

WALKING OUR *CURRERE*

THE FOUR BLACK SCHOLARS' CREATION OF COUNTERSPACE THROUGH BLACK PLACEMAKING IN THE ACADEMY

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REGRESSIVE

SHAWNIEKA

I completed my master's degree 20 years prior to returning to school as a doctoral student. I navigated both undergraduate and graduate courses as a non-traditional adult learner. I did not have any expectations of community or building community. I worked full-time and had young children during my undergraduate and graduate programs. Honestly, given that I perceived myself to be older than my peers and with the additional assumption that I shouldered more responsibility, I didn't believe community to be a vital part of my academic journey at that time. I worked a third-shift job, attended courses during the day, and spent time with my children. I believed navigating my programs was a very individualized journey. I did not engage in campus life, and I did not pursue opportunities to connect with my peers. Many people establish long-standing friendships and community during their undergraduate years. This was not my experience.

Pursuing my PhD was the last of my childhood dreams. My sole purpose for pursuing my doctorate was shaped by my clinical experiences as a social work practitioner and therapist. My experience in the clinical setting offered me insight into a critical public health crisis—one that was not represented in public discourse or even available in existing literature and scholarship. My decision to pursue my PhD was to address the lack of scholarly representation within marginalized communities, especially in literature centering the narratives of Black girls. So, once again, as I enrolled in courses, I believed this doctoral journey would be yet another individualized academic experience. However, I experienced an immediate shift in my understanding of how vitally important community would be for my persistence and academic success at the doctoral level.

The very first class exposed my flickering confidence and self-doubt. I questioned my capacity, my belonging, and my grit to navigate the rigor. The design of the first course, Introduction to Doctoral Studies, created built-in opportunities to collaborate with other students. It was at this moment that I discovered the absolute power of community. My guiding worldview during my previous educational experiences sharply shifted, and I actively sought community with my new peers. Unfortunately, I also learned that, even with newfound community, our sense of belonging on campus would require us to create a nuanced space that attended to our needs as Black doctoral students, a space that would become our counterspace. bell hooks (2015) and Bettina Love (2019) call this counterspace a home—in essence, a space that offers Black people a refuge, a sanctuary where they are able to show up as their authentic selves, whole, nourished, and



supported. I soon realized that the notion of community would be insufficient; we needed a counterspace to hold, nurture, and embolden our Blackness and other collective identities and our ability to persist.

TYAIRA

It was not until I reached my master's program that I was taught by Black women ... plural ... more than one. That was when I realized that I too could earn a Ph.D. and perhaps even be the first Black professor for a Black girl as they were for me. This is not because I did not know they existed, but because I finally saw and experienced, first-hand, the #BlackGirlMagic, a term coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 centering the achievements, resilience, and promise of Black women and girls (Lamar-Becker, 2022). In October 2020, I began full-time work at the institution, and with this came the benefit of a tuition fee waiver. I figured that, since I had the benefit, I would take the program for a test drive to see if it would be a good fit. In Summer Semester of 2021, I took a Critical Gender and Sexuality in Education course with doctoral students as a non-degree student. I passed the course with an A and received words of encouragement to apply to the program. Fast forward to the first night of classes. It had sunk in that this was for real this time around. I was a doctoral student. In reflecting on my past educational experiences, I knew that I wanted to be intentional about connecting with my peers. This intention turned into reality as my peers and I would fill our class break time with conversation, getting to know each other. This soon turned into the cultivation of our counterspace.

PHILIP

Prior to entering my doctoral program, I had little to no understanding of the social and psychological demands doctoral programs required of students. Although I sought guidance from two mentors who had graduated from the same institution, their experiences could not fully prepare me for entering a space into which no one in my immediate family had endeavored to venture. During my Introduction to Doctoral Studies course, I became acutely aware of how academic confidence and legitimacy were conflated. As classmates articulated their ideas with ease, I began to question my belonging in that space, interpreting my inability to articulate or duplicate my thoughts in the same manner as my peers as being not being ready or worthy of occupying the same space with other doctoral students.

