

Scholar Perspective

One For All: The Intergenerational Exploration of Racialized Experiences in School for a Shapeshifted Black Family

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Abstract

The racialized experiences of Black folx in the U.S. and abroad are well documented in the literature, yet, the richness of these experiences is best articulated through stories passed down throughout the years. With each passing generation, there exists a parallel phenomenon where different generations of Black folx in the U.S. experience similar trials and triumphs as it relates to various societal systems. One such system that continues to define and redefine, traumatize, liberate, and restrict is education. The purpose of this narrative exploration rests with one research question: How are the intergenerational experiences of racialization in education shaping the individual and collective identities of a multigenerational Black family? While the concept of shape shifting (Cox, 2015) often centralizes the phenomenon or action to one person transforming themselves to protect their identity in hostile spaces, this study sheds light on how the refinement of shapeshifting has become a transferrable legacy within our family.

Keyword: shapeshifting, Black, school, narrative, racialized

One For All: The Intergenerational Manifestation of the Black S.O.U.L.

“For trees to grow in Brooklyn, seeds need to be planted” – Talib Kweli

Du Bois early in the 20th century crystallized a monumental phenomenon that Black folks persist through, which often offers great insight while withstanding societal oppression. He posits that for Black people, the construction of their identity exists in a duality of views. Whereas typically an individual views themselves from their perspectives, Black people are also under the surveilling eyes of white people in a predominately white society. Thus, this veil allows Black people to see themselves not only through their own eyes but in the fragmented imagination of a predominately white society which sees Black people's existence as an unblotted stain on their societal progress, particularly in the U.S. This fragmented reality has been on display since before the Continental Congress legalized the sovereignty of white immigrants ability to subdue and control the land of Indigenous people, whose social and cultural heritage educated colonist on how to survive. The identity of enslaved Africans was one of nothingness in the face of white supremacy; yet the social, cultural, emotional, and educational prowess of these enslaved people did not wither away in the face of dire circumstances. How enslaved Africans constructed their own identity required a fundamental understanding of the mechanisms that white society enacted to foster anti-Black ideologies, and their fugitive mechanisms to ensure that their individual and collective knowledge was securely passed on to future generations through storytelling.

The art of storytelling preserves and articulates the Black experience in forms that remain resilient to the constant oppressive forces that subjugate Black people in various arenas in life. It is the story that offers lessons, knowledge, skills, and wisdom for Black people in an apparatus that permits a transference, even if the individual who was in the story is not the person telling the story to the current or next generation. The oral history is to be of the benefit of the tribe or

village, dispensed often by the griot (storyteller) according to Western African history. It is the hope that the story informs the current and future generations of not only the challenges or problems of old but also situates these generations to effectively surpass and support the older generation. These acts (s) for Black people are critically important as the effort to erase the contribution and cultural knowledge remains constant. In particular, as Black people enter into more prominent roles in society (i.e., government, administrators, CEOs, etc.) and into what we would consider hostile territory, they have and will continue to be subjected to racialized experiences. Racialized experiences are defined as intentions, processions, or procedures by which racial identities are systematically constructed; often elevating one group to a superior status while subjugating other groups to inhuman-like treatment and conditions. While people of color in the U.S. have always existed in a racialized state, for Black people, this racialization is heightened by the fact that each society's shift towards justice, requires them, their bodies, and their identities to be the sacrificial lamb (i.e., Emmitt Till, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Sandra Bland, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Crispus Attucks).

One historical shift occurred after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which legally ended Jim Crow in the U.S. Essentially, it became illegal to segregate on the basis of race in any public location. Where this would have the most significant ramifications was in traditional public schools. Millions of children who were once separated by race would now be forced to learn in “integrated schools”. This decision while it brought about new possibilities for Black people in the U.S., also created a new opportunity for Black children and their families to enter into a new state of racialization; having to enter into schools and communities that were not welcoming and consistent reiterated messages of Black children’s inferiority. Integration became

synonymous with Black children being the first, in many cases, to enter into predominately white educational spaces and experience trauma while constructing conscious mechanisms to protect their own identity from the harshness of racialization. Thus, in connecting Du Bois' double consciousness with Cox's shapeshifting framework and the art of storytelling in Black communities, it is possible that an intergeneration framework exists where Black children are not forming their identities solely through the lens of racialized experiences. Rather, through storytelling the racialized experiences of older generation Black folx become a new veil that is displayed to the younger generation of Black children to aid in their ability to shapeshift beyond the capabilities of prior generations. One's experience(s) become the tapestry for which current and future generations view artifacts to improve upon their experiences and to construct identities that are more impervious to racialization.

Thus, this intergenerational narrative inquiry approach for this study sought to explore how Cox's concept of shapeshifting, became a transferrable legacy within three generations of a Black family, as it relates to K-12 schooling. The research question that drove the study was; how are the intergenerational experiences of racialization in education shaping the individual and collective identities of a multigenerational Black family? The significance of this study exists in the fact that there are a limited number of studies that explore the lived experiences of Black children who integrated predominately white schools – through two generations, and there are few studies that critically examine how the art of storytelling has aided Black folks to push back on racialized attempts across multiple generations in education. Following a cogent literature review of racialized experiences for Black folx in the U.S., the role of education in identity formation is our conceptual framework shapeshifting which was formed by Cox (2015). This

manuscript concludes with forward-facing recommendations for Black children and families, in addition to schools and community stakeholders.

Literature Review

Racialized Experiences of Black Students in the U.S. Education System

“To all the teachers that told me I’d never amount to nothing” – Notorious B.I.G.

