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**Dress Practices as Embodied  
Multimodal Rhetorics**

# Dressed but Not Tryin' to Impress

## Black Women Deconstructing “Professional” Dress

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*A brief note re: language in this piece—As part of our work as Black women compositionists and scholars, we opt to utilize non-standard English in our writing as a way to reaffirm our various identities, and as a way to speak back against white supremacist standards of language in academia. We pull a page from a legacy of Black women scholars who refuse to capitulate their language for standardized language praxis. With this in mind, dis us and we cussin, reflectin, and telling it how it is—the way we see fit.*

Early career scholars spend a significant portion of their doctoral study and junior careers thinking critically and deeply about how to synthesize the various aspects of academic work. Managing research, teaching, and service is difficult. These concerns are amplified for persons from historically marginalized communities, whose identities, epistemologies, and even their very bodies are called into question. Because minority bodies are always, already under scrutiny and subject to explanation and qualification, they are often conditioned to be aware of and responsive to the presumed standards of professionalism just to survive. bell hooks (1989) declares, “While assimilation is seen as an approach that ensures the successful entry of [B]lack people into the mainstream, at its very core it is dehumanizing” (p. 67). Black women embody dual identities and the pressure to conform to spaces where they were not welcome historically must be negotiated almost every day. Consequently, studies show that the varying identities Black women embody while navigating academia, can cause attention to dress to be a problematic focus resulting in sexualization and dismissal by students and colleagues alike (Moses, 1997, p.29). Although contemporary, progressive thinking rejects respectability politics and encourages the embrace of difference, the tension between marginalization and inclusion still permeates the daily lives of scholars on the margins.

As three scholars entering new phases of our careers, we see dress practices as a critically symbolic metaphor for the challenges of thriving as Black women in academia. The difficulty of negotiating “Black”, “scholar”, “woman”, and “professional” alongside a myriad of other labels manifests in how we choose, or cannot choose, to compose our bodies for public interpretation through dress practices. Choices about not only clothes, but also hairstyles, demeanor, language, and tone allude very clearly to the “texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” of the body, that comprise embodiment as defined by Johnson et al. We argue

that Black female bodies make themselves meaningful in response to a variety of audiences, contexts, and purposes. This article takes up an autoethnographic methodology to reflect on the ever-present task of asserting the meaningful perspectives, contributions, and critiques of black bodies. Our readers will gain insight into the way Blackness can manifest through ‘professional’ attire; but we will also challenge readers to rethink definitions of *professional attire* vis-a-vis Black bodies and reconsider the implications and assumptions that their pre-conceived notions have on our transfer of knowledge/instruction, both formal and informal.

The central thread in our discussion draws on the notion that the academy is a space fraught with the push and pull of teaching and learning, expert and novice, informed and ignorant. We explore this tension in three critical spaces with important audiences for academics—the classroom, where students are watching, academic and professional conferences where colleagues are watching, and the public where everybody is watching. Each section is framed by a critical reflection of an experience with dress and embodiment in that space, highlighting larger themes, insights, and critiques of the academy.

### What I’m Gon’ Wear Today?—Brittany Hull

Prior to startin my doctoral program, I considered it vital that I presented myself as *professional* in my workplaces. This meant wearing a pantsuit, suit separates, and some sort of relatively comfortable flats (Image 1). The unpredictable weather in my area (eastern Pennsylvania) also meant that I was sometimes lugging a bag with a change of clothes or shoes in addition to my work bag and taking the stairs up just three flights put a strain on me. I followed this routine for



*Image 1: Me in St. Louis after presenting at my first CCCC. It was about 80 degrees and I was stuck in this suit and long sleeve NY & Company shirt because I thought it was "professional". I was burnin up though.*

four semesters because I was once told by a tenured white woman faculty member that I “needed to wear a suit” to all my classes because I “looked like a student.” I understood where this suggestion came from because I was fresh outta my masters’ program, and I was strugglin’ with feelin like I didn’t “fit” due to my language, my identity as a Black woman, and because white faulty kept implying I didn’t deserve to be there; I agreed because I didn’t know *how* to disagree (yet). As a result, I wore pant suits and suit separates daily in the classroom. However, after realizing that my suits and blouses ain’t prevent microaggressions from students and colleagues, I opted to dress as I was comfortable. And that meant not wearing a pant suit and blouse every damn day.

