Scholar Perspectives

Black on Both Sides: Teaching in K-12 *and* Higher Education Classrooms at Predominantly Black *and* Predominantly White Schools

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Abstract: In this reflexive essay, we recast our years as K-12 classroom teachers in predominately Black schools to assess how those formative experiences have subsequently shaped our pedagogy in predominately and historically white schools. Drawing on Aimee Cox's conceptualization of shapeshifters alongside other perspectives rooted in Black studies, we begin by considering the relationship between shapeshifting and Blackness in our professional lives as critical Black, differently gendered pre-tenure professors at a conservative research-intensive university in the South. Tracing our pedagogical practices and orientations from our time as K-12 classroom teachers to higher education instructors, we subsequently demonstrate the stakes we have in the work we currently do. Next, we discuss how our evolving political commitment to intersectional racial justice ultimately helps us reconcile the specific form of shapeshifting we enact with a more confident and transparent embrace of our Blackness. We shapeshift not with the expectation that we will transform racist structures or transcend systemic racism, but in an effort not to lose ourselves by trying to fit into a space that was designed to exclude us. As we rewrite the socially constructed meanings affixed to our bodies, we accept that this revision will be illegible to some—if not most—for only certain persons have the visual capacity to see us for who and what we are.

Keywords: racial realism, Black faculty, pre-tenure faculty, higher education pedagogy

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For Black higher education professors working at predominately white institutions who previously taught in predominantly Black K-12 settings, how is their current pedagogy shaped by these prior experiences? In which ways does race—specifically Blackness—inform how they engage with their current students and construct their pedagogical identity? What differences and similarities do they deem meaningful across these two contexts? Guided by these questions, this essay explores how we; Black tenure-track professors at a research intensive, historically white institution; navigate the current environment in which we work, drawing on our experiences as former K-12 classroom teachers at predominately Black schools. The issues we raise in this essay are important in part because few scholars have critically analyzed the pedagogy of college or university faculty relative to race and in its relationship to their previous formal teaching experiences. Additionally, little scholarship to date has examined the link between the instruction of higher education faculty and their previous experiences as educators. More specifically, little literature is available discussing the role of race or Blackness regarding these matters.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to explore how our Black identity has influenced our professional lives as two critical, Black, differently gendered, pre-tenured professors. In addition to our race and critical scholarly orientation, our pre-tenure status exacerbates the precarious nature of our professional lives, as faculty without tenure suffer greater vulnerability and less job security than our tenured counterparts. To support our analysis, we emphasize the part shapeshifting, as articulated primarily by Black feminist scholar Aimee Cox (2015), has played in our careers and what it means to us. In essence, we aim to demonstrate how our evolving political commitment to intersectional racial justice ultimately helps us reconcile the specific form of shapeshifting we enact with a more confident and transparent embrace of our Blackness.

That is, we shapeshift not with the expectation that we will transform racist structures or transcend systemic racism, but in an effort not to lose ourselves by trying to fit into a space that was designed to exclude us. As we rewrite the socially constructed meanings affixed to our bodies, we accept that this revision will be illegible to some—if not most—for only certain persons have the visual capacity to see us for who and what we are.

We proceed with a brief section that highlights the space we occupy in terms of institutional setting, and then move on to discuss the conceptual underpinnings on which we rely for this essay, namely, shapeshifting (Cox, 2015), racial realism (Bell, 1992), second sight (Du Bois, 1903), and Otherness (Wynter, 2003). This framework allows us to underline the Black feminist perspectives (Gumbs, 2016) that we posit are consistent with each concept individually, and they exemplify how a Black feminist vantage point can help Black men live more justice-oriented lives (hooks, 2004). Next, we share our individual narratives, beginning with Chaddrick's and moving on to ArCasia's. Both narratives begin with context about our K-12 teaching experiences and bring readers forward to our present work as faculty members. The following section highlights the responses our narratives offer relative to our guiding questions and implications of this essay for pedagogical studies across the K-12 and higher education spectrum. To close, we reemphasize this paper's key takeaways.

Where Are We?

