

Scholar Perspectives

Navigating Intersectional Identity as a Black Female Professor Across Space, Place & Time - Dr.
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Abstract

In the landscape of higher education, Black female professors face a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities within historically white institutions (HWIs). In this autoethnographic reflection, I delve into the intricacies of navigating academia as a real-life shapeshifter, continually negotiating identity within white educational spaces. Drawing upon Gee's (2004) concept of shapeshifting and the intersectionality of race and sex, I explore the nuanced dynamics shaping the experiences of Black female professors in the academy.

Through critical self-reflection and personal narrative, I illuminate the unique resilience required to navigate systemic inequalities. By interrogating the intersections of race, sex, and power dynamics, I contribute to a deeper understanding of identity formation within higher education. This submission responds directly to the journal's call for papers, addressing the complexities of space, place, and time in identity exploration. By amplifying the voices of Black female scholars, I aim to advance discussions on equity, justice, and liberation within educational institutions.

This reflection offers a vital perspective on the intersectionality of race and sex, highlighting its profound implications for Black female professors in the academy and emphasizing its significance in fostering equity and justice in higher education.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Shapeshifting, Historically White Institutions (HWIs), Systemic Inequalities, Black Female Professors, Codeswitching

Within the realm of academia, where knowledge is cultivated and disseminated, lies a landscape often fraught with complexities, particularly for those who exist at the intersections of race and gender. As a Black female professor navigating the intricate terrain of higher education within the academy, my journey has been one characterized by continual negotiation of identity. It is within this context that I propose to contribute an autoethnographic reflection delving into the multifaceted experiences of navigating white educational spaces as a Black female professor.

Informed by Gee's (2004) concept of shapeshifting, which encapsulates the adaptive strategies employed by historically marginalized groups to navigate dominant cultural norms, my autoethnographic reflection seeks to offer a personal narrative on the nuanced dynamics of identity negotiation within academia. Drawing upon my lived experiences and engaging in critical self-reflection, I aim to illuminate the intricate interplay between race, gender, and power dynamics that shape the experiences of Black women in educational settings. Thereby amplifying underrepresented voices in discussions of equity and liberation within higher education, fostering critical dialogue on the lived experiences of those who navigate complex social and professional environments as real-life shapeshifters.

Exploring Intersectional Identity in Academia

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, and how they overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. In academia, intersectionality serves as a critical framework for understanding the complex interplay of identities within academic spaces. The intersectionality of race and sex, in particular, has been a focal point of research and discourse within academia, revealing the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their identities and experiences.

The intersectionality of race and sex in academia highlights the diverse challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2015) have emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing these challenges, arguing that traditional approaches to feminist theory often fail to adequately capture the experiences of women of color. Black women in the academy may face unique experiences that are distinct from those experienced by white women or black men. This intersectional perspective stresses the need for academic institutions to adopt more inclusive policies and practices that account for the diversity of experiences among faculty, staff, and students.

Exploring intersectional identity in academia holds significant importance as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' experiences, challenges, and contributions within academic settings. By acknowledging the intersections of various identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, scholars can better address the complexities of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). This approach is essential for recognizing and addressing the unique forms of marginalization experienced by individuals at the intersections of multiple identities (Collins, 2015). Incorporating intersectional perspectives into research and teaching practices not only enhances the quality and inclusivity of scholarship but also contributes to broader goals of social justice and equity within academic institutions (Cho et al., 2013). Furthermore, it empowers marginalized voices and informs policy decisions aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). However, negotiating identity in academia can be fraught with challenges. Marginalized individuals may encounter bias, discrimination, and microaggressions based on their intersecting identities. For example, a female person of color may face double discrimination in academic settings, contending with racism and sexism from peers and colleagues (Gee, 2004). Moreover, the pressure to conform to

dominant norms and expectations within academia can create feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome among marginalized individuals (Gee, 2004). These challenges underscore the importance of creating supportive and inclusive academic environments that validate the experiences of all members of the academic community.