When I got ready to go into another semester, I was a combination of nervous and excited at the same damn time, but I was ready to do what I loved; teach first-year composition. I was ready as

far as logistics were concerned. Syllabi approved and printed. Check. Desire2Learn course page set up. Check. Textbook selection sent to the bookstore on time. Check. Pre-semester lunch with cohort members to kick off the semester. Check. I was prepared even, to not allow these emotions to prevent me from going to bed on time so I could make it to campus to get a good parking spot. The only thought that consumed my mind the night before this first day back in the classroom was: *What I'm gon' wear?*

My hair was already done, as I had just recently gotten a wash and re-twist of my long locs a few days prior. The issue was the clothes. Whatever I chose to wear had to be a combination of comfy *and* cute, period. I searched my closet and found some cropped pants with a light blue diamond shaped pattern that I got from Targeè.<sup>1</sup> Boom, I had bottoms; now, I needed a top. I was back on the hunt; after movin various tops around, I found a white cotton scoop-neck t-shirt. Finally, I grabbed some black flats and a khaki suit jacket I got from H&M way before the bullshit where the popular retail store posted a picture of a Black lil boy<sup>2</sup> wearin a hoodie with the phrase “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle” on they website.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, after deciding on each item, I strategically placed the pants, white cotton scoop-neck shirt, khaki suit jacket, and black flats on my bed like I was solvin a puzzle. I liked what I saw and it definitely fit the comfy *and* cute vibe I was goin for. I was ready for my first day back in the classroom; now I could take my ass to sleep.

The next morning, I was greeted by smiling faces and echoes of “Good morning” from colleagues when I got to “my” office space. I responded with my signature “Hey Y'all” and soaked up the positive vibes; everyone was excited to be back. As I moved through the office, I ran into a colleague, one of the other folks of color in my department. When I asked him if he was ready for the first day, he said, “Yes, but I feel under-dressed.” I was confused; he looked comfortable, so what was the problem? He explained, “Everyone looks so professional.” I looked around the room and saw my peers dressed in business casual or *professional* attire—below the knee-length dresses, blazers, blouses, jeans, button-up dress shirts, cardigans, dress shoes, traditional, cultural, and religious attire.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, I saw jeans, sandals, sneakers, vintage t-shirts, stuff that wouldn't be considered *professional* for the college classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> Target (the big retail chain). According to urbandictionary.com this pronunciation is “Fancy way of saying Target.” I ain't sure when this trend started, but this pronunciation ain't limited to the Black community. I've seen individuals from a variety of racial backgrounds who are familiar with it.

<sup>2</sup> Liam Mango is the child in the now viral H&M pic. A native of Sweden and the son of Kenyan parents, his mama, Terry, wasn't bothered by the pic; however, she felt the backlash for H&M's “mistake” (Wang, 2019). Check Connie Wang's “The Real Story Behind H&M's Racist Monkey Sweatshirt” for a more extensive run down.

<sup>3</sup> While many Black consumers of H&M was pissed, there was just as many who wasn't surprised, as discussed in this joint by Danielle A. Scruggs, “H&M's ‘Coolest Monkey’ Hoodie and How Racism Wastes Our Precious Time”, in which we are provided one of several responses from the Black perspective. Now, given the racist history of Black people being compared to monkeys and apes, consumers called for a boycott, to which they responded by removing the pic and allegedly hiring a diversity manager (Brennan & Feldman, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> A number of my female colleagues practiced Islam; thus, they wore hijabs.

