

DOCTORAL PERSPECTIVES

VOICES OF RESISTANCE: SHAPESHIFTING AS HBCU DOCTORAL STUDENTS

**KYRA MILBOURNE
NZINGA CARDWELL
VERNAJH PINDER**

Shapeshifting is a multifaceted concept that transcends code-switching, which often refers to the conscious modification of language or behavior to navigate social contexts. Shapeshifting, however, encapsulates a broader and more intricate spectrum of adaptation (McCluney et al., 2021). It entails shifts not only in race, ethnicity, and gender but also in socio-economic status, class, culture, and environmental influences. This process is deeply interwoven with one's core identity and represents a continual negotiation of the self across different contexts.

In the following autoethnographies, we explore the nuanced experiences of identity formation and the necessity of shapeshifting. These personal narratives offer insights into how individuals navigate and reconcile aspects of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and origin. Through these stories, we shed light on the complexity of adapting to diverse environments and the critical role that shapeshifting plays in achieving both personal and communal success.

Narrative One (I'm Bahamian)

"Dum-Dum Dum-Dum Dum-Dum-Dum-Dum" echoes the rhythmic beat of the goat skin drum. Trumpets blare, cowbells jangle—a symphony that forms the heart and soul of our beloved rake 'n' scrape music. Dancers sway down Bay Street, adorned in costumes of crepe paper, glue, and cardboard. The crystal-clear, turquoise waters shimmer in the distance, mirroring the spirit and dreams of the Bahamian people. If you pause and listen, you can hear the tranquil sound of waves crashing against the rocks. The white (or pink) sand—depending on where you stand—feels heavenly underfoot. This is the Bahamas, where community thrives, close-knit and family oriented. As our slogan declares, "It is better in the Bahamas."

Growing up here wasn't easy, but without this place, I wouldn't have shapeshifted into the person I am today. As an international student from the Bahamas, my cultural identity is deeply rooted in my heritage. From the funky rhythms of KB and Trez Hepburn to the fierce battles between the Saxons and Valley Boys on Bay Street, and conch salad from "under da dock," this is what defines me as Bahamian.

I also take pride in my queerness, my resilience, and my creativity. In the Bahamas, I learned the importance of community at an early age. I saw firsthand how my community shaped my identity and raised me, along with the other kids in the neighborhood. But I knew early on that being queer would create challenges for me, so I hid that part of myself. America was supposed to be my chance for a fresh start—to live authentically. In 2015, gay marriage had finally become legal, and for the first time, I felt like happiness was within reach. Yet, things did not unfold as I had envisioned.

Adapting to New Environments

In rural areas, value is often tied to one's family name and kinship. In metropolitan areas, however, it is more about socio-economic status, education level, and material possessions. Take, for example, William Ellis. Born a slave and later freed, Ellis became a millionaire who had homes in both Mexico City, where he was seen as American, and New York City, where he was viewed as Mexican (Spickard, 2022).

When I arrived in America in January 2016, I experienced snow for the first time—a thrill that quickly turned to disdain. Checked into room 1102 in Court Plaza Hall, this was where the person known as Vernajh began to take form. My initial weeks on campus were a cultural shock. Coming from a place where everyone greets one another in passing, I was startled by what seemed to be the rudeness of my peers. I quickly realized this wasn't the Bahamas, and I had to adjust.

My first significant challenge arose in the classroom. As a student eager to engage, I often responded to professors' questions. However, my Bahamian dialect and accent made it difficult for some to understand me. The constant questioning of whether English was my first language forced me to alter my speech, to slow down and eventually adopt an American accent. This was my first encounter with shapeshifting—certainly not my last.