Autoethnographic Reflection

As a Black female professor navigating the academy, my experiences have been shaped by a complex interplay of personal identity, institutional culture, and systemic inequalities. Within these spaces, my presence often stands out amidst a sea of whiteness, highlighting the stark contrast between my own racial and gender identity and the dominant culture of academia. Reflecting on my experiences, I am keenly aware of the complexities of intersectional identity and the ways in which race, gender, and other intersecting identities intersect to shape my interactions and experiences within the academy. As a Black woman, I have the potential to face dual burdens of racism and sexism, facing unique challenges that are distinct from those experienced by counterparts of other races and ethnicities. This critical self-reflection has deepened my understanding of the ways in which power and privilege operate within educational spaces. I explore the pervasive pressures to perform while combating stereotypes such as the 'Black Angry Girl,' negotiating the practice of codeswitching, confronting isolation, and enduring microaggressions. These experiences underscore the intersectional challenges of race and gender within educational spaces, revealing the need for more inclusive and equitable practices.

Different Strokes for Different Folks

One concept that sheds light on the intricate process of negotiating identity in academia is "shapeshifting," as articulated by linguist James Paul Gee (2004). Gee (2004) describes shapeshifting as a form of code-switching where individuals from marginalized backgrounds

adeptly navigate diverse social contexts and power dynamics. In academic settings, shapeshifting involves modifying language, behavior, or appearance to align with prevailing cultural norms or expectations. For instance, a Black female professor may engage in shapeshifting or code-switching between my home community and academic environments, adjusting linguistic styles and cultural cues to establish rapport and credibility. This phenomenon underscores the multifaceted strategies Black women employ to negotiate their identities within the complex terrain of academia.

Having been raised in Louisiana with deep roots in Black Creole culture, my upbringing has imbued me with a unique linguistic and cultural identity. Our language, often referred to as "broken French," possesses a distinct beauty and tone that reflects our heritage and community bonds. While I take pride in my cultural roots, as a Black female faculty member in the academy, I frequently find it necessary to engage in shapeshifting or code-switching for strategic reasons, particularly in navigating predominantly white institutional environments. Academia, especially in historically white institutions (HWIs), often adheres to specific communication norms that may not align with the linguistic and cultural styles of Black faculty members, like myself. Code-switching allows me to adapt my communication to fit these mainstream norms, thereby enhancing my professional credibility and effectiveness in conveying expertise. Moreover, code-switching serves as a survival strategy in professional landscapes where perceptions of professionalism and competence can be influenced by communication styles. By utilizing a more standard or formal language, I aim to mitigate potential biases or stereotypes that could hinder my career advancement. This strategic adaptation helps me navigate the nuances of academic interactions, from classroom communication to administrative meetings, where clarity and conformity to the dominant communication styles are valued. Additionally, code-switching

enables me to effectively communicate with diverse audiences within academia, including students, colleagues, and administrators who may not be familiar with or accustomed to African American Vernacular English (AAVE), my heritage, or other Louisiana cultural expressions. Adjusting my language and communication styles ensures that my messages are understood and respected in various academic contexts.

Beyond professional survival and effective communication, code-switching also represents a nuanced negotiation of cultural identity. It allows me to navigate between different linguistic and cultural settings while maintaining my cultural authenticity and strategically positioning myself within the academic hierarchy. This enables me to assert my expertise without compromising my identity or background.

In practice, code-switching among Black female faculty in academia is a multifaceted strategy driven by the need to navigate institutional norms, enhance professional opportunities, ensure effective communication, and affirm cultural identity (Gee, 2004). It highlights the complexities of identity and power dynamics within academic environments, where linguistic and cultural diversity intersects with professional expectations and career aspirations. While it can be a survival strategy for navigating challenging or unfamiliar environments, it can also pose challenges to one's sense of authenticity and belonging.

Pressure to Overperform

Having worked in higher education for over a decade, I have consistently felt the intense pressure to excel, understanding that anything less than excellence was not an option. As a Black woman, this pressure was compounded by societal expectations. Research underscores that Black women encounter heightened standards and obstacles in professional settings due to the intersecting dynamics of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Many Black women resonate with

the sentiment that we must work harder and achieve more to be perceived as equal to our white and male peers (Lewis, 2020). In each position or promotion I have attained, I keenly felt the need to validate my competence. This sentiment is widespread among minority professionals who are acutely aware of the stereotypes and biases that influence hiring decisions (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Making mistakes was simply not an option; I was determined to demonstrate unequivocally that hiring me was the right decision (McGee, 2015).