I turned back to my friend and said with a smile, “If I ain’t throw this together and it wasn’t comfortable, I wouldn’t be wearin it. If you comfortable, you good.” This topic of *professional* dress would come up again and again during my time in this department. Today, I was confused, but eventually, I would get pissed off.

On the first day of class, I always tell my students to read over the syllabus and jot down any questions they have as we get started. As the students read, I always see some confused facial expressions and some smirks, as if what they was readin was a joke. I know why they’re confused. See, I write my syllabus introduction in my own speech, my mother tongue, and students (and some of my colleagues, for that matter) ain’t used to seein that in the classroom. Students see my “what’s up y’all?!” and my talkin through my class in my own words, and while I see a lot of smiles, some of these ain’t kind.

On this particular day, as I watched their reactions, I knew someone would ask the obvious question: Why did you write the syllabus like this? As I facilitated our icebreaker, I’m walkin around and I feel my feet start to ache in pain. This was my second time wearin these flats and at this point, I couldn’t wait to take them off and switch into my sneakers. As we concluded the activity, my thoughts on my aching feet was interrupted by the inevitable question. One of my new students, a Black man with short locs, raised his hand and asked, “Why you write that part of the syllabus like that? You was usin slang and stuff, can we do that?” I was happy that someone opened the conversation about this part of the syllabus, and explained that this was the only part where I could be *me*, (everything else was required to be copy and pasted to follow the standards of the department) and that I felt it necessary to be myself and introduce myself on the page just as I had in class. Furthermore, I told him that there *would* be assignments where they would be able to write usin the language or variety they were comfortable with, depending on their intended audience and the rhetorical situation, and that we would learn all about it this semester. This response acted as an unofficial introduction to our lesson on the rhetorical situation. All in all, class was a success and I was free to go back to my desk and change outta these flats, my feet was hurtin somethin terrible; I knew this would be my last time wearin these damn shoes.

A few weeks later, we was working on literacy narratives, and except for a few who was strugglin, everyone was doing fine. On my way outta the class one day, a student stayed behind and asked me if she could discuss her literacy narrative topic, and I invited her up to my office to talk. As we waited for the elevator, I noticed my “underdressed” colleague from the first day, and I almost didn’t recognize him—he had donned a full suit, tie, and dress shoes. He looked dressed to impress, and I thought maybe he had an interview later that day. After I finished with my student, I figured I’d ask ‘bout his outfit and wish him positive vibes for a successful interview. Much to my surprise and frustration, he did *not* have an interview, but he’d been told by a white faculty member that he ain’t look *professional* enough without it. He was promised that students would “take him more seriously” if he wore a suit and tie in his classroom. *Now* I was pissed.

My experience with my colleague pissed me off, both for me and for him. Why was we tied up in all this uncomfortable shit if it ain’t *really* help us? I decided that day that I would start wearing more comfortable clothes in my classroom, and I maintained my casual attire and ain’t

wear the pant suit, suit separates, or them uncomfortable ass black flats anymore. I began to wear my favorite tees with images or quotes from Black women historical figures, such as Rosa Parks and Assata Shakur; tees that shared my love for Marvel comics or my favorite sports teams. I wore jeans, cardigans, hoodies, and sneakers. Additionally, I kept my hair pulled back in a ponytail unless I got it styled in an up-do.

Even though my attire was supposed to take away from my teaching, it often made my students feel more open to genuine and authentic conversations with me. I had many conversations with students of all colors and creeds, who could connect with Marvel and my favorite sports teams. Yet, most importantly, I believe my approach made students of color feel welcome and safe in my classroom. I constantly remember the brother with the locs asking if he could write like I talked in my syllabus and in class. My clothes opened up impromptu conversations with Black students who was in the beginning stages of their loc process. They'd asked about products I used in my locs, as well as who re-twisted them in the predominantly white area of the campus. I even held, a conversation on the history of AAL after a student asked about the names on a tee I rocked to class. The shirt was worn during my participation in the Digital Black Lit/Literacies and Composition (DBLAC) panel at the 2018 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) presentation. Me and my co-presenters (Khirsten L. Scott, Sherita Roundtree, and Louis Maraj) wore custom shirts with the names of Black language and literacy scholars from various generations in the field of composition, whose work has impacted our own as Black early career scholars. Specifically, my shirt featured Lorenzo Turner, Geneva Smitherman, Richard Barksdale, and Jaqueline Jones Royster to name a few.<sup>5</sup> Learning more about my students was a direct result of my shift from professional clothes to those clothes that represented me, and I was comfortable as fuck.