Understanding the important role context plays in any investigation, reflexive or otherwise, that intends to examine the ways individuals or groups navigate a social setting, we feel it is also imperative to underline the unique environment within which we currently work: at a conservative research-intensive university in the South. This research emphasis is important to note because a great deal of our professional success at such an institution depends on our

scholarly productivity beyond teaching and service. Furthermore, we are employed in Texas, which comes with many other complex considerations for professors like us. The 2024 Niche College Rankings ranked Texas A&M University the 2nd most conservative public university in the nation (NICHE, n.d.). In many ways, this conservatism ranking represents a badge of honor for many long affiliated with the institution, including alumni and those who wish to be "Aggies." Such conservative values and the centuries of imperialist white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy (hooks, 2004) "that made America great" sharply misalign with our own view of history and the way we understand systemic oppression. As a result of this conservative environment, we find ourselves constantly navigating such tensions as we seek to survive within a nation, state, and institution uninterested in meaningfully addressing historic wrongs.

For both of us, the school at which we now teach is quite different from the ones at which we taught early in our careers. This current setting is not only at a different educational level, but it also is a historically white, research-intensive institution that is a member of the Association of American Universities, making it one of the most distinguished and prestigious universities in the country according to typical metrics. Perhaps most importantly, both Black students and Black faculty are said to make up approximately 3 percent of the student and faculty population, respectively (Yenor, 2023). To add, recent efforts by the state legislature have banned programmatic initiatives intended to further diversity, equity, and inclusion at Texas' public colleges and universities. While these moves have for the time being protected scholarly research and teaching, the sentiment and intentions of many who wield political power over the state are clear regarding the needs of Black learners, their communities, and those invested in supporting Black education writ large (James-Gallaway, 2024).

Conceptual Orientation

The work of several scholars situated within the Black studies tradition helps us illustrate the nature of our work, how it has perpetually been tied to Blackness, and what stakes we have in it. When Black feminist sociologist Aimee Cox published her book *Shapeshifters* (2015), she, drawing on Schreiber (2012) explained that "shapeshifting is defined as a method used to 'find solutions, master concentration, recall, recontextualize ideas, and map out plans'" (p. 29); Cox linked shapeshifting to the choreography associated with moving through a space such that the people, the space, and the processes involved are subject to transformation. We deem Cox's findings from this study on the young Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter with whom she worked especially useful for considering how differently gendered educators move through different sites with particular (seemingly subversive) political commitments. This undertaking is marked by the second sight that Black sociologist and activist William E. B. Du Bois (1903) discussed in his essay about, in part, the veil, which is linked to African Americans' double consciousness with regard to race and racism in the United States. In essence, the color line, as Du Bois described, that long ordered and continues to organize U.S. society has impacted our teaching, even in settings that were predominately Black. This status as the Other, according to Black studies and Black feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter (2003), has long informed the way Blackness connotes Otherness across the western world. Ideas about who can be fully human, or Man as she explains, and treated as such are determined largely by one's ontological relationship to Blackness, a configuration that supplies the full array of humanity to those whose existence is absent Blackness. In terms of the day-to-day choices Black educators like us make vis-à-vis our pedagogy, Derrick Bell's classic essay on racial realism (1992) invites readers to rethink what it means to measure Black humanity based on the willingness to fight racial oppression while

knowing the outcome: defeat. Because racism, antiBlack racism specifically, is endemic to US society, Black people are unable to annihilate it (Bell 1992; 1995); we can, however, challenge it and the very notion of the color line itself (Du Bois, 1903). In doing so, we assert our status as fully human despite claims that we are not. The way we go about contesting our inhumanity (Wynter, 2003) constitutes a form of shapeshifting—of resistance (Cox, 2015).

Chaddrick's Narrative

K-12

My path towards the classroom was atypical. Unfortunately, I participated in the educational organization Teach for America (TFA). TFA's neoliberal foundation is predicated on commodifying and privatizing the education system (Brewer & Cody, 2014; Lahann & Mitescu Reagan, 2011; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Sondel, 2015). Because TFA believes in decentering collegiate teacher education training, I was not trained in a college classroom or via a traditional teacher educator program. My pedological experience was premised on a 6-week training session at Georgia Tech University. Each day, aspiring TFA teachers were bused to our onsite location, where we would instruct summer school. Afterwards, we were inundated with professional development training that insisted the way to be a successful teacher required us to treat students like objects and not people. After I finished this part of my journey, I transitioned to New Orleans, where I taught in a "no excuses" charter management organization named Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). Scholars explain that "no excuses" charter management organizations employ rigid behavior and disciplinary measures and a longer school day (Golann, 2015; Kerstetter, 2016), with KIPP specifically branding itself as an institution that uses penal-based punishment (Lack, 2009). With time, I came to see that this approach to discipline stemmed directly from antiBlack "racialized surveillance technologies" (C. James-Gallaway, 2022, p. 67),

context that stirred me to more consciously invest in developing a subversive pedagogy with my students.