That is a summary of how the U.S. education system has treated Black children. Whether it was the refusal of slave owners to allow Black people to become educated for fear of a revolt (they happened regardless); the outright murdering of Black people for becoming literate, the burning down of schools; the stripping away of funding for Black schools in the south after the end of the Civil War; the outright refusal to properly fund segregated Black schools during the Jim Crow era; the refusal to integrate Black children into predominately white schools, the constant refusal to include the histories and contributions of Black people in the curriculum, or the disproportionate rate at which Black children are suspended from schools – Black children have always been racialized by the U.S. education system in one form or another (Williams, 2024). Hochman (2019) denotes that racialization is the process by which racialized groups are formed. He denotes that rather than focusing on understanding the concept of race itself and stopping there, theorists and racial realists must contend with the underpinnings of how groups are forced (willingly or unwillingly, either from an external or internal force) into a subgroup. This subgroup-hood is attached to inferiority either in how this subgroup is treated or how this subgroup can access opportunities in various aspects of life (i.e., housing, labor, health, and for the purposes of this article, education). Race can be a biological category, yet the so-called biological differences between races do not describe how even in a school where the majority are Black students (biological), they still receive substandard treatment as compared to other biological races, even though they constitute the majority of the “power”. This is where

racialization plays a key role, as the processes within schools enforce a racial hierarchy that values the lives and contributions of non-Black more than Black students.

As indicated previously, Black students have always been racialized and these experiences can occur in various forms. For example, Black children and their families are often stigmatized for attending underfunded schools, also known as Title I schools. Black children are penalized for attending urban schools, as they are pathologized as having severe challenges and barriers. If Black children are not attending a traditional public school, they often run the risk of being double penalized. They are seen as selling out for not attending a public school, and if the school they are attending is predominately White, they often are forced to endure the trauma placed upon them by the curriculum, teachers, administrators, and peers who are either culturally unaware of the support Black children need in these spaces, or are willfully practicing anti-black sentiments. Beyond these challenges exist systemic barriers that constantly reinforce the deficit ideologies and treatment towards Black children.

A sizeable systemic barrier to Black children thriving in an education system is the failure to acknowledge that the systems, policies, and procedures throughout various school districts in the U.S. were not designed by or for Black children (Fairclough, 2004). There is this constant notion within educational discourse that if minor tweaks are made to some systems (teacher preparation, classroom management approaches, class sizes, etc.), Black children will instantly begin to thrive in the system. This notion is a fallacy, as research denotes that various components in education serve to subvert attempts to enact equity toward Black children (Davis et al., 2024). Again, despite no wrongdoing by Black families and children to deserve such treatment, the racialization of Black folx is persistent and pervasive throughout the history of education in the U.S. As evident by prior research, it is not a matter of when Black students will

be racialized by the U.S. education system, rather it is a matter of how it will be done and to what extent are the consequences of this phenomenon longstanding. If Black students are racialized in a system that is forced upon them (i.e., education), then it is feasible to assert that within this outcome is the undeniable trauma that is afflicted on Black students and their future generations.

The Transmission of Racialized Experiences Intergenerationally

Far from being isolated, the racialized experiences of individuals are transmitted through various means. Research contends that racialization and the experiences formed from it are passed down explicitly through lessons and stories, or implicitly through mannerisms, perceptions, and the othering of certain racial groups. For example, Spanierman (2022) asserts that for White parents, the socialization (i.e., racialization) of other groups occurs through silence, color-blind ideologies, or implicit or explicit messaging about one or multiple non-white groups. These approaches are often passed down to their children without the children being able to resist or combat these processes – they are just viewed as a normal way of interacting with the world. In other research, Ferrer et al. (2017) offer an intersectional examination of an aging Filipino woman in Canada, whose lived experiences in the labor market situated her in an environment opposite to what she was used to. Seeking to support her family, she remained the sole breadwinner based on prescribed racialized experiences of her family: women were managing the aging parents without complaint. This not only traumatized and relegated her to intense physical jobs, but her body aged faster and harsher as she succumbed to the experiences she encountered while conducting labor.

These examples offer a nuanced glimpse at how racialization and the experiences stemming from these processes are not unidirectional. Rather, there is a lateral and vertical

transmission of these experiences, particularly for racial/ethnic groups that have historically encountered oppression (Ferrar et al., 2017). The transmission of these experiences influences how individuals, particularly those from racialized groups, come to construct, maintain, and evolve their own racial identity. This influence is compounded in the context of education, as individuals spend 12 years of their lives developing an identity through the lens of schools, teachers, administrators, librarians, and other education stakeholders. The negative impact on identity formation via the education system is explicated below.

The Role of Education in Identity Formation

Identity formation plays a pivotal role in who we are, how we come to understand our identity in connection with others, and how we interpret the world around us. For racialized groups, individuals construct their identity through a multiplicity of experiences in the areas of community (peers and friends), home (family), and community institutions (i.e., education). Through these areas (lenses), individuals develop their identity, peel away pieces (values, norms, culture, etc.) of their identity that they deem ineffective, and accumulate artifacts that solidify their sense of self-worth. Crocetti (2017) and colleagues (2008) denote that people typically form and revise their identity over time and through three processes: how they make and affirm commitments, how they actively contemplate their commitments, and how individuals compare current and past commitments to determine which ones are not satisfactory in their lives. As we contemplate this identity formation process, particularly for racialized groups, actively engaging within institutions that purposefully cause harm can be detrimental to their identity development. For example, when institutions explicitly segregate Black children from the general public, it sends an explicit message that their existence is not warranted. Those messages can be interpreted in many ways, but if viewed through identity development, the individual

would strip away elements of their identity that do not serve to support or promote their well-being. Rather than being viewed as an asset, Black children are forced to assimilate or acculturate rather than being allowed to thrive and develop. Viewed often as “the problem,” as DuBois states, if Black children underperform at school, it is not a surprise – rather it is a confirmation of the poor manner in which Black children are raised. Rather than the system of education being intensely critiqued, educators regularly see negative outcomes such as school discipline disparities, a lack of representation in gifted and talented courses, the overrepresentation of Black children in need of special education services, and low academic performance as indictments toward Black children.