Identity Negotiation

Being queer added another layer to my shapeshifting. In certain spaces, usually male-dominated and heteronormative, I had to downplay my queerness to be heard. In other spaces, such as those dominated by women, I amplified my queerness to avoid being perceived as a threat. As Sophie Jones aptly states, "my queerness transforms me into the Other" (Jones, 2017). Constantly negotiating my identity, I navigated spaces where I hoped to fit in without losing myself entirely. Navigating my multiple identities—Bahamian, queer, international—has taught me that while adaptability is vital, compromising one's identity should not be the cost. Shapeshifting is a survival mechanism, but it also poses the danger of eroding authenticity. Learning to accept all aspects of oneself and finding spaces that celebrate, rather than tolerate, those identities is crucial.

Shapeshifting is not just about adapting to survive—it's about embracing the full spectrum of one's identity. It plays a pivotal role in achieving personal and communal thriving, but it requires spaces that value and respect all aspects of our being. Only then can individuals navigate the complexities of identity without diminishing themselves in the process.

Narrative Two (I'm country)

Growing up in a small town with just three stoplights and a graduating class of 138, I had no idea how narrow my worldview was. My town, with Confederate flags waving proudly in front yards and the cheapest gas station called "Dixieland," seemed normal to me.

Black and brown families lived in the projects, colloquially known as the “Back Burner.” Despite not feeling offended or uncomfortable at the time, this environment shaped me in ways that I would later question—and that others would find offensive.

My hometown was not a place that welcomed me—it merely tolerated my existence. Without even realizing it, I had shapeshifted to survive. I adapted, blending into an environment that did not nurture my growth but saw me as a means to an end.

It wasn’t until I moved three hours away to attend graduate school at an HBCU that I understood how deeply disconnected I was from my Black identity. Suddenly, I was immersed in a culture where “Blackness” was celebrated openly. Chicken boxes were served in the cafeteria, spades was a game of fellowship, and your social status often revolved around your membership in one of the “Divine Nine” fraternities or sororities.

Instead of feeling a sense of belonging, I felt deeply out of place. My upbringing had created a false sense of identity. Although my race was Black, my mannerisms, knowledge, dialect, and worldview had been shaped by the predominantly white culture of my hometown. Spickard (2022) explains shapeshifting as the ability to transition between racial identities for various reasons, known or unknown. While race is a primary marker of identity, authenticity is equally important.

Adapting to HBCU Life

Transitioning from a predominantly white small town to a Black-majority environment where prosperity was the norm among Black families created a stark contrast. It highlighted how little my race alone could define me, without the cultural and social cues that I had missed out on in my earlier years. My ability to shapeshift into different environments, without consciously trying, was due to the stark differences between the two worlds I had inhabited.

Spickard (2022) emphasizes that shapeshifting is not universally available. It is tied to the unique circumstances of migration, identity, and cultural adaptation. I found that my experiences, shaped by my earlier environment, had given me the ability to adapt, but also left me questioning my authenticity.

Navigating multiple identities provided growth and resilience but also led to dangerous levels of introspection. Muhammad Khalifa (2018) talks about leadership practices that create safe spaces for all identities. As I continue to navigate academic, professional, and social spaces, I am learning to celebrate all aspects of my identity—not as fragmented parts, but as essential pieces of who I am.

Narrative Three (I'm DC)

Shapeshifting has always been a part of my identity. Growing up in one of Washington, D.C.'s toughest neighborhoods, I decided early on that I would not become a statistic. Shapeshifting was a survival skill for me, embedded in my DNA. I learned to present myself in ways that would get me ahead starting with how I appeared on paper.

My name, Nzinga, of African descent, holds deep meaning and pride. Yet, as a child, it was a source of embarrassment. My name was often mispronounced, with teachers and classmates alike struggling to say it correctly. To avoid the discomfort, I started using an alias— "Nikki"—when ordering pizza or registering for classes. This alias became my go-to identity. But it wasn't truly me. I often forgot to respond to "Nikki" because it wasn't my name—it was a mask I wore to fit in, to avoid the discomfort others had with my true identity.