These professional development trainings and my first semester at KIPP made one thing overly clear: I was not there to teach children, but to control students within a system of stringent penalization. This observation was painfully evident early on because, as I would soon learn, antiBlack racism in the US is a permanent condition (Bell, 1992) animated largely by the veil Du Bois (1903) wrote about. I was placed in a KIPP school and assigned to teach 8th grade special education. Early on, I witnessed how majority white administrators and teachers oversaw the majority Black student body, seeking to control the bodies, minds, souls, and voices of students (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). These educators believed that the best way to educate Black students was to control and surveil them through antiBlack authoritative discipline. Students had little bodily autonomy; they could not do tasks I took for granted as a student, like speaking, walking, or even completing their coursework without a teacher's command. Alongside the constant surveillance of educators, the school, which was comprised of a majority Black student body, walked in chain gang like lines within and outside their classrooms (Haley, 2013), often had silent lunches, limited recess time, a strict dress code, and no room to voice criticism of their treatment without harsh consequences. The institution, the majority white administrators, and teachers believed that without controlling every moment of these Black students' time in school, little academic progress would be possible (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). If students did not precisely follow all adults' commands, their teachers were to deduct payment from their weekly "paychecks." This payment device represented a demerit system intended to incentivize student compliance, advancing the fallacy of meritocracy as educators promoted working hard and following commands with earning money; at the same time, they linked the inverse with losing

money from one's paycheck (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). If a student lost too much money from their paycheck, they would then have to attend a mandatory in-school detention while students who earned enough money were able to attend a celebratory event. Although the white teachers who enforced these practices were never educated under such conditions, they believed this was best for the Black children within the school. Witnessing Black children experience education in this way at the behest of a charter organization created and operated by majority white employees angered me immensely. It angered me because the employees of the institution had in most cases been deemed fully human by the prevailing educational system and thus had not been subject to Otherness in the ways our Black students were (Wynter, 2003). I could not ethically practice the rules of the KIPP school because I knew this approach to discipline and learning was incompatible with Black humanity and because I did not learn under such authoritarian practices. Furthermore, I did not become an educator to police Black students; thus, I set out on my own path towards resistance, as I did not believe my Black body could educate or discipline Black students in the ways my KIPP employers saw fit (C. James-Gallaway, 2022).

Though I did not know it at the time, one central aspect of my teaching was rooted in Black fugitive pedagogy. Like many others, my K-12 or undergraduate education did not teach me about the history of Black education, which, as I have come to learn, was a Black fugitive endeavor (Givens, 2021; Gumbs, 2016). Historically, Black educators used fugitive pedagogy to reject antiBlackness within schooling spaces and to uplift the souls of Black children during the 19th and 20th centuries (Givens, 2021). This vital task for Black educators reflected their understanding that their students would have to navigate an antiBlack U.S society (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021). However, these actions would put Black educators directly in opposition to white administrators, school boards, and educators who wanted Black students to

learn materials that denigrated and distorted Black peoples (James-Gallaway, 2019). Thus, Black educators relied on their subversive pedagogy to undermine the antiBlack curriculum.