This pathologizing of Black people establishes an ethos for Black children that to be successful - academically and socially in schools - their cultural values, norms, and beliefs must conform and be viewed as acceptable and safe to those within the education system. As indicated before, the deconstruction of the Black identity through education is not a one-stop phenomenon. Generations of Black children have entered into and exited (either successfully or unsuccessfully) the U.S. education system, never fully matriculating through with a Black identity that hasn't been tested, torn, burned, bent, and worn down. Extrapolating this reality with the fact that, as stated prior, identity development is not one-directional but unilateral. Thus, the crucifixion of the Black identity that current Black students are experiencing is compounded by decades of this phenomenon in education. Without the proper support and resources that affirm the existence of the Black identity, and children's right to formalize their identity free of persecution, Black children will not only continue to be seen as the problem, but they will more than likely see their identity itself as a problem.

Conceptual Framework

Shapeshifting

Cox (2015) proffers the conceptual framework known as shapeshifting to explain the various mechanisms that seek to deprive Black girls and women of their sovereignty, autonomy, lived experiences, and ability to carve out identities that affirm their self-worth. She insists that the dominant discourses that "other" Black girls and women through stereotypes, misogynoir tropes, demonization, and adultification are based on a rich pathology within the U.S. and abroad that blames Black girls and women for their plight in society. Even when Black girls and women contort their identity, sense of self-worth, and ideas to match a patriarchal and anti-Black society, validation is fleeting, as their self-destruction and reconstruction are never enough to be seen as citizens in the U.S. and abroad. Rather, as a form of agency, resistance, and liberation, Black girls and women re-create their identities—void of the aforementioned deterrents—to instill in themselves an enduring sense of pride, empowerment, liberation, and safety. Cox's framework is derived from eight years of fieldwork at a Detroit homeless shelter, where workshops in poetry and dance served to cultivate the residents' internal ethos of resisting and dismantling the prescriptive narratives placed on them.

Shapeshifting as a framework has been utilized primarily to examine how Black girls and women resist, persist, and sustain their well-being in anti-Black environments. For example, Joseph et al. (2019) utilize this framework to advocate for the inclusion of Black girls' humanity in learning and growth in mathematics classrooms, while Gist and colleagues (2018) illuminate this framework when critiquing how education at large attributes great academic feats by Black children as heroic, without challenging the barriers in place and the neoliberal ideology that hard work conquers all. The barriers within and around the education system seek to script how,

when, and why Black bodies should be celebrated and demonized (Apugo et al., 2023). Elements of Cox's framework are visible throughout the Black diaspora. From how Black children dress, the music they listen to, and how they communicate all the way to code-switching, shapeshifting is not a singular modality that occurs identically for all Black children at the same time or in the same manner. Thus, we enter into this work not only to explore intergenerational racialized experiences with education but to illuminate how shapeshifting occurred, transformed, and liberated multiple generations in one Black family. The questions posed to each member were: What experiences in education did you feel racialized your identity? How did you come to understand and implement approaches that supported your identity development intergenerationally? To what extent did you instill forms of protection (shapeshift) to your identity as you underwent racialized experiences in K-12 education spaces?

Methodology

Research Design

Narrative inquiry as a method seeks to systematically unpack, describe, and explore the personal experiences of an individual or individuals in order to better understand a cultural experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). The ability to discover the self, and how the self interprets, reacts, and conceptualizes an experience or experiences offers a unique view into how individuals interact with the world around them. People are influenced by their community and the larger society differently and thus interpret or come to various values, beliefs, and thinking differently as well. How and why the aforementioned aspects occur is directly tied to social constructs that are deeply rooted in one's culture. Socioeconomics, religion, region, gender, race, education, and other elements indirectly and directly alter individuals' perspectives beyond the

typical Western, white, male heterosexual canon that is portrayed so often in the media and through literature. The approach offers an alternative, a way to understand a wider angle of how the world is for many individuals through collective stories.

Narrative inquiry merges autobiographic information (stories) to glean perspectives about past experiences. Various artifacts such as pictures, journals, notes, and recordings aid in helping individuals recount how they perceived certain events through their relationship with their own values, beliefs, and shared experiences with those connected to the event itself. Adding to a growing literature base, this study uses an intergenerational approach, which is suitable for understanding racialized experiences in education—across space and time—and how those experiences formalized innovative and robust shapeshifting mechanisms employed by each subsequent generation. The intergenerational approach allows the researchers to explore divergent meanings of experiences and illuminate various challenges and emotions, particularly in relation to the individual and collective response to racializing experiences through the individuals' K-12 educational journey (Song & Wu, 2024).

These experiences, as noted earlier, shape how individuals construct their identity, but also serve to inform individuals of how to protect their identity. Little (2020) indicated that children do not naturally inherit their cultural identity, and to that extent, neither is racial identity automatically passed on from parent to child. Cultural, racial, and ethnic values, practices, and beliefs, when transmitted from one generation to the next, are negotiated and resisted by future generations (Blackledge & Creese, 2008). Through the intergenerational lens, the contextual fabric within a family can be analyzed to ascertain how the transmission of certain values and beliefs occurred and to what extent the future generation accepted, rejected, or negotiated certain values and beliefs. What emotions arose as each subsequent generation encountered a racialized

experience in education, with a fundamental understanding of the previous generation's approach to identity formation and resistance? How have future generations returned more evolved values and beliefs regarding identity construction, resistance, and shapeshifting to older generations?