Identity as a Coping Mechanism

Reflecting on those experiences, I now realize that I engaged in shapeshifting to cope with imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is the internal belief that you are not as competent or knowledgeable as others and fear being exposed as a fraud (Flanagan et al., 2021; Pennie Sims, 2020; Peteet et al., 2015). This bias, particularly for Black women, can make us feel like we don't belong in spaces where our lived experiences are not respected or understood. I found confidence in my identity when I connected with other women of color who, like me, had beautiful and complex names. It wasn't until then that I stopped apologizing for who I was and embraced the fullness of my name and my identity.

Shapeshifting Without Compromising Identity

Shapeshifting, while sometimes necessary for survival, should not come at the expense of our authentic selves. As Black women in academia, we must embrace our uniqueness—our names, our appearances, our voices—and not shrink ourselves to fit into spaces that were not designed for us. There is power in acceptance, both of ourselves and in the people, we surround ourselves with. As André De Shields once said, "Surround yourself with people whose eyes light up when they see you coming" (Copeland, 2024).

Conclusion

Shapeshifting may be a necessary tool at times and for many reasons; however, one must avoid the potential to diminish your capacity to allow others around you to "shine." Claim your space or command respect by preparing yourself, being honest about your limitations, and having confidence in your abilities. Recognizing that for some no matter how well you conform to normalized standards of what a Black woman, man, or queer should be, how they should think, act, or appear will never be enough to just be. To exist while being yourself, your reality and constant companion must be the awareness that you are enough and that in itself is a state of being. The ability to shape shift extends far beyond this idea of adapting in the different spaces you are in.

Your autoethnographic insights profoundly illuminate the transformative power of identity confluence in fostering authentic self-expression. The emphasis on creating spaces where individuals, particularly those from minoritized backgrounds, can freely and fully manifest their diverse identities resonates deeply. This approach not only validates the multiplicity of personal experiences but also underscores the necessity of inclusive environments in facilitating genuine self-expression.

By advocating for such spaces, your work contributes significantly to our understanding of how identity confluence serves as a catalyst for personal and communal growth. It reflects an awareness of the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their multifaceted identities and highlights the importance of environments that honor and accommodate these complexities. The ability to express various aspects of one's identity without compromise is crucial for personal well-being and empowerment. It allows individuals to engage with their communities more meaningfully and authentically, thereby enhancing collective empathy and solidarity. Your exploration of this theme emphasizes the need for continued advocacy and structural support in creating spaces where all identities are recognized and valued. This not only enriches individual experiences but also promotes a more inclusive and equitable society.

Shapeshifting can be a tool for resilience and adaptation, but it must not become a vehicle for diminishing our potential. We must find ways to claim our space and remain true to our identity. Recognizing that some spaces may never fully accept us is key to navigating these challenges. The ability to shapeshift, when embraced thoughtfully, allows us to navigate diverse environments with authenticity and pride—ultimately contributing to personal growth and fostering a more inclusive society.

References

- Copeland, S. (2024, April 23). Tony-Winner André De Shields on the essential qualities His parents taught Him. Oprah Daily.
- Davidson, B., & Joinson, A. (2021). *Shape shifting across social Media*. *Social Media + Society*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121990632>
- Dobson Smith, D. (2022, August 8). A sense of belonging starts with self-acceptance. Harvard Business Review.
- Jones, S. (2017). *Shapeshifting and sexuality: A critical autoethnography of a Selkie* (Master's thesis). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1292>
- halifa, M. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Matthews, D.Y., Roberts, L., Flanagan, C.N., & Frazier, R. (2021, March). When Black girl magic isn't enough: Supporting Black college women through advising & coaching. *Academic Advising Today*, 44(1).

McCluney, C. L., Durkee, M. I., Smith, R. E., Robotham, K. J., & Lee, S. S.-L. (2021). To be or not to be...black: The effects of racial codeswitching on perceived professionalism in the workplace. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104199>

Peteet, B. J., Montgomery, L., & Weekes, J. C. (2015). Predictors of imposter phenomenon among talented ethnic minority undergraduate students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 84(2), 175–186.

Spickard, P. (2022). Shape shifting: Toward a theory of racial change. *Genealogy*, 6(48). <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6020048>