Like Black educators that taught decades before me under different and incomparable racially dangerous circumstances (Givens, 2021), my students (aged 12-16) and I relied on Black fugitivity, as antiBlackness was a pervasive undercurrent at the school. The students I taught were inquisitive and thus asked questions about the structure of the school; if my schooling experience was like theirs; if the rules could be different in my classroom and in our interactions. The brilliant and critical students I taught challenged me to restructure our classroom and interactions in a humanizing way because we collectively disagreed with the rules of the school. As a result, I, not yet having the language to articulate such, relied on a Black fugitive pedagogy within my own teaching practice to subvert the dehumanization of Black students that the school relied on for power and control. This meant rejecting the authoritarian-minded disciplinary practices of the institution and using "communication and transparency" (C. James-Gallaway, 2022, p. 71) within student interactions to uplift the voices of students. It meant operating on co-created rules within our shared classroom space as well as outside. It also meant recognizing that despite our fugitive practices, we could still be harmed by the KIPP school. As such, we could not act like the rules did not exist when other teachers or administrators were watching. We were good actors; we still maintained the school's rules until we were outside watchful eyes. Even during teaching evaluations, my students knew that our classroom would need to operate like the others within the school for me to keep my job. Shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) in such a way was a testament to our evolving Black feminist-inspired vision of justice (Gumbs, 2016; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; James-Gallaway, 2024). As a teacher at a KIPP school, I learned that my work is to support those who are being actively harmed by those in positions of power; that it is important

to turn that power over to those who are afflicted, in this case, to the students. I also learned that there were a lot of adults who maintained sexist, racist, classist mindsets that negatively impacted the students we were supposed to serve.

Higher Education

My engagement of Black fugitive pedagogy in the K-12 space has informed and continues to inform my current pedagogy as a higher educator instructor. Because I am presently a university faculty member and due to the white supremacist, conservative atmosphere of Texas politics and education, I am not at liberty to detail my Black fugitive practices in this section. I take this action to protect when, where, and how I evoke Black fugitive pedagogy writ large. My actions reflect the shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) I have enacted and continue to enact because I have adapted my teaching from that suitable for K-12 students to what I deem best for higher education learners; all the while, I have remained committed to the power and importance of Blackness and Black education in a way that I believe enriches the learning experiences of all students with whom I interact. However, I will discuss my journey towards two critical theoretical frameworks, why I use them, and how they connect to my experience as an 8th grade teacher. I do so because these frameworks shape my pedagogy, praxis, and approach to instruction more broadly.

The goal of my scholarly work is to reduce the dehumanization of students, with a particular focus on Black students. One issue I noticed as an 8th grade teacher was how the majority-white teachers and administrators routinely dehumanized Black students, practices that were heightened by additional marginalities like social class, gender, mental/physical/emotional ability. Due to religious conservativism, some elder Black teachers and administrators often struggled to accept lesbian, gay, and bisexual students' identities. As an educator within the

school, it was clear to me and many of my students that most if not all students faced various forms of dysconscous antiBlack racism (King, 1991). Thus, as I transitioned out of the K-12 environment, I figured one place to make change would be where individuals go to learn about practicing or researching different forms of education.

Since leaving the 8th grade classroom, I have raised my level of critical pedagogical practices and orientations through engaging subversive theoretical frameworks. I was initially introduced to this material in my graduate coursework. Two classes that transformed the way I see the role of research, education, and the world were Black Feminisms and Critical Race Theory, both of which were taught by two critical Black women scholars. These two courses allowed me to put language to the expansive world of education that Black people experience. These two areas allowed me to comprehend systemic oppression from the bottom (Matsuda, 1987) and across multiple modalities of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 2000). Doing so gave me a deeper understanding of how various forms of oppression function within institutions, structures, and interpersonal relationships.

Both my former teaching experiences and graduate coursework have influenced my pedagogy in dynamic ways. As noted previously, in real time I witnessed the dehumanization of Black students within a "no excuses" KIPP charter school. Adults were the ones causing this dehumanization through the systems and structures they created, and through interpersonal student-teacher engagement. Given this context, I view as my first objective in my current work with student to push them as they enter my classroom to question the mindset they bring to education. Before I begin each semester, I seek out critical course materials (e.g., videos, readings) that introduce students to subaltern thinkers whose scholarship seeks to upend the status quo (e.g., Stuart Hall, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Derrick Bell). Most importantly, I

build course content to include the works of scholars whose fields have relegated them to the margins for focusing on racial matters. Furthermore, my courses rely heavily on the history of a topic from a critical perspective. A focus on historical foundations roots out ahistoricism and allows students to infer about the past, present, and future of education given the pervasiveness of oppression. Importantly, for many if not most of my students, this learning experience is the first time they have been exposed to these kinds of ideas or been asked to think in such a provocative or counterhegemonic way.