As the day progressed and I moved to the following class, I noticed the presence of other Black students—a contrast to the isolation I had envisioned. A brief exchange over shared institutional history became an entry point into relational connection. What began as an informal invitation to study together emerged from a recognition that persistence in the doctoral program demanded collective support that the institution was structurally incapable of providing its minoritized students. This realization marked my earliest encounter with the conditions that facilitated the cultivation of a space of belonging, intellectual vulnerability, and shared cultural identity within a broader, hegemonic campus environment.





LAKISHA

As a High School teacher with a master's degree, I had never envisioned myself obtaining a doctoral degree. It was the year 2020, and a colleague who became my close friend saw the work I was doing with my students. She was in the last haul of obtaining her Doctoral Degree, and she encouraged me to pursue Ph.D. as well. The thought of obtaining such a distinguished degree seemed so out of reach for me. Research and writing were activities that I always enjoyed. In the course of obtaining my bachelor's degree, my friends would often consult with me for guidance when they were tasked to write an extensive paper. I knew writing was a strong suit for me, but writing at such a high academic level did not align with my personal capabilities.

The feeling of contentment in my current position as a teacher would soon dissipate. While sitting in a monthly steering committee meeting for a program I was assisting with at my high school, the university personnel began discussing the need for someone with a Ph.D. to teach the class I was teaching. Saddened by the news, I called my friend, who had completed her doctoral degree and was now teaching at a university. Once again, she encouraged me to pursue the degree, stating I would love what I am doing even more because there would be meaning behind my work. After receiving an email with the information about the program she completed, I was excited, and I had a newfound confidence to apply to the program. What began as a tentative application turned into a letter of acceptance.

Consistent with the way I completed my master's program, I understood that, if I were to survive a Doctoral studies program, I had to connect myself to a community. From the first day of orientation, I searched for someone with whom I could build mutual support. There was a young lady with whom I had crossed paths during virtual meetings and graduate fairs. Instinctually, I thought she would be the person with whom I would build community. However, my expectations were deflated when the question was posed and she explained that she worked better alone. A space to affirm each other's strengths and mitigate vulnerabilities had become an independent expedition. Entering class for the first time, I did not have an expectation of community. One isolated conversation created a false reality that I was on an island all alone. Contrary to my own beliefs, both of my professors believed in community, and unbeknownst to me, there were three other doc students who were looking for that same community I was seeking. We connected for many reasons and on many levels. The authenticity of support and our desire to see each other succeed fuel our becoming what I call "My family."

PROGRESSIVE

With each passing week, we would have an opportunity to spend moments in class in dyads learning one another's stories and our whys. Soon, these brief opportunities to connect within class time would not offer enough time to fully engage in community with one another. The engagement would end abruptly as our professor would transition to new content and material. There would be this palpable yearning to finish conversations, unpack course content, and learn one another's gift and skillsets. Although opportunities to engage presented themselves in each class, we longed for more. Conversations shifted during our in-class moments to discussing scheduling study time together during the weekends. These conversations would take place at the end of each weekly class. We considered where, when, and how often we should connect in community. We brainstormed which spaces on campus would make sense, would meet our needs as doctoral





students. We wondered which space would be invitational for each of our visible and invisible identities as Black scholars and individuals. How would this space offer full belonging within the historically white space? We were certain that the space must offer not only physical comfort but also psychological comfort and safety as well.