Data Collection

Data collection occurred from June 29th until July 8th, 2024, at a family gathering. This gathering is a significant tradition, as it revolves around the brothers' (John and Matthew) childhood where they would have parties for the 4th of July celebration and John's birthday at the end of June. In this tradition, the family gathers together at Matthew's home to celebrate legacy, discuss future endeavors, and ensure that the younger generation is equipped and prepared to begin the upcoming school year. This year was also a celebration of Domino (John's oldest daughter) graduating from high school and attending Howard University in the Fall. Data collected from this study revolved around a multilayered reiterative focus group and interview process. The lead researcher individually interviewed each of the family members separately, first starting with the matriarch, then his brother, and then his daughters. Upon interviewing each member, focus groups (family sit-downs over dinner, car rides, movie watching) occurred in which members discussed identity formation, racialization, elements gleaned about resistance, and shapeshifting. Each of the stories was documented and transcribed. Members were allowed to review the transcripts for authenticity and add contextual notes and comments to elements that may have appeared unclear. If members had additional information about their stories or experiences, they were allowed to contact the lead researcher to add further clarity or comments. This ensured that if additional insights, emotions, or memories emerged after the interviews and focus group, individuals would feel comfortable sharing these items.

Participants

The participants include Marilyn, who is the mother of John and Matthew, and the grandmother of Domino and Soledad; John, who is the father of Soledad and Domino; Matthew, who is 3.5 years younger than John and is the uncle of Soledad and Domino; Soledad, who is the youngest child; and Domino, who is the oldest child.

Marilyn was born and raised in East St. Louis, Illinois. The middle child with four siblings, her father was a truck driver, deacon, and former military. Her mother was considered a jack of all trades: a nurse, homemaker, and home cleaner for predominately white families around the St. Louis metro area. Both of her parents were born in the 1920s in Mississippi. Born in 1956, two years after the Brown v. Board decision, Marilyn would experience the ramifications of this legal ruling eleven years later in 1964. It was her third-grade year when she was bused across town from a predominately Black school to an all-White school in East St. Louis.

Born in East St. Louis, John's mother (Marilyn) and father (John) lived in East St. Louis until 1987, when his family moved to the outskirts of the city known as Belleville (although the house was zoned for East St. Louis schools, but we will discuss that later on). From PreK until the moment he graduated high school, he always attended a Catholic school. This was a conscious choice made by his mother, whose educational experiences in East St. Louis schools made her realize that outside forces (white flight) had diminished certain opportunities for public schools after she graduated. Up until 3rd grade, John attended what would be considered racially diverse schools or predominately Black schools in East St. Louis. Upon learning about the disparate treatment by one teacher, Marilyn decided to transfer John (who had already been through two other schools since first grade due to closures) to a predominately white Catholic

school in a segregated city known as Belleville. After two years, Matthew would eventually end up at the same school as John; however, he spent one year (Kindergarten) in a predominately Black public school in East St. Louis. They both would spend the remaining years in all-White schools until college.

Lastly, Domino and Soledad were born in Urbana, Illinois – a diverse college town home to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Domino, born in 2006, and Soledad, born in 2009, experienced vastly different preschool experiences. Domino attended a predominately White Catholic preschool for one year, while Soledad attended an all-Black Catholic preschool for a year. Both would transfer schools and migrate across multiple states during their K-12 education. As Black girls, they experienced a time when many thought racism was ending due to the election of President Obama, and another time when racist acts increased during the term of President Trump.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by the lead researcher to identify themes related to racialization, identity formation, education, and intergenerational transmission of protective shapeshifting techniques/approaches within the family. A thematic analysis was applied to ascertain patterns of meaning in the responses provided by each of the family members and across their responses. Key to any thematic analysis is the subjective experiences of the researcher in making meaning of the data. The lead researcher's role in this process is detailed in the next section. From the transcripts, codes were extracted. The thematic analysis was best suited for this study as it is atheoretical and can be applied across multiple theoretical frameworks and paradigms (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Additionally, a thematic analysis is flexible in that it allows the researcher the ability to draw multiple meanings while not being constricted to structural issues within a study

such as sample size, data collection methods, and research question(s). Themes were formed around key aspects in the areas of shapeshifting, racialized educational experiences, and intergenerational transmission of protective approaches.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As the lead researcher, the methodological approach used requires a level of reflexivity and a transparent explanation of one's positionality. My Blackness has always existed in a state of refinement through pragmatic reflection and reflexive experiences. How I view the world around me and how the world sees me is deeply rooted in my experiences in education, my hometown East St. Louis, Illinois, and my growing understanding of Black identity through the lived experiences of other Black people. In conceptualizing this study, it is my own experience in predominately white private Catholic schools, where often I was the "first" to do many things that crystalized how I resisted attempts to pathologize my Blackness. What does it mean to be the first, when in reality, you are part of an experience or a community where it is the last to partially accept Black people into the fold? How does it feel to be the problem, when in reality, that statement reflects a continuous struggle to remove the problem label from oneself without complicating problems for oneself in constructing one's label (identity)?