Following these steps allows for the deliberate construction of a critical classroom space that is intent on dismantling imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in education and the world. Throughout the semester, I do not engage with students in a "you are wrong; I am right" dynamic, but through a specific Black feminist pedological tool to which I was introduced in graduate school. There, I started to extend my understanding of power relations within the classroom. I began to search for alternative modes of teaching. This search sent me down a trail of readings by feminist scholar-activist bell hooks. One major focus of bell hooks' pedogeological perspective is the removal of the educator-as-dictator from the classroom with the aim to create a community of reciprocal learning (hooks, 1994; 2003; 2010). Educator-as-dictator is a vital construct within the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that harms all elements of learning and teaching (Gumbs, 2016; James-Gallaway, 2024). Thus, within my coursework and student interactions, I encourage student leadership and autonomy as much as possible. For me, this means that within the classroom, I do not seek to stand in front of a podium and lecture endlessly. Instead, I encourage students to lead the class and explain what they saw or learned from the materials we engage. Meanwhile, I, too, share what I learned while connecting multiple threads of thinking that students bring up during

discussion. Motivated by my first students, my shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) as such creates a more open, fluid classroom space that in turn supports my students to endeavor in the same. While I have faced and will continue to face opposition from students (colleagues and administrators) who uphold a white supremacist worldview, I know that I have exposed them to important content and ideas to which they may return and grapple whenever, if ever, they are ready.

ArCasia's Narrative

K-12

I have always been practical. I know I think in smaller steps rather than in big bounds, so when I identify something I would like to do or accomplish, it has always been in my nature to first assess whether that goal feels attainable and then, if so, plan backwards to achieve it. Deciding to become an educator was no different. It was a very rationale choice based on the persistent issues I was witnessing in the institution of education at the time. These observations hit a peak for me during my time as an undergraduate in part because this was when I had to select a major and craft an intellectual and practical focus in terms of my career path.

A number of contemporaneous issues around me informed my choice to become an educator, including the Black undergraduate classmates I was watching be placed on academic probation or dismissed altogether despite having graduated at the top of their (mostly urban, mostly Black) high school classes; though I did not yet have the language, I viewed these as symptoms of a deeper, endemic issue related to what I would come to understand as antiBlackness (Bell, 1992), issues that centered on the color line (Du Bois, 1903). Raised in what some might consider the height of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) frenzy and having schooled in Texas, I knew firsthand what it meant to have your entire future hinge on your test performance (i.e., high stakes testing) (Apple, 2006; Causey-Bush, 2005). For example, I was

supposed to walk the stage alongside a Black high school classmate whose 3.2 GPA proved insufficient for him to graduate because he had failed his Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test; as a result, his life and career trajectory were injured beyond repair. I also knew early on that this approach was ineffective, especially for Black students, and that education is not a business. However, seeing it playout after high school convinced me that I had to do more than complain or remain appalled. In addition, I also felt I needed something to stand on in terms of experience if I hoped to move the needle at all, and I reasoned that nothing could give me better experience than K-12 classroom teaching. Accepting education as an area that my skillset was well suited to, I moved forward with transforming it from an area of interest into a career, and the central force motivating my focus was what I would come to later articulate as Blackness, which I was watching be disregarded at too many points in the formal educational process.

Adding education as an additional major mid-way through my undergraduate studies, I decided on earning my credential the traditional teacher-education route so I could access the training necessary to best support the Black students I was set on working with. My preservice teaching program, however, was incredibly traumatizing, details of which I have written about elsewhere (A. James-Gallaway, 2022; James-Gallaway & Turner, 2021; Vlach et al., 2022). To summarize, I was the only Black student in my cohort, and I was regularly accused of fabricating racism and mocked for highlighting the plight of Black students. For the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say that I quickly learned that the issues with the education system were deeply rooted in white supremacy and antiBlackness and that Texas was but one of many places in which such was occurring. Thus, I elected to join the Teach for America (TFA) program largely because I wanted to see firsthand how I educational issues I witnessed and experienced differed

across geographic contexts and to ensure I would be placed in a majority Black, under-resourced school setting that would give me the insight I knew I needed to better understand the most pressing issues and begin to consider approaches to redress. I entered TFA, however, well-aware of its pretense, so much so that I quickly and confidently showed my hand by asking the recruiter who met with me why he so swiftly left his classroom in the Rio Grande Valley if the experience and his students were, in fact, as fantastic and transformative as he told me my experience would be. I was familiar with its neoliberal antics and "grit" ideology, which emphasized rugged individualism and "getting kids [of Color] out" (Carter et al., 2023). Nevertheless, I was honest with myself about leveraging the program for what it could teach me about the group whose needs I felt merited more concerted and informed attention: Black children.