As a Black woman scholar and teacher of English, I know I stand out when I walk into spaces that wasn't developed with *me* in mind. When I walk into spaces where white men and women have traditionally been in the role of teacher or professor, I disrupt the status quo. My very *being* is resistance to, not only a field, but a society that privileges whiteness. These various criticisms are



*Image 2: A pic in my custom tee. The shirt reads "Cook, Smitherman, Royster, Logan, Barksdale, Turner...Our past and living elders of generation 1.0."*

<sup>5</sup> As earlier mentioned, alongside with my panelist, we wore our own shirts to shout out our fam. Roundtree and Scott wore tees including the names of Beverly Moss, Elaine Richardson, Gwendolyn Pough, Carmen Kynard, Keith Gilyard, Adam Banks and Eric Darnell Pritchard among others. Lastly, Maraj's shirt brought it all together with "DBLAC WE GOT NEXT..." which symbolized the space for budding Black scholars of language and literacy to contribute to the field of composition.

a way to articulate a problem that students bring into the classroom with them - that I am not “white enough” to teach this class. A suit don’t shield me from racism or sexism, but it also don’t elevate the knowledge I had before I put the damn thing on. My credentials *are* my suit; they suit me to this position. What I wear don’t change what I know, as shown in Image 2. This is a conscious choice not to accommodate the sexist and racist feelings of students and faculty who are *looking for reasons to think I’m under/unqualified*, and I am perfectly comfortable filling that role.

### **I Am My Brand—Temptaous McKoy**

The email said, “Congratulations, you’ve been accepted to present at xyz conference!” or something like that. I was in the first year of my doctoral studies and I didn’t really know what “presenting at a conference” was, but my mentor told me I should respond to the call for papers. This was one of the biggest conferences in my field and it would def work in my favor if I got accepted. I got accepted. I was provided the opportunity to give a poster talk. Very low stakes, but also very good for a newbie like myself. It would provide the opportunity for me to chat with some of the big names in my field and get to introduce some of those same people to my love for HBCUs. Showcasing my love for HBCUs was one of the various ways I planned to establish my brand within the field.

What some call their reputation, I prefer to call my brand. I say this because I am a firm believer that we are all walking talking billboards in some form or fashion. And for some, our bodies can become prime real estate to showcase and exemplify other branding initiatives, goals, and outcomes. For example, if a Predominately White Institution wishes to diversify their student body, and I am a part of the current student body, I am a part of that department’s branding initiatives as a program for diverse scholars. In addition, I’ve situated my own personal brand as a Black student, doing Black work, at a white school. Not too far-fetched or different from other Black graduate students. What I believed separated myself? At the time, I was a Black graduate student focusing on an area that was severely under researched, overlooked, and devalued—the Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) knowledge made present at HBCUs. So again, my brand became very important to me early on. Fast forward from the time I got accepted until it was time to head out, I remember looking at my suitcase and thinking, “What should I wear?” And this my friends, is where it all begins.

As previously stated, the conference I was preparing to attend was one of the biggest in my field. Now in case you ain’t know, TPC is still a pretty white male dominated field. Not to mention the field brings on some founding principles of what TPC really is. In other words, it can be chopped to professional writing—for some. Professional is typically coded for whiteness and on white folks’ terms. This goes from the writing in Standard English all the way to wearing clothing that is a representative of a professional within various fields, hell even in the National Basketball Association (McDonald & Togila, 2010). Suits, blouses, stockings, cute lil heel...all dat are some of the various pieces of clothing that are attributed to professional attire. And like most Black people, I have been socialized fairly early to understand what professional looks like on Black bodies; pressed hair or smooth fade and two steps over regular professional. Business



*Image 3: So this is the actual outfit at the actual conference I'm talking 'bout.*

casual?? What's that. Either we business or we casual, we ain't mixin em too much (But when we do, we slay). As in a matter of fact, my Historically Black College/University (HBCU) Elizabeth City State University was adamant to teach us how to "dress for success" or professional. Yet, I would have never guessed such molding would one day lead to my present-day resistance to professional dress.