Having seen race and racism, and experienced racialized experiences at an early age, the "difficult" discussions that many adults seem to want to escape are apathetic to me. These are discussions I have never had the option to opt-in or out of throughout my life. Thus, any biases that may be present are the culmination of the racialized experiences that I have thrived past, witnessed, or protected my friends, family members, and colleagues from. Drawing from Bell's (1995) racial realization, when he openly admits that racism is an endemic disease for which no cure is in sight, I view efforts to resist while retaining one's identity as a crucial component that

should be passed down from generation to generation to ease the burden of racism on Black children.

Findings

The “First” Phenomenon

“Paid the cost to be the boss,” James Brown

“I vividly remember being in school with all Black kids, and then one day, I found myself on a bus riding to a new school across town where Black people did not go to”, stated Marilyn. “We were the first kids to be assigned to a white school in East St. Louis and I did not like it one bit” she went on to add. For Marilyn, being the first meant leaving the comfort and peaceful confines of her school, where most of her friends went, and where most of her community lived, to a place where she was not accepted and barely tolerated. On numerous occasions, Marilyn would remind her two sons how each bus ride and from school meant being called every racial slur under the sun and having rocks thrown at the bus. Being the first to integrate also came with a badge of uncertainty. She states, “We just did not know what to expect nor did we know how much our schools lacked until we went to their schools.” It was one thing to hold onto concepts and ideas about race and racism based on societal pressure and experiences. It was another type of experience to have your race thrown into your face in a space that is supposed to be filled with learning – every single day. Previously, all her teachers were Black, and now she would be in a classroom where one Black teacher was expected to teach all the Black children regardless of what age or grade level they were in. She indicated that all of the Black kids would be in one room, in the basement every day of the week. Time seemed to flow differently in the basement of her school. Additionally, each of her school-aged siblings was

bussed to different schools across East St. Louis. “Each of us had to deal with being Black in our way without the collective unity of being together in one school,” she stated.

Marilyn indicated that this busing only lasted three years, and then suddenly she was back to her old school.

It was weird” I had spent all these years protecting myself, my identity, while trying to secure a safe spot in the school in regards to integration, to have myself just pushed back into my old school. There was no briefing, no warning, and certainly no “I’m sorry this is happening to you”. We were just expected to continue to go to school as if those years did not exist.

This experiment had its consequences. Marilyn admits that she felt slighted, to say the least. “It appeared as if they just used us to meet a mission, and when they did not need us anymore, they dumped us back where we came from,” she states. The level of education she received at the White school did change her personally, but at what costs? Coming back to a segregated school meant de-assimilating, something that she struggled with. This shell of an identity she built for her educational experience in the White school was no longer needed, or so she thought.

“Working ten times harder just to keep up, because we were behind as it was when we went to the white school” and, “while I hated being there just because of how they explicitly or covertly treated us, it shaped how I viewed being Black from there on out,” she stated. This phenomenon of going into hostile environments would not end with Marilyn’s generation, a testament to how little society has changed, she states from when she was bussed over.

The Second Generation of Shapeshifting and Yet...Still the “First”

For John and Matthew, the charge was simple: don’t mess things up. Now, that came with a plethora of do’s and don’ts which was complicated by contextual factors beyond their understanding - at first. For me (John), going to school was fun. “There was never a time where I did not want to be in school, to the point where I had trophies for perfect attendance multiple

years, and never missed a day of school in high school. Prior to attending my last elementary school, I interacted with racial groups from all parts of the world because of the private schools I attended.” Remember, Marilyn chose to send her sons to private schools because she saw the difference in education quality between public schools in East St. Louis and private schools. However, when investigating my last school in East St. Louis and other schools, she saw that it had succumbed to dumbing down the curriculum for students rather than lifting them up. I hated leaving because, this time it felt different, and sure enough, it was.

While I was not the first Black person to enter that school, it sure felt like it. In 1995, I was the first Black male to graduate, and the second Black person to graduate (the first one graduated the year before). I remember coming to school and literally having to explain the existence of Black people to every boy, girl, adult, teacher, custodian, etc. While some White children did not know who I was or what Black people were all about, it was quickly made known to me that some had a deficit perspective of Black people. It was different from my mother’s experience in that, racism was both explicit and undercover, with the majority of macro and microaggression occurring in how I was treated. Rather than calling me a nigger, I was deemed one of the good ones (mind you that got a couple of people in trouble). Rather than interacting with me, I vividly remember some children whom I became “associates” within the first few weeks, ignoring me after a while because their parents found out I was Black. My first reaction to all this was pure exhaustion, but I always had a reprieve. If I could just make it to the final bell, I would be picked up by my grandparents and I could go back to “my” reality. Well, that did not last long as soon my grandparents would not be able to pick me up from school and I was forced to go to latchkey (an afterschool program).

Man.....I was HOT. Seething. So mad that the first day I was supposed to report to Latchkey, I ran away. I didn't get far (maybe three blocks) and stopped at a dentistry office to call my mom to let her know where I was. Needless to say, that night was bad. My exhaustion grew because I was tired. Tired of interacting with White people, tired of having to explain myself, tired of being alienated, tired of having to learn their culture, values, ideas, and perspectives, and tired of having to work harder just to stay above water. After school was my break from Whiteness, from having to codeswitch, from having to realign myself to their expectations, because messing up was not an option in my household. What also complicated my feelings was the fact that there was another Black boy in my grade who was always getting in trouble. He was the standard of bad (although he really was not bad, most of the time misunderstood) and I knew I could not be associated with that pattern. Thus, the only option was not to work at things twice as hard, I had to work 50 times harder to keep myself outside of that racialized orbit of deficit that many students and teachers held against me.