I would like to say or believe I was prepared for or could reasonably predict what my professional life would entail, but I was not and could not; it was by all accounts a very mixed bag. In all honesty, I still firmly believe no one could prepare for what one's life as a teacher (or student for that matter) would involve or demand in the school in which I was placed. Thankfully, the school's population was precisely what I had hoped it would be; it was 98% Black and nearly 95% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Moreover, excluding the all-Black para-professionals, the staff was nearly half Black and the administration included only one non-Black person. This school was no typical public school, however; it was an all-boys charter school in a small "urban" city on the east coast. An integral detail is that in the community, this school's reputation centered on it being the final lifeline before a young Black boy was sentenced to a stint in a juvenile detention center. A significant number of our students had been previously expelled from other local schools, and parents sent them to us with the hope that we could meet their educational—and socioemotional—needs. To add, the school nurse

once shared with me that nearly half of our students were being prescribed ADHD or ADD medication. Hence, as one might imagine, the behavioral needs of this population were significant, so the school elected to employ many of the same tactics Chaddrick's KIPP school did; these sub-humanizing behavioral techniques expected, for example, children to walk silently in straight lines with their hands behind their backs, pivot around corners, and endure literal ostracization from their class by sitting at the edge of the classroom and forbidding their peers to speak with them if they misbehaved. The broader context within which all of this happened was steeped in a ferocious sexism that pervaded virtually all aspects of the school; in short, the boys were trained and encouraged by male staff members to disrespect and objectify women with nonchalant regularity. As I entered the classroom, I brought the critical approach to instruction that I had started to develop as a preservice teacher. Keeping race at the center, I sought to engage with my students in a way I had wished my K-12 educators had engaged with me: as a learner eager to make racialized sense of their world, as one who needed to learn to decipher the world in terms of its inequitable power relations. At its core, my pedagogy aimed to help my students build the skills they needed to see that they could, in fact, practice agency and self-determination, ultimately liberating themselves. I tried to accomplish these admittedly lofty goals while struggling with my de-priortization as a social studies teacher whose perceived irrelevance relegated me to the margins as a full-fledged teacher without a dedicated classroom like my math and English Language Arts colleagues. Nevertheless, I did what I could to teach my students, blending the useful parts of my educator-preparation training with my majors in sociology, history, and minor in African American Studies. These intellectual instruments aided me tremendously in working with my students to build a critical framework for them to read their world in terms of power and justice. I wanted them to cultivate the skills and language to critique

mainstream narratives that glorified genocide and white supremacy in ways I was never asked or expected to. As I have detailed elsewhere (Griffin & James-Gallaway, 2018), my intention with my students was for them to be able to deconstruct oppression anytime they encountered it. At a school with no functioning or staffed library and no textbooks, I located various textbooks and extracted excerpts that discussed common narratives, including those on Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas. Armed with insights from scholars like Howard Zinn (1980) and James Loewen (1995), I guided my students through the historical distortions and outright lies that littered many documented interpretations of the past. They compared accounts from traditional textbooks to those from individuals like Bartolome de las Casas and other Indigenous-centered histories that counter the heroic Columbus narrative. These kinds of exercises proved to be generative gateways for us to unpack all kinds of issues related to subjugation.

It was in this space that I developed into a Black women educator who worked to carry on the legacy of the Black women teachers during segregation (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021). Like them, I encouraged and nurtured my students because I believed in their capacity to change the world if they so choose. We talked directly and honestly about race and racism in the lives of the people we studied and in our own. After my first year as I found my footing and stood witness to the toxic sexist climate in which we were working, I pushed myself to discuss with my students how racism intersected with sexism. I required my students to reflect on their own lives and experiences as legitimate areas of study and sources of knowledge, using this insight to make connections to the material we were investigating. I told them they were powerful and capable, and many believed me. At the same time, they helped me see myself as a real teacher with gifts to share, one who could learn much more from the students in my charge than I could ever teach them. It was an empowering experience that was cut short due to the highly toxic, sexist work

environment and conditions in which we were forced to operate, details too lengthy and complex for the space permitted in this paper.