Pinar (1975/1994) offers the Progressive lens as part of the *currere* method. He asserts that, “We look . . . at what’s not yet the case, what is not yet present” (p. 24). As Black doctoral scholars, we considered the ways in which we curate our unapologetic belonging on campus. Our initial strategy was to utilize the spaces on campus that affirmed our identities as doctoral students. The campus library made perfect sense, as it represented knowledge production and offered a space that would provide accessible resources. While the campus library in theory would serve as an information hub, the policies would offer the collective unforeseen barriers. Physically the library offered generous accommodation. However, the policies governing how students access the space proved difficult. The identified group study spaces had time constraints that disrupted the collective’s continuity of engagement. Specifically, group rooms were assigned in two-hour increments. Two of the four members of the collective drove a great distance to utilize the campus information hub, and only having access to group study spaces for a few hours of time was pointless. After that initial planned study session at the campus library, the collective needed to reconsider not only the physical space, but we had to re-imagine, or envision, transformational space where not only our identities as doctoral students would be welcomed warmly invited our Black identities equally. A progressive moment invites us to imagine the Black doctoral collective establishing a scholarship and other mentorship opportunities to help future Black doctoral students attend conferences and create pathways to connection at their prospective historically white institutions.

ANALYTICAL

As mentioned above, our collective consists of four Black doctoral students—three women and one man. We convene within a historically white, undergraduate-dominant institution. We theorize our counterspace (Solorzano et al., 2000) through Black placemaking, understanding placemaking as the ongoing labor through which minoritized groups transform hostile institutional environments into livable places in which to reside. Black placemaking is not simply about occupying space but producing sites of endurance, belonging (Tinto, 2017), and resistance within academic structures not designed for Black doctoral life.

Within this collective, placemaking functions as a relational and intentional process that resists doctoral socialization norms, such as isolation, competition, and individualism. The gendered composition of our group, rooted in Black feminist epistemology, as it is led by Black women, further disrupts patriarchal and hierarchical academic norms. As such, our collective leans into the aspect of relationality, ethic of care (Tinto, 2017), and shared accountability as central tenets to our scholarly persistence in the academy. This form of placemaking challenges racialized and gendered expectations of professionalism and intellectual legitimacy by creating a place where Blackness, faith, vulnerability, and joy are not relegated to the margins but are central to our success/thriving.

In the analytical phase of *currere*, this analysis supports our experiences to interrogate how our collective practices function within a historically white institution. Instead of recounting personal narratives in this section, this section acts as a theorizing space on how Black placemaking





has emerged within the collective to labor toward our collective relational commitment. This collective does not solely operate as a place of support but also as a fugitive place where it exposes academe's norms and becomes a place to create a path toward Black survival and success. Through this lens, Black placemaking becomes a conduit through which doctoral education is actively negotiated, disrupted, and reimaged.

In the synthetical stage of *currere*, these insights are realigned to consider what our collective placemaking makes markedly noteworthy about doctoral education at historically white institutions. By holding together past conditions, present practices, and imagined futures, this synthesis foregrounds how Four Black Scholars resisted institutional norms and created a collective that consistently remakes said norms through placemaking. What is made apparent is that our alternative space is not one that exists on the periphery, but it is a space that is designed for belonging, success, and survival during our doctoral journey.

SYNTHETICAL

In reflecting on our past, present, and future as the *Four Black Scholars*, the intentional cultivation of our counterspace within a historically white institution (HWI) has aided in the navigation and resistance against systemic inequities in our doctoral experiences. Pointedly, this counterspace has served as a site of community, accountability, and scholar identity to combat environments where our Blackness is seen as a deficit or not seen at all. Through collective dialogue and action, we have not only cultivated a space that has sustained us but one that calls-in institutional accountability. As Ross (2025) suggests, calling in invites constructive conflict. Moreover, we hold onto the possibility that institutions and environments are capable of change.

The field of educational leadership often presents principles of power-sharing, inclusive communities, and democratic ideals. Yet, these principles often fall short in practice to the very students they are serving. Principles cannot merely act as degree outputs but must be woven and stitched into the fabric of curriculum and teaching. We invite educational leaders and those alike to interrogate how their principles and actions affirm (or fail to provide) a sense of belonging for their students with particular attention to minoritized graduate students. How might an institution, college, and/or department provide space, both inside and outside of course instruction, for minoritized graduate students? How might the current social, cultural, and political climate affect how minoritized graduate students show up? These are the types of questions educational leaders must grapple with as they commit to an environment rooted in belonging and equity.

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