Interestingly, my brother felt this same weight and the weight of being my brother as well. "Man, when I came to the school everyone already knew you and what you were about. They were looking for reasons to tear me up, mainly because I came in smarter than my classmates," said Matthew. The year Matthew spent in public school gave him an academic advantage when he moved schools. While he was not the first Black boy the private White school saw, he was the first Black boy they ever witnessed be considered gifted academically. He notes,

There were times where they knew I had the right answer or I performed better than the rest of the class. Most of the teachers would purposely use that opportunity to put me down only because I was Black. Even some of my classmates would use the opportunity to call me an "good nigger" or one of the ones we liked. While those experiences had me ready to fight, I knew that fighting was not an option. Marilyn was not having that.

He was right. Enduring racialized experiences in the classroom was not accompanied by any sense of reprieve or relief inside and outside of school. Both of us were trained not to succumb to the idea that we were less than any other child in that school, regardless of race. To thrive, in spite of it, we were constantly reminded of the harshness of racism that my mother experienced in the 60s. The label of being Black was not a stigma to us. The label of being from East St. Louis was not a hindrance to us because the previous generation had already shared their experience and interpretation of these experiences. Our excellence was the standard because that bar was higher than the one set by society and some of the teachers who taught us. Besides, at this point, it was just Marilyn raising us, and every Black child knows not to have their mother come up to school for anything negative. We both knew that being the first in many ways was a lonely road in that we needed to both adapt but not lose who we were evolving into as we grew up. These experiences would narrow our focus not only on who we wanted to be but how we wanted to go about being “that” person concerning our Black identity. We never transcended racism, however, at an early age we formed dispositions and safe guards that would help us weather hostility, while still remaining open minded to White peers and teachers who genuinely cared about us.

While we never fully shared how we felt about those K-12 years, this inquiry helped us realize that we were both shapeshifting not based on a restrictive education environment, not based on White normative values, but because of what was instilled in us by previous generations in our family. Additionally, we found out through this process that we were shapeshifting through each other’s experiences. Matthew realized what I had worked for, not being what their notions of Black were. For myself, I saw my brother as having an unbridled confidence in who he was early on, not as just my brother, but as a Black genius in his own right.

This level of confidence, genius, and centered Black self-concept would grow as the next generation entered the K-12 space.

A Newer Generation of Shapeshifting

As the daughter of John, nieces of Matthew, and granddaughters of Marilyn, Domino and Soledad entered the world with a hefty weight of expectations. Similar to Marilyn, John, and Matthew, Domino and Soledad would shift schools multiple times during their lifetime. While the prior generations shifted for educational attainment, Domino and Soledad would move for economic mobility with their father from Champaign, IL, East St. Louis, IL, Charlotte, North Carolina, and finally College Station, Texas – all within a span of six years. Interestingly, their experiences through each of the phases of life would echo a similar tone: shapeshifting not to meet the pressure in school but to achieve their individual goals.

Domino, being the oldest, would spend one year in a predominately White private catholic preschool, and then three years in a diverse public school prior to moving to East St. Louis, IL. Similar to generations before her, she would be one of the few Black students in her classroom in her preschool. Domino states,

I would always ask myself why everyone looked different than me. Also, I had what I considered at that time a weird name. Kids, teachers, and anyone who heard it would ask me why and how I got the name. However, any of these questions were put to rest as I knew how to “do” school well.

“Do” school for Domino was to come to school, not cause trouble, and excel in her academics. Excel so well that before taking the gifted and talent test in the 2nd grade (to which she failed the actual test, but was recommended by a teacher to get in) she would regularly be called in by child psychologists to take tests at the local university. As her father, I quickly

realized that, compared to me at that age, Domino required a different type of learning environment that focused on cultivating inquiry and taking calculated risks. This type of constructivist approach seemingly did not go too well with her teachers throughout her K-12 environment.

Domino: I would continuously ask teachers questions to the point that they would brush me off. Their assignments became too easy, and I wanted more. As I got older, I began to realize that the more I learned, the more I became comfortable with my identity as a Black girl in these spaces. What made it challenging is that the further I went in my educational journey, I saw fewer Black students, particularly Black boys. I would enter into classrooms and often be the first Black girl my teachers saw who excelled. I would be delighted when I saw other Black students in my classes as I got to middle and high school.

As she contended with being the only one in honors courses, she also experienced a level of discomfort because it took her longer to complete assignments and to understand concepts than many of her peers. Several times in middle school and high school, because of the lack of understanding from her teachers (many of whom had few interactions with a wide range of cultures) she would internalize how teachers treated her for not moving as fast as everyone else.

Domino stated,

I hated the way some teachers would make me feel. They treated me as if I was dumb, but I KNEW I was not dumb. My folks would always remind me that if it takes you two or twenty hours to learn a concept, everyone learns differently. I constantly sought perfection, and through the years, I realized it was not me who was the problem. The problem was the way education devalues Black children who do not see themselves in the

content that is provided or how it is being taught. Having a supportive family that dialogued with me during my triumphs and struggles help realize who I was, and how being Black is never something that be fully eroded. When I had problems concerning racism and sexism, I brought them home and my folks openly discussed it with me.

For Domino, this was a significant shift in how her race and gender were always a threat in the classroom. She admits that her schools were never really a safe space for all children. She realized this in middle school when her social studies and English teachers continuously avoided bringing up topics in the curriculum that deal with race. Domino noted, “any time I would ask for books to read about Black people, suddenly the room fell silent. It was like I was cursing out loud in class and needed to be reminded, that Black people’s experiences are not curriculum worth.” This concept of “silencing Blackness” was prevalent in the schools that Marilyn, John, and Matthew attended – which were predominately White.