Higher Education

Alongside 90% of my colleagues, I was forced out this school, which was shuttered shortly after our departure. Subsequently, I sought to find answers to larger questions about education, questions I knew the classroom would not permit me to explore. I also knew I wanted to contribute on a larger scale to knowledge production because I knew that the way many researchers understood and framed Black children and Black communities was flawed and, thus, in need of attention. I also knew I could bring with me many of the lessons my students had taught me to bear on my next professional endeavor as a higher education scholar and instructor. For additional context, I sought to become and am an education foundations professor who specializes in the history of education and supports preservice and in-service teachers for work in a variety of social contexts. It did not matter to me what racial setting I was placed in to do my work as a higher education faculty member because my students taught me that everyone who traffics in education can benefit profoundly from considering the plight of Black children and their learning needs. I intended to allow this view to lead the way, and I understood that shapeshifting to meet this new challenge would likely push me to further consider that "by the body's placement in a space, the nature of the space changes" (Cox, 2015, p. 29).

One of the oddest aspects, at least to me, of higher education is that little if any real teacher training is provided or mandated for college and university instructors. Accordingly, I, like most of my colleagues, was never formally trained to teach at this level. The "apprentice" model of graduate education saw me serve as the instructor of record (i.e., primary instructor who is responsible for assigning final grades) for different courses; in them, however, virtually

no feedback on my teaching or mentorship was supplied. Nevertheless, despite the very different student body I was teaching, I felt somewhat confident in my abilities given my time as a K-12 educator. My "teacher training" for higher education put me face-to-face in one case with a student body that largely mirrored the preservice teacher cohort that had harassed and gaslighted me during undergrad. And this group, one I encountered in Illinois, delivered much the same toxicity as my preservice teacher cohort had shown a few years prior in Texas. Like Malcolm X said, "as long as you South of the Canadian border, you South" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 2).

Overwhelm and trepidation are reasonable responses for faculty like us who work in environments like the one in which we find ourselves. The commitments that brought me to the classroom as a K-12 teacher and currently motivate my research agenda alongside the lessons my first students taught me about the fight for racial justice, however, continue to pay dividends and inform my pedagogy as a higher education instructor. Higher education has given me the opportunity to hone my deployment of Black feminist pedagogy, which I describe as "an emancipatory intervention that explicitly prioritises Black women's and girls' varied standpoints, knowledges, perspectives, and lived experiences in teaching and learning [and]… is not singularly concerned with the consciousness-raising instruction of Black women about Black women by Black women but offers a set of learning strategies and commitments that all can adopt and embody;" it also "challenges the traditional classroom in which students are taught to conform to institutionalized power and to preserve white, western cultural values" and advances a holistic perspective that includes academic learning as part of a broad nexus of student needs (James-Gallaway, 2024, p. 4-5). If anything, I have shapeshifted (Cox, 2015) into an educator who is less willing to appease the white gaze. I tell students that I am a Black woman who employs a Black feminist pedagogy that cannot be untethered from my instruction.

My time with my first students showed me just how capable and brilliant Black middle school boys can be, so I draw inspiration from them to encourage my present students, who are years older and have had the luxury of more years of formal schooling, to see everyone, including themselves, as raced despite society often deracializing whiteness, and thus white people. These commitments are similarly apparent in the way I show up to teach. I combine my awareness that my presence in the classroom, virtual or otherwise, as an instructor at a predominantly and historically white institution that was established to exclude African Americans and women—not to mention Black women—is a counter to the prevailing racial order with an understanding that my positionality compels me to bring my whole, critical self to my students and their learning endeavors. Furthermore, my syllabi center on oppression and issues of racial justice; my students learn about related issues via the perspectives and experiences of individuals and groups marginalized along the lines of race, sexuality, gender, and class. They are required to analyze this material with systems of privilege and deprivation in mind, considering subordinated perspectives.

