Scholar Perspectives

Shapeshifting in Academia: Navigating Multiple Roles as Black Women Teacher Educators at Predominantly White Institutions

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Abstract

As a Black woman teacher educator at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), the experience of shape-shifting can be complex and multifaceted. It often involves navigating intersecting identities and power dynamics within the academic environment. In this context, shape-shifting may entail adapting one's demeanor, communication style, and appearance to conform to the norms and expectations of the institution, which are often influenced by white cultural standards. This could include modifying speech patterns, adjusting teaching strategies, or downplaying aspects of one's racial or gender identity in order to be perceived as competent and professional within the predominantly white academic culture. Furthermore, Black women teacher educators (BWTEs) at PWIs may face additional pressures to serve as representatives or role models for diversity, which can place a burden on them to constantly prove their worth and expertise in predominantly white spaces. Despite these challenges, many BWTEs also leverage their unique perspectives and experiences to enrich the academic environment and advocate for equity and inclusion within their institutions. They may draw on their cultural knowledge and community connections to develop curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives, mentor students from underrepresented backgrounds, and engage in scholarly research that addresses issues of race, gender, and social justice in education. However, it's important for PWIs to recognize and address the systemic barriers and biases that contribute to the need for shape-shifting among

BWTEs. BWTEs at PWIs navigate place and time to advance equity, justice, and liberation while disrupting oppressive structures so that they can thrive authentically.

Keywords: shapeshifting, space, place, time, Black women teacher educators (BWTEs), social justice, liberation, teacher education, PWI, othermothering, Black tax

As higher education continues to diversify, the experiences of underrepresented faculty members, particularly Black women teacher educators, remain complex and fraught with challenges. Within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Black women teacher educators (BWTEs) navigate a unique and multifaceted experience shaped by race, gender, and academic role. This paper delves into the phenomenon of "shape-shifting," an adaptive strategy BWTEs employ to navigate white-dominated institutional norms and expectations. Shape-shifting, in this context, involves altering one's demeanor, speech, and appearance to fit within an academic culture that often marginalizes expressions of Blackness and femininity (Gee, 2004).

The need to shape-shift is frequently imposed by implicit biases within PWIs that associate whiteness with professionalism and Blackness with incompetence or otherness. Collins (1986) noted that Black women have been the ‘other within.’ The ‘other within’ regarding the academic landscape shows that when a Black woman earns a tenure-track position in a predominantly white school, she is laden with service, acting as the nurturer to scores of Black students who also feel ostracized in white environments; nonetheless, she typically performs such service silently (Mawhinney, 2011).

At many schools of education, teacher candidates are trained on classroom instruction with minimal attention to the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups, particularly Teacher Candidates of Color (TCOC). This paper explores the challenges TCOC encounter in

predominantly white spaces, including systemic racism, cultural marginalization, microaggressions, and implicit bias. Consequently, professors who are disruptors often take on personal risks and bear the burden of "the Black tax"—uncompensated labor that goes unrecognized—while advocating for educational equity and justice.

TCOC navigate these barriers by forming supportive networks and affinity groups and creating counterspaces to buffer racialized and gendered experiences. Centering the lived experiences of TCOC highlights the realities of anti-Blackness in K-12 education, educator preparation programs, and future teaching roles. Consequently, this paper examines shape-shifting as both a survival mechanism and a form of resistance, acknowledging the toll it takes on BWTEs while also recognizing the strengths and contributions that Black women bring to academia.

The Complexities of Shape-Shifting

Shape-shifting, for BWTEs, is an adaptive response to institutional norms that prioritize and validate white cultural standards. This process may manifest in various ways, including modifying speech patterns, adjusting body language, or adapting teaching methods to align with expectations of "professionalism." Such modifications are not merely strategic but are often necessary to gain acceptance, legitimacy, and professional recognition within predominantly white academic settings. However, this adaptive process can be emotionally and psychologically taxing, as BWTEs may feel pressured to downplay or mask aspects of their identity to avoid stereotypes and biases associated with Blackness and femininity. The next few pages will discuss how complexities of shape-shifting shows up in the academy and how Black women teacher educators have to shape shift in order to navigate certain aspects of the academy. Shape shifting in academia could lead to role strain, being the token, cultural taxation, racial battle fatigue and being the safe space for students.