Shapeshifting, for Domino, was more of her diving deeper into her Black experience at home and in school. She became fascinated about all subjects and when teachers in her middle school and high school would reveal scholars, scientists, or leaders, she would instantly search for Black scholars, scientists, and leaders who lived at the same time as the ones mentioned to her in class. Domino stated, “The students in my class did autobiographies on John Kennedy, and I wanted to do mine on Angela Davis, Coretta Scott King, and James Baldwin.” These individuals represented who I was and offered me a glimpse of “Blackness unchecked”, she stated. She believes this confidence is the direct result of watching her previous generations form identities that were not tarnished by bad experiences in school.

I saw my father get his doctorate, my grandmother started her own business, and my uncle worked at a Fortune 500 company. My thoughts were, if they can do it, I can do my

own thing as well. My father would have me read the Philadelphia Negro, Critical Race Theory, Patricia Hill Collins, and other texts that did not see being Black as a burden. While I would often ask why, I realized as I went through high school that these texts provided me the ability to evolve who I was not based on bad experiences but based on what I wanted my Blackness to mean to me.

As Domino traversed through her school and eventually graduated from high school, she realized that her responsibility was to ensure that her experiences of being the “only one” in school while being gifted would not transfer over to her younger sibling. “Everything they taught me, every saying or perspective they provided me I offered up to my younger sister – and just like younger sisters do, she didn’t listen” she stated.

But did she? In conducting these interviews and focus groups, Soledad would be the last to offer up her experiences in school concerning race, gender, and educational achievement. Soledad indicated that her identity as a Black girl never really came into question until high school. She felt that before that, she would go to school, get the grades she needed, and repeat the process year after year. “It was not until high school when I would be questioned not because I was doing something completely wrong in class, but because I did not respond the way they saw other Black students interact to things,” Soledad indicated. When asked to clarify that remark, she stated,

Again, I am not going to have my parents come up to the school for anything I did wrong. I got in trouble many of times with teachers because when they said, “I am going to call your parents” I would say go ahead. I was not trying to be smart, but if you believe they are going to automatically side with you because you are the teacher then you clearly do not understand how to communicate. This happened my first year in high school when

the teacher saw me making a stern face at her when she was reprimanding some of my friends in class. The teacher was White, and when she saw me just look at her, and then look back at them, she told me to see her after class. Mind you, I looked at her with a stern face because that is always how my face is, emotionless half the time. It could be considered a resting “b” face, but that’s my face and that is how I choose to wear it.

Soledad states that the teacher then told her it was an option to come to speak with her outside the classroom. She stated that she knew it was a trick because if she left the classroom without speaking with the teacher, she would have received an office referral for a detention. In speaking with the teacher, Soledad stated that the reason she was called to the hallway was that the teacher did not like the “expression on her face”. After revealing this explanation, the teacher indicated that she would be contacting her parents about what happened. Soledad explains that these types of interactions were normal for her, not because she was non-compliant, but because she did not fit the stereotype of what they saw Black girls should be in class: silent and obedient. “I told her she could contact my parents, and she looked shocked as if she was surprised that I was not afraid or willing to apologize for just being in class and making a face”, she stated. Soledad notes that these types of experiences are normal not just for her, but for other Black girls that she interacts with in school. “I know that I am Black by the way some teachers treat Black kids in our school. It’s like they do not know how to relate so they have to treat us differently than non-Black kids,” she stated.

Throughout the conversation, Soledad repeatedly indicated that “I know my mission and I know who I am”, which is to get an education and to get out. Despite the experiences being an almost a weekly occurrence in her life at school, Soledad state that it does not get to her. She stated,

I find teachers who care about me. I learn from those teachers who see my race and what I bring to the table as a benefit to the classroom. Those are the classes I enjoy. Those are the people that I choose to be around. It is the same with my classmates. I don't hang around people who want to destroy my Blackness because it somehow offends them.

Unbothered. That word was uttered by Soledad towards the end of the discussion. Unbothered by experiences that attempted to bring her down or make her question the core of who she is.

Soledad echoed many of the sentiments that her older sister mentioned during the conversation and indicated that much of what she does in the classroom and on her sports teams is due to her seeing and hearing conversations between Domino, her father John, and her uncle Matthew. She also indicated that while many of these conversations were in passing, she would pair what was being said with older conversations with her grandmother when she was younger. She ended the conversation by stating, "I knew that these types of experiences would happen, but I cannot change or prevent them, I can only stand on who I am and how I slay."

Discussion

The aforementioned findings come from seeking to understand how three generations experienced racialization through education and what protective factors were implemented that allowed these individuals to shapeshift and not self-destruct. The findings reveal two salient themes around intergenerational mentoring and purposeful resistance.

Intergenerational Mentoring

Each of the participants offered what can be described as intergenerational mentoring: learning from current and past experiences by family members who were exposed to various forms of racism. For example, Soledad articulated how she learned to weather actions by teachers or other students from listening to conversations with her older sibling, her father and

uncle, and her grandmother. While these conversations were not always explicitly directed towards her, they reveal the power of communication and counternarratives as forms of empowering younger Black children. Racism appears in many forms, and unfortunately, Black children are forced to encounter multiple dimensions of racism in education (Williams, 2024). Understanding that these experiences will occur is important. However, what the findings underscore is the open communication between generations about what is required to keep one's identity intact despite the numerous inevitable racialized experiences that one will encounter in school. As seen through Marilyn's recount, the lack of explanation of why certain decisions were made (busing) led to a greater internalization of racialized experiences than what Domino and Soledad reveal. Whereas John and Matthew experienced a second rendition of being the only Black children in schools, Domino and Soledad found themselves often being the only Black children in their advanced courses. Both types of experiences of isolation in racialized settings can inflict harm on children, regardless of where they are in their journey to develop their identity. However, whereas Marilyn was forced to endure, John and Matthew were forced to just persist, the findings show how both Domino and Soledad actively found refuge with supportive networks and their family. Research shows that intergenerational support can provide a narrative to children that their culture, values, and beliefs are important despite societal notions that indicate otherwise (Song & Wu, 2024). This type of support – through mentoring – is often absent in scholarship about Black children and Black families.