Maybe most importantly, my teaching is catalyzed by the Black students who have faced and continue to face sub-humanizing educational contexts, those who routinely interact with teachers that openly despise them in systems designed to destroy them and their brilliance—those who view them as the Other, as non-human (Wynter, 2003). Although the work I did with my first students showed me what is possible when one or a few educators conspire to undermine the prevailing system of Black under- and mis-education, they also demonstrated the grave limitations of an individual approach to educational amelioration that produces a reactive, haphazard remedy to longstanding issues. As a result, I teach teachers to consider, as they develop their pedagogy, the plight of these Black children in all they do, showing them that such

consideration will ultimately serve the interests of all students they have the opportunity to work with. My first students taught me that if I want to do right by them, I do not have many other options.

What we are saying and what it means

In our collective work, we remain motivated by our first students, who resisted their own destruction each day. Having both taught in underserved contexts where the state was working to subjugate Black peoples in multiple ways, particularly those educational, we learned firsthand how our students understood resistance and how they went about practicing it. They showed us that resistance can and often does take many forms, and the one they allowed us to witness alongside them was resistance through the preservation of their humanity, of Black humanity (Bell, 1992). In reflection, it does not seem to us that our students resisted with the intention of completely overturning the systems of oppression we were living and learning about, but they pushed back with the objective of asserting their personhood—because that was challenge enough to white supremacy. That, as they portrayed, embodied the racial realism Derrick Bell (1992) wrote about, the same racial realism that animated our ancestors who languished under enslavement and in the century of Jim Crow immediately after. Today in our work with our current students, who look much different than those we originally worked with, we carry forward the spirit of the Black freedom struggle because we understand that this objective has the potential to benefit everyone. With intersectional racial justice at its core, this form of resistance is multifaceted, but it centers on race, on Blackness, and its innate significance.

We found ourselves shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) in a way that was cognizant of the veil Du Bois (1903) wrote about, and we refused to be defeated by it. This way of seeing double, as it were, clarified that our "second sight" might be one of our most powerful instruments for

responding to our oppression, enabling us to assume a form consistent with the political commitments our first students implanted in us. Our first students gave us strong grounding that has since guided our path as educators who now work at the higher education level. In this sense, we accept that dominant society views us as the Other, and, thus, our Otherness, as Sylvia Wynter (2003) explained, makes us vulnerable to all manner of attacks from disgruntled students, administration, colleagues, and the state itself. Reckoning with our Otherness through the lens of our initial experiences as classroom educators showed us how important and powerful it can be to prioritize Blackness, even and especially when doing so comes with great risks.

In doing the research and reflection required to write this paper, we realized that there is little to no literature that discusses the connection between one's K-12 classroom teaching and their higher education instruction. For us, our time in the K-12 classroom was foundational to the instructors we have since grown into, and we are unable to decouple our pedagogy from these formative experiences as K-12 educators. Although it is less common for academics outside those in the field of Curriculum and Instruction to have taught at the K-12 level prior to their employment as scholars in higher education, we suspect there are some who have. While Chaddrick's experience as a current higher education scholar with previous K-12 classroom experience may be unique, we believe the research community could greatly benefit from learning about other, similar experiences to better understand how teaching experiences in different contexts shape what happens in college and university classrooms. We, thus, call for more work, conceptual, reflexive, and empirical, that investigates this topic.

To conclude, we have used the space allotted us in this essay to explore some of the salient linkages threading together our teaching experiences in K-12, predominantly Black environments with those we have had in higher education as professors at a historically white

university. We have demonstrated that white supremacist, antiBlack oppression occurred in both setting types, conditions with which no one should have to contend. Underlining the unique socio-political positions we occupied and occupy in both spaces as critical, differently gendered Black pedagogues with an unrelenting commitment to Black flourishing, we have highlighted some of the key considerations we weigh in our fight against Black subjugation. Ultimately, as we strived to make apparent, the lessons our first students taught us about what it means to be Black and to embrace one's full humanity in the midst of utter chaos is largely what continues to motivate us in our professional journey as academics. Our earliest students showed us how unproductive it is to live in fear when you are living right—when you know you are doing right. They showed us that refashioning a message for an audience should not affect the essential message being delivered. For us, we know that message to be the full, complex humanity of Blackness—of Black children, communities, and learners—and we know that because we are committed to remaining Black on both sides.

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