Role Strain and the Burden of Representation

Beyond shape-shifting, BWTEs at PWIs often bear the weight of dual roles. In addition to their responsibilities as educators, they are frequently seen as representatives of diversity within the institution (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). This role entails serving as visible examples of racial and gender diversity, mentoring students from underrepresented backgrounds, and often being called upon to participate in diversity initiatives. While BWTEs often take pride in supporting and advocating for marginalized students, the constant need to prove their competence in predominantly white spaces can lead to role strain, leaving them feeling isolated and overextended.

This burden of representation is exacerbated by the pressures of being "the only" or "one of few" Black women in predominantly white faculty circles, a reality that limits access to solidarity and support. Furthermore, BWTEs may face heightened scrutiny of their teaching and research, which can be compounded by students and colleagues who perceive them through a lens of racial or gender bias. This scrutiny reinforces the need for shape-shifting as a defense mechanism, even as it imposes an additional psychological burden (Moore, Salas, & Miller, 2024).

Black and Brown faculty consistently face challenges being racially and ethnically diverse in institutions of higher education that are known more for being spaces that elevate and center whiteness (power structure and ruling ideology), than being inclusive or equitable spaces where Black and Brown faculty can thrive, not just survive. This phenomenon is known as the Black Tax and it certainly has an influence on the everyday experiences of BWTEs. Palmer and Walker (2020) describe the Black Tax as “the psychological weight or stressor that Black people

experience from consciously or unconsciously thinking about how White Americans perceive the social construct of Blackness" (para. 2). It is a result of anti-Black racism which heuristically also represents racialized macro and microaggressions experienced by other racially minoritized groups.

Cultural (Black) Tax

In 1994, Padilla coined the idea of "cultural taxation" as the rare assault of experiences of ethnic faculty in academia. At its core, "cultural taxation" was a term to describe the unique set of extra encumbrances and responsibilities put upon faculty of color (FOC) (and thereby within Black faculty) by the administration to legitimize their place in the academy. These superfluous burdens demonstrate the willingness of FOC to display good stewardship and citizenship to the institution—essentially, to be good soldiers. This "cultural taxation" was one of the prices of admission and clandestine workload burdens into the labyrinthic world of academe for a faculty member of color.

Cultural taxation refers to the additional responsibilities and pressures placed on faculty of color, often related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. Black women in academia frequently experience this as a dual burden: while they work to advance DEI initiatives, they also bear an extra weight of proving their credibility and worth. While FOC needed to pay this cultural tax in order to secure her/his role in the academy, the type of work that was completed was often unrecognized and unrewarded in the promotion and tenure process. According to Padilla (1994) there are six examples of cultural taxation in the academy for faculty of color:

1) Being the "expert" on matters of diversity; 2) Being called upon to educate majority group about diversity; 3) Serving on affirmative action task committees; 4) Serving as liaison between the institution and ethnic communities; 5) Sacrificing time from one's

> work to serve as "solver, troubleshooter, or negotiator" for conflicts among administration, students, and community; and 6) Serving as translators for non-English speaking visitors to the campus. (p. 26)

Black women at PWIs undergo constant policing and monitoring of the cultural self-created unnecessary stress to the point where they often contemplate leaving their institutions (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). The plantation-like system of "free" labor and "be seen but not heard" at PWIs exclude Black women's presence, dismisses their voices, exploits their service, and ignores the additional tenure-track challenges Black women confront—these affronts highlight the CRT tenet of interest conversion as Black women participate in service (free labor) that continues to benefit white faculty and students at the expense of Black women. Diversity efforts at PWIs appear to only tolerate and subjugate Black women rather than embrace and proliferate, which suggests that the presence of Black women at PWI is transactional, and statements of diversity and inclusion are simply buzz words that are popular in mainstream America, such as "belonging".

Consequently, it is hard to promote and encourage belonging when the hurt and harm comes from within those same systems and people who are contributing to the harm and hurt of minoritized individuals, whether it is through policies, pedagogy, or positions. Missing from the diversity equation is the development of authentic measures to understand Black women's plight in the academy and the struggle for respect, acceptance, and the acknowledgment that institutions of higher learning reproduce plantation-like environments. As a result, Black women often have to share shift and navigate the culture of those plantation-like environments.