During my first year as an Assistant Professor, I also assumed the role of doctoral program coordinator-typically reserved for senior faculty. This dual responsibility demanded a delicate balance of teaching, research, administrative duties, and several projects, which could at times feel overwhelming at times. Nonetheless, I approached these challenges eagerly, driven by a desire to contribute meaningfully to the university despite the added pressures and responsibilities. Research indicates that Black women faculty often confront systemic barriers to career advancement, such as limited mentorship opportunities and support networks tailored to their specific needs (Griffin, 2021). Consequently, many rely heavily on their own efforts and resilience to succeed in academia (Turner et al., 2019). In summary, I believe the experiences I encounter reflect a nuanced interplay of race and gender dynamics that profoundly shape my career path. These experiences inform the strategies employed to achieve success in demanding environments.

Fighting the “Angry Black Girl” Stereotype

Black women contend with pervasive negative stereotypes in mainstream American culture, particularly the portrayal of the "angry Black woman," which depicts them as aggressive, irritable, irrational, domineering, hostile, and unintelligent without cause (Ashley, 2018). These stereotypes have deep historical roots and are perpetuated through global media representations.

As a Black female faculty member, I am acutely conscious of how I present myself during faculty meetings and campus events. When engaging in scholarly debates, I am hyper-aware of my tone, voice, and demeanor, knowing that maintaining composure is crucial to avoid falling into the stereotype trap. This stereotype often emerged as a response to external stressors and historical injustices faced by Black women (Ashley, 2018).

In discussions and interactions, vigilance is essential because Black women may find themselves at the receiving end of unfair treatment, with limited support or defense (McDonough, 2018). Historical feminist movements have frequently overlooked the unique challenges and perspectives of Black women, further complicating their experiences in academic and professional settings (McDonough, 2018). As expressed in McDonough's study, "It's not easy being a Black woman who believes in something strongly and isn't afraid to convey it.

Every time we stand up for ourselves, express an opinion or have a viewpoint that makes some uncomfortable, we're deemed 'angry,' 'hostile,' or 'uncooperative'" (McDonough, 2018). This sentiment reflects the frustration many Black women feel when their assertiveness is misconstrued as aggression. Avoiding confrontations becomes a survival strategy. Colleagues have been surprised by my composed responses even during emotionally charged debates, an adaptation necessary for survival that other racial groups may not have to consider (McDonough, 2018). Navigating the stereotype of the angry Black woman demands constant vigilance and strategic social navigation, underscoring broader issues of race, gender, and representation in academic and professional contexts. Unlike their counterparts from majority racial groups, Black women often face a double-bind dilemma where assertiveness that would be seen as confident or authoritative in others might be interpreted as intimidating or hostile (Crenshaw, 1989; Lewis, 2020). The necessity to manage these perceptions skillfully is a survival strategy born of

historical and ongoing systemic biases that depict Black women as less deserving of respect and fair treatment (Smith, 2017). This challenge requires Black women not only to excel professionally but also to navigate social dynamics with an acute awareness of racial and gender expectations (Smith, 2017). Moreover, this adaptation is not just about personal advancement but also about challenging and reshaping institutional norms and biases. By demonstrating competence, composure, and resilience, Black women in the academy can redefine stereotypes and pave the way for future generations (Griffin, 2021). In essence, the adaptation required for survival is a strategic blend of assertiveness and composure that demands a level of vigilance and resilience that may not be as imperative for those who do not face similar stereotypes and biases in their professional lives.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are pervasive in academic environments, manifesting as subtle yet impactful actions or remarks that unintentionally convey discriminatory attitudes (Sue et al., 2007). These experiences are notably prevalent in my interactions within academia. For instance, I frequently encounter instances where I am mistaken for administrative staff or a student rather than recognized as a professor, which reflects assumptions about my professional status based solely on my appearance. Moreover, there are occasions when my qualifications are questioned, leading to a persistent need to assert my expertise and legitimacy in my role. This assumption that youth equates to a lack of experience or knowledge undermines my professional standing and requires continual affirmation of my credentials. These experiences may be compounded by broader societal biases, potentially influenced by stereotypes regarding race and gender. Research indicates prevalent stereotypes associating Black individuals with intellectual inferiority and laziness (Devine & Elliot, 1995), and pervasive beliefs about women's

incapabilities in academic and professional settings (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These stereotypes can influence perceptions and interactions within academic spaces, presenting additional challenges for individuals who, like myself, identify as both Black and female.