Back to the conference. So, I sat down and looked in my closet trying to figure out what was I about to wear to this conference. I decided to go with a tan/khaki colored suit that I purchased from Lane Bryant. I then paired it with a black and white speckled shirt, and a slight pump (Image 3). I knew this was the outfit that was it. Now this is a two-day conference, however, I was only able to be there for one of the two days. So that meant I had to look good and mean it. I traveled to the conference certain that my suit would be a hit. It would show that I was serious. It would show I meant business. It would show that a sister was trying to simply match the standards of what she has been taught professional meant.

light bet, I head on to the conference. I walk into the hotel with confidence. I pull up on the registration table and I then realized I may be a lil' overdressed. However, THIS (my attire) is what I have been taught professional looks like, so I look the part—it's just that everyone else don't know the rules. I get compliments on my attire and I'm so excited to present my poster. As I prepared for all of the great people to come in the room, I began to feel like I just wasn't myself in my suit. Don't get me wrong, I looked damn good and that suit was fitting me just right. Yet, given the circumstance I simply felt overdressed, so I took off my blazer. And then, people make their way in. "Game on Temptaous," I start to think. As everyone begins to come around and I so anxiously wait to answer their questions, I still didn't feel like myself.

People came to my poster. I described my work with confidence. I smiled and was so very pleasant. Then I realized something, I was not being myself. I was putting on a front. I wanted to appear like I was supposed to be in that space, and I knew it was my job to do that through my speech and my dress. So, I untuck my shirt. I drop my hair. I get comfortable. I loosen my speech. I begin to talk to everyone like we were family. All while this embodied shift is occurring, I am still articulating my work to all those that came by and were interested in my research. I went back to my room and had an epiphany; my clothes influenced my performance. While I tried to put on that front, I was straight up exhausted. I had to switch to bein' my unapologetic self, in order to preserve my energy for the duration of the poster hour. And it wasn't until I got back to my room, took off that damn suit and realized the power it had at that conference.

From that day forward, I decided I was going to wear what made me comfortable. What made me comfortable? Tee-shirts and sneakers made me comfortable. Yet, I still had a thought in the back of my head that reminded me it was not going to fly because I didn't want to disrupt my brand as a member of my field that belonged. I didn't want to appear as if I had not received any formal training. So, I decided to meet somewhere in the middle. Tee-shirt up top, slacks down bottom. Not only would this look show me as a professional, it would also show who I was an individual and a member of my field. I mean don't get me wrong, I love a bad suit and dress like the next gal, I just know I can be flexible in my choice of dress.<sup>6</sup> But even one step further, I placed a message on all of my tee-shirt so allude to what I was presenting on and so people could easily identify who I was on the program, without having to formally introduce myself. As much as I love networking, I am simply not a fan of going through the "What is your name?" motions. That's another article for another day. Any who, I found a way to establish my brand through my tee-shirts. The shirts started out as just regular tees I found online, and then I went to making custom shirts. And as time went on, I started to notice the pattern happening at other conferences by other participants.

I will not dare say I spearheaded the movement to wear tee-shirts to conferences. What I would say however is that I assisted in having other conference members rethink how our attire could be used in rhetorical ways at conferences, instead as simply our uniforms. Conferences are perfect spaces to showcase your brand. These spaces can help you get a job, publications, network for your life, and learn from fellow scholars. The attire we choose to wear in the conference/ professional space is just as important. Our attire can serve as an outward declaration of resistance and a reflection of who you are as an individual—as I exemplify in Image 4.