PWIs should consider several factors when crafting mission statements and hiring Black women faculty should--not only tick the two diversity boxes but also recognize that the magnitude of

racial and gender stressors in the academy supersede the already known inherent stressors associated with obtaining tenure. Black women at PWIs delicately balance their existence and counter the stereotypes and tropes that are often ascribed to them, to include the angry Black woman (Ashley, 2014), non-intellectual (Johnson-Bailey, 2015), and less scholarly output (Croom, 2017), which puts insurmountable pressures to succeed on them and contributes to the need to shapeshift to belong in spaces that were not created with them in mind, but where they belong. Cultural suppression and the multitude of racist acts these women encountered appear to contribute to psychological and/or social distress, which Arnold, Crawford, and Khalifa (2016) identify as racial battle fatigue symptoms, and suggest Black women are exhausted by their exclusion on the academic plantation.

Racial Battle Fatigue

Race and gender mediate the consequences of justice work in the academy. Smith (2004) introduced the concept of racial battle fatigue (RBT) in the context of students in an institutional environment, like higher education. This can be extrapolated to faculty in higher education as well. The RBT framework offers that universities are operated from a systemically and historically dominant White (hegemonic) perspective (Smith, 2004). Racial battle fatigue can be defined as the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions (Smith, 2004).

Smith (2008) offered: “Racial battle fatigue addresses the physiological, psychological, and behavioral strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups and the amount of energy they expend coping with and fighting against racism” (p. 617). People of color are physically and emotionally drained as a result of preparing against and buffering everyday racial

microaggressions (Smith et al., 2006). In discussing racial battle fatigue, Smith et al. (2006) found that people of color were often so impacted by the symptoms associated with racial battle fatigue (anxiety, ulcers, insomnia, emotional withdrawal) and that a loss of confidence can occur as well as the possibility of questioning one's own self-worth.

Additionally, qualitative research conducted by Smith et al. (2006) found the experience of black males on what they described as elite white campuses as frustrating feeling fearful, being shocked, and reporting signs of racial battle fatigue caused by the psychological stress they endured. Both of these ideas, academic labor costs and racial battle fatigue, are entrenched in one major idea—the extra costs associated of "doing business" for black faculty. In essence, it is the not-so clandestine and very particularized "black tax" in the academy. Black faculty must "pay to play" in a way that is required of no other faculty.

Black faculty often take on additional work assisting their (primarily Black) mentees to access networks and resources that are often veiled in the PWI context or a part of the hidden curriculum that many of them do not have access to. I have worked closely with a young woman who was the victim in a domestic abuse case, helped a young man who was the primary caregiver for his sick father and the parentified sibling for his siblings, and even helped a student get readmitted to the institution after returning from a medical leave. Not to mention the students from other areas outside of education who have been sent to me by other students to seek out assistance. Of course, I have them go through the proper channels first so as not to step on toes. Students who see how Black faculty go above and beyond often come back to let them know that they are the reason that they stayed at the institution. This contributes to retention of students from minoritized backgrounds. This kind of work, while rewarding and essential for retaining

underrepresented students, also takes energy and has a psychological impact on Black faculty who help students through tough times.

Fictive Kinships and Othermothering as a Black Women Teacher Educator

There are a number of ways African American women can build community on their campuses to provide support that speaks to their specific needs of working with dual-marginalized identities at PWIs. To foster an environment of support, African American women should connect with colleagues through racial and/or gender-based affinity groups. Affinity group participation that supports the needs of African American women is an intentional approach to reducing the feelings of "outsider within" on campus. These campus-based affinity groups can provide support, celebrate accomplishments, provide a safe space to share counter-stories to reduce the impact of negative interactions in the workplace (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003), and work collectively to address workplace challenges (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). In addition, mentoring programs are able to support the specific needs of African American women, share knowledge of their experiences working on campus, and provide insight on how to utilize campus-based resources through a more focused engagement.

At PWIs, African American students are generally faced with a small community of students who share their racial identity. Students with a desire to connect with same-race staff will seek out these individuals on their campuses. Regardless of staff members' roles, students will seek them out to expand their campus community to create a network of support. Students are motivated to create a community of support that is similar to the community of othermothers that supported them from childhood through high school (Mawhinney, 2011). African American students seek out African American women that are in campus leadership roles as a way to

recreate the environments where othermothering was present in their lives. These campus connections by African American students often add additional work hours to staff that are currently overworked, underpaid and overlooked by campus leadership (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017).