Beyond personal experiences, there are institutional implications as well. The underrepresentation of Black educators in academia, particularly in positions of authority, poses a barrier to student engagement and rapport-building. In the United States, Black female professors remain significantly underrepresented in higher education institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), Black women constitute 4% of full-time faculty positions across various academic disciplines. Therefore, many students may have limited exposure to Black professors or educators, leading to initial assumptions or stereotypes about academic authority based on race and gender. These perceptions can manifest in students mistaking me for a graduate teaching assistant rather than recognizing my role as a professor. In addition, questioning my feedback and judgment in ways that my white colleagues may not have experienced.

Addressing these challenges requires proactive efforts to combat stereotypes and foster inclusive academic environments. Central to this effort is encouraging students to confront and reconsider their own preconceived notions about race, gender, and academic authority. By creating meaningful interactions and positive experiences that highlight my capabilities as an educator and mentor, I aim to reshape perceptions based on merit and professionalism rather than stereotypes. I aspire to contribute to a transformative educational experience where respect and recognition are based on the quality of instruction and mentorship provided, irrespective of race or gender. While navigating microaggressions and stereotypes in academia presents ongoing challenges, I remain committed to promoting inclusivity and challenging biases through

education, engagement, and the cultivation of new perspectives. By fostering environments that value diversity and meritocracy, I aim to empower students and colleagues alike to appreciate the contributions of Black women educators based on their expertise and dedication to academic excellence.

Amplifying the Voices of Black Female Scholars in White Educational Spaces

In predominantly white educational spaces, the voices and experiences of Black female scholars often face marginalization and erasure (Gee, 2004). However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of amplifying these voices to challenge dominant narratives and promote greater equity and inclusion within academia. As a Black female professor, I am navigating these spaces, I am committed to using my platform to elevate the voices of marginalized individuals and push for meaningful change.

One way to amplify the voices of Black female scholars is through mentorship and support networks. By connecting with other Black female academics and providing mentorship to emerging scholars, we can create spaces for mutual support, encouragement, and collaboration. These networks serve as vital resources for navigating the challenges of academia and advocating for systemic change. Additionally, Black female scholars can use their research and scholarship to center the experiences of marginalized communities and challenge dominant discourses. By conducting research that highlights the intersecting forms of oppression faced by Black women, we can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics and social inequalities. This research has the potential to inform policy debates, shape institutional practices, and promote social justice within educational spaces. Furthermore, Black female scholars can contribute to discussions on equity, justice, and liberation in academia by actively engaging in advocacy and activism. By leveraging positions and platforms, we can mobilize

collective action and effect meaningful change within institutions and beyond. In conclusion, amplifying the voices of Black female scholars in the academy is essential for promoting greater equity, justice, and liberation within academia. By fostering mentorship networks, conducting research that centers on marginalized experiences, and engaging in advocacy and activism, we can create more inclusive and equitable academic environments.

Conclusion

“Living life as a black woman requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to black women’s survival. Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type for Other objectification as the Other denies us protections that white skin maleness and wealth confer.” Collins, 2002, p.257. In conclusion, my journey as a Black female in academia has been deeply shaped by the intricate interplay of race, gender, and institutional dynamics. Navigating these complexities has required resilience, determination, and a constant negotiation of identity in spaces where diversity and inclusion are ongoing challenges. Throughout my career, I have confronted pressures to overperform and combat stereotypes, while also navigating microaggressions and the need for strategic adaptation. Despite some of the challenges, teaching is not merely a job for me; it is my passion and purpose. It is a calling that drives me to educate, inspire, and empower students from all backgrounds. Through teaching, I aim not only to impart knowledge but also to foster critical thinking, empathy, and a commitment to social justice. My dedication to creating inclusive and equitable learning environments stems from a belief in the transformative power of education to challenge stereotypes, dismantle barriers, and cultivate understanding. Looking forward, I am committed to advocating for systemic change within academia, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion at every level. By amplifying the voices of underrepresented scholars, mentoring the next

generation of academics, and challenging institutional norms, I strive to contribute to a more just and equitable academic community. As I continue on this journey, I am guided by the belief that education is a catalyst for positive change. It is through teaching and scholarship that I seek to make a meaningful impact, advancing knowledge, and advocating for social progress. By sharing my experiences and insights, I hope to inspire others to join me in creating a future where diversity is celebrated, equity is ensured, and every individual has the opportunity to thrive. In essence, teaching is not just my profession; it is my vocation, an integral part of who I am, and the legacy I aim to leave in academia and beyond.

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