Even though I do not see an official dress code for the attire worn at conferences in my field, there certainly is a space where I see an assumed dress code, in addition to what that is privileged to certain bodies. As a Black woman, I don't have the option to look like who done it and why. I represent a community that is far greater than myself. Black people must always be extra aware of their Black body in professional white spaces, including conferences. These are spaces that can make or break our careers and the last thing we need is to be denied an opportunity because we were underdressed. But we can take on what it means to be



*Image 4: Me pictured at CCCC 2018 with my awards and rocking my "Y'all Feel Safe?" shirt in response to the conference and its location choice (see NAACP Travel Advisory Warnings in 2018 and CCCC 2018 Conference location).*

<sup>6</sup> If Imma pull up in the sneakers, ain't nobody gonna check me...trust I wore them to my job talks too.

underdressed. And turn it on its head for all conference members to see, understand, and learn from. Learn to not only pick and choose your battles when it comes to dress, but be sure to actually fight your battles, and fight them strategically and unapologetically.

### **I Am My Hair—Cecilia Shelton**

People have lots of reactions to discovering that I teach college writing for a living. Surprise is the predominant one.

“Oh, wow, really...where do you teach?” I mention a local college or university.

“Wow. That’s impressive. Gee, I’d better watch my grammar around you. Don’t judge me.”

Cue nervous laughter on both parts. This kind of exchange is somewhat universal. People expect “English teachers” to be strict grammarians out to rid the world of pronouns without antecedents and dangling modifiers.

What people do not expect, though they cannot say so, is for an “English teacher” to look like me. I don’t know this because people tell me so directly. But more than 10 years of experience with reactions to my profession has revealed a number of patterns—surprise and exaggerated compliments are common themes; another one is some kind of comment or reaction to my hair.

When I reflect on my time as an instructor of college writing and how my embodiment has most often intersected with my choice to work in the academy, my hair stands out as a point of contention. I am a Black woman and have worn my hair in its natural, kinky state for the



*Image 5: Profile of C. Shelton with a braided and twisted natural hairstyle.*

duration of the time I’ve been teaching. While the styles themselves have varied, they have always reflected the texture of my hair and aligned with the hair care choices that are safest and most convenient for my lifestyle. Three casual but memorable interactions illustrate the various ways for which my hair was a point of departure for people to indicate that my body was not the typical English teacher body.

There is a long-standing inside joke in the Black natural hair community—we wear our hair straightened to the interview and then when we get hired, we show up with the afro! Black women have been conditioned to do as much as possible to meet white beauty standards in professional environments; however, the natural hair renaissance of the last twenty years has encouraged a new generation of Black women to choose not to

chemically straighten their hair. Many Black women now enjoy the flexibility of naturally curly or kinky hair which can be worn in any number of styles (Image 5).

I planned to get my hair styled in preparation for my interview for my first full-time academic job just after completing my master's degree. As is common in Black hair salons, my stylist was interested in more than my hair. When she learned that the purpose for my visit was to prepare for an interview, we followed the script outlined above. She was shocked but proud of my accomplishment. After learning that I'd be working as a college writing instructor, she quickly deduced, "Oh, so we must be straightening your hair then" and she quickly set about the task of identifying which heat protectants and flat irons she planned to use. I stopped her.

"I'm not so sure" I said. "It's an HBCU, so..." my voice trailed off.

She knew what a Historically Black College or University was. But she was not convinced that I could escape the inside joke about Black women and straight hair for interviews. Because we both knew it wasn't really a joke. Black women do get judged more harshly for the presentation of our bodies in professional spaces. Everything about that presentation needed to be strategic, including my hair. But how did the cultural context of a historically Black institution impact my decision? The deciding factor in the conversation was what specifically I was being hired to do—teach students to write by leading the University Writing Center and teaching writing courses. People, even Black people, have been socialized to associate standard English with whiteness—not because Black people don't have a rich language tradition associated with our culture; and not because white people all speak without the influence of dialect and slang—because English teachers are associated with policing language correctness and that policing is a function of whiteness.