Purposeful Resistance

Racism is real, it is present, and it is harmful despite any notion that this discriminatory construct/action has dissipated. For Black people, the sentiment and expression of anti-Blackness exists for all Black students regardless of how old they are. The findings support a litany of

studies and experiences by Black people regarding the relatively young age at which racism exposes itself to them. For Marilyn and John, it was at the age of 8, for Matthew it was at the age of five. Each of their transitions into racialized learning environments marked a time when education and resistance against racism became complimentary pursuits. Both John and Matthew directly benefited from Marilyn's lived experiences, similar to many Black children in the U.S. The notion of, "You have to work twice as hard to get half as far" was a constant reminder that resistance requires a greater effort and toll. Rather than allowing overtly or covert racist actions or sayings to unravel the hard work put in, John and Matthew aligned their practices to resist through achieving. As Matthew indicated, he knew he had to work harder not because he was lacking, but to push back on any potential racialized experience that may occur for him either misbehaving or not achieving academically.

The extension of "high performance" as a form of resistance was also visible with Domino and Soledad. Their enrollment in honors or advanced placement courses was a disruption to the racialized and gendered ideology that persists in education. To be young, Black, a girl, and gifted is not often portrayed in today's society as a positive. Scores of studies highlight how Black girls' pursuit of a quality education is situated within the confluence of racism and sexism, and both of these -isms either silence Black girls, shatter their self-efficacy, or remove them from the classroom completely (Blake et al., 2011; Blake et al., 2022). Still, what is visible between the generations is the transition from resistance as survival, to resistance through achieving, to resistance as a form of shapeshifting. Domino and Soledad both actively resisted vocalizing their displeasure – accurately – to teachers and administrators. Their resistance was not a matter of accident but rather through the culmination of knowledge and

wisdom from previous generations of how to attack multiple forms of racism and sexism in their classroom.

These findings align with research that discusses how Black people are physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and academically required to shoulder a heavy load, which typically results in diminished well-being (Boyd-Layne & Burch, 2019; Smith et al., 2007). These findings show racialized experiences in education are dangerous, and despite numerous attempts to “sensitize” teachers to Black children in teacher education, schools, whether private or public, are not constructed in a manner to prevent racialized experiences. Thus, the recommendations we put forth are not necessarily new or novel, nor do they focus on the systems and actors that create these experiences. Rather, they draw from the lived experiences of multiple Black people and, thus, are for Black people renewed self-determination.

Recommendations and Conclusion

First, as Black parents must ultimately send their children to schools, regardless of the demographics of the students and educators, they need to have open and honest dialogue with their children. This dialogue needs to be continuous and open to investigate how children learn about racism and what they feel before, during, and after racialized experiences. Simply knowing that racism (and any other ism) that a Black child may encounter is insufficient given the multiple modalities (in class, on social media, in their community) that racism can present itself. In these conversations, parents of Black children must offer approaches to Black children that affirm that Black children are valuable members of the household and their community. Additionally, these conversations should be age-appropriate and offer approaches to Black children to actively resist racism in a manner that they are comfortable with applying in their social context.

Second, both Black parents and Black children should understand that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach when protecting one’s self from racialized experiences in schools. Whereas some students may feel comfortable with speaking up in class, some students may want to engage in some type of therapy with avenues that affirm their identity. This can be through seeing Black-aligned therapists, interacting with mentors, engaging in sports, video games, anime, music, or any other type of outlet; Black students deserve environments that pour into their soul and identity with an immeasurable richness. The concept of saying, “Well I went through it, so you can get through it” is unfair to Black children and it legitimizes the idea that these racialized experiences are justified to the academic and social maturation of Black children. Cox’s work underscores how various outlets poured into Black women, rather than dehumanizing them. All generations of Black people must be searching for avenues to affirm Black children and equip them with the necessary tools to not only survive racialized experiences but to thrive past them.

Finally, the efforts by Black children in schools will always face scrutiny no matter what academic growth they display. Often, the pursuit of an “A” in class comes at a cost, particularly for Black children who must interpret a curriculum that does not represent them. This cost is due to the pressure of having to perform and behave better in class so as not to be labeled and stereotyped as the loud, ignorant, underachieving, disrespectful Black child. For those raising Black children, recognize the effort that Black children are putting forth and let them know that their best is always going to be good enough, regardless of what grade they receive. What Black children face in their classrooms is different than what Black parents and Black grandparents endured in many different ways. Having a supportive home life helps Black children to feel comfortable with being vulnerable, a benefit they are hardly afforded in school and society. This

allows Black children to openly discuss who they are and critically examine how they examine the world they live in. This offers them the opportunity to develop their sense of agency, afforded by the unrelenting support they receive at home. How Black children shapeshift and inform their identity development is a direct result of what is poured into them from those whom they consider their family. The transmittal of intergenerational knowledge and ways of knowing is not for the sake of one; rather, it is the responsibility of the one (each generation) to impart these things for the benefit of all current and future Black generations so that no Black child will ever need to shapeshift again.

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