There is an opportunity for campus administrators to increase their awareness and knowledge of the ways African American women support African American students through the practice of othermothering. It is important that universities gain a greater awareness of the needs of all students, but especially the minoritized students on their campus. Campus administrators need to gain awareness of these specific students' experiences because they will differ than students who are part of the majority population. African American students at PWIs face different challenges than majority students and campus leaders need to develop an awareness to these challenges that could negatively impact students' persistence and graduation rates.

This is an opportunity for campus leaders at PWIs to engage in conversations with African American students regarding their campus experiences inside and outside of the classroom. These conversations between campus leaders and African American students on how they connect with resources and build community that supports their academic success will bring attention to the ways African American women connect with students through the practice of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005). Campus leaders at PWIs should engage in conversations with African American women that incorporate othermothering practices with higher education practices to gain insight on how they support and engage with students. Under the leadership and direction of African American women, there is an opportunity to educate administrators on the history of othermothering and amplify the ways it supports students' academic success and build

campus community. The attention and support by campus leaders of the utilization of the cultural tradition of othermothering at PWIs has the potential to improve how the work of African American women is evaluated by campus colleagues. As the awareness of the practice of othermothering grows and is valued by campus leaders at PWIs, the work of African American women can be better accessed for appropriate financial compensation and evaluation of work performance.

My office has been considered a safe space over the years where students knew that they could get a hug, get a snack, get assistance with a problem, take a nap, and even just be and exist away from the outside world without having to walk all the way back or drive back to their dorms or apartments. If they needed food because they had run out of money on their student dining hall account or had just gone through a break up with a girlfriend, boyfriend, or had a disagreement with a parent, they would come to my office and I would show them how to do a referral for the Dean of Students Office for food, counseling, or any other service that could support them. On the other hand, the office conversations were primarily used for talking through personal issues. As a Black women teacher educator, I have often put on my counseling hat, my social worker hat, and even my student affairs hat to assist students with issues.
My office is a safe space to vent serious concerns or issues with students that had nothing to do with academics. It is seen as a space of liberation that allows students to show up and their whole selves on campus. For instance, students have even done their lashes and their weaves in my office. Students discuss a lot of concerns outside of academics, including their concerns about questioning their sexuality, being in situationships, disagreements they had with roommates, or concerns about friends and/or family members.

I provided a shoulder for students to cry on (literally), an ear to hear their issues and concerns, and a smile to welcome them as they entered my space. This has proven to be important in creating a culture of care and understanding (CCU) among students and to help them through situations by showing care and extending grace. If there were problems working through institutional red tape, students would come to my office for help. I often advocated for students in areas like financial aid for loan assistance and within academic departments to work through course-related issues. I felt that students' lives could affect their academics, and if I could support them emotionally, this would ensure that they could fulfill their academic commitment. The role of the professor and othermother as an advocate is evidence of shapeshifting to meet the needs of the students at a PWI. As a result, shapeshifting can be a double edged-sword where one side is draining and time consuming, but the other side is rewarding and it cultivates joy when BWTEs help students thrive in an environment where they often have to deal with the conformity of white standards and white norms.

Leveraging Identity for Social Justice and Equity

Despite these challenges, BWTEs leverage their cultural knowledge and lived experiences to make valuable contributions to the academic environment. Many develop curricula that reflect diverse perspectives, drawing upon their community connections to enrich their teaching and research. This approach not only enhances the educational experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds but also exposes all students to a broader and more inclusive understanding of the world. Additionally, BWTEs engage in scholarship that addresses issues of race, gender, and social justice, contributing to critical dialogues within their institutions and the wider academic field.

For BWTEs, cultural knowledge and experiences become powerful tools to resist the constraints of predominantly white academic culture. Through mentorship and support, they create spaces of belonging for students and colleagues from marginalized communities, challenging the exclusivity of traditional academic spaces and fostering a more inclusive, student-centered environment.

Conclusion

The need for shape-shifting among BWTEs underscores the presence of systemic barriers within PWIs, where implicit biases and structural inequalities persist. These institutions often fail to recognize or address the unique challenges faced by BWTEs, inadvertently perpetuating a culture in which they must constantly navigate and conform to white-dominated norms. For PWIs to foster true inclusivity, it is essential to create institutional policies that address the biases and barriers that drive the need for shape-shifting.

This includes promoting hiring practices that value diversity in all its forms, creating professional development opportunities that increase cultural competency, and building support systems for underrepresented faculty. By fostering a climate that values the contributions of BWTEs without forcing them to conform, institutions can begin to dismantle the systemic biases that require shape-shifting as a survival mechanism.

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