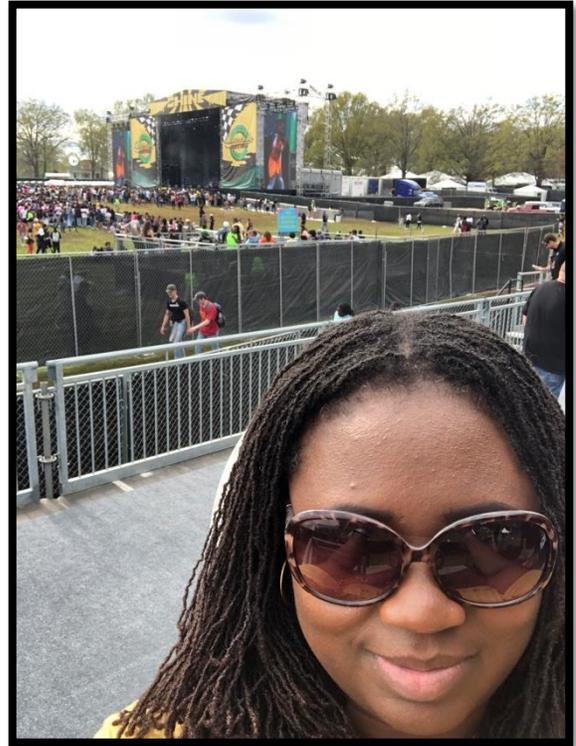
As my hair stylist quipped, "They ain't askin you to teach Black history, baby!"

Honestly, I don't remember which hairstyle I chose. But I do remember the conversation and my persistent efforts to convince my stylist that I'd studied language variation and dialect during my master's degree and that the way we speak has rules like every other language and that it was perfectly beautiful and valid and I wanted to share that with my would be students. But my stylist, positioning herself as an auntie figure, there to guide and protect me, would not yield. She strongly suggested a straightened style at least for the interview. This experience solidified the ways that professionalism not only colors the academy, but also shapes disciplinary standards in raced and gendered ways.

I got that job at the HBCU and I wore my hair in a wide variety of natural styles over the course of the 7 years I worked there. In all that time, my presence as a Black woman was affirming for many Black students. But the fact remained that my body, for them, was a symbol of whiteness because the subject I taught had been a tool of white oppression for their entire educational careers, dampening and discounting their own linguistic resources. Even with my affirmation of their right to their own language (SRTOL), and my code-meshing pedagogical stance (Shelton & Howson, 2014), my position as an authority figure in the writing classroom aligned me with whiteness and I had to hold that reality in tension with my embodiment. Though I've described

it differently here than my stylist did, she was telling me the same thing. And as she predicted, my hair would continue to be a focal point, calling me back to the significance of my embodiment for what I chose to do for work.

Changing hairstyles was interesting and fun but was also time consuming and expensive. I began to search for a hairstyle that would fit my busy lifestyle and keep my commitment to a natural hair care regimen. I chose sisterlocs. Just a year and a half before I began my PhD program, I got my sisterlocs installed and when I was accepted, I knew that they would save me time and energy. They became an instant identifier for my new colleagues. Curious white people with questions about hair are also very familiar to Black women. For the most part, my doctoral community was inquisitive out of curiosity and admiration and everyone was well informed enough to avoid the mistake of touching my hair without permission (and pulling back a nub). Even my students were interested in my hairstyle. I sometimes referred to my hair as an identity marker as I scaffolded into an assignment about critical reflection. A handful of times, I got follow-up questions asking more about my hair and complimenting its beauty. Again, a little zoo-like, but mostly harmless.



*Image 6: C. Shelton enjoying the Dreamville festival & rockin sisterlocs.*

One day, I was out to meet a friend for a lunch and writing date somewhere close to (but decidedly off) campus. We were in an area that students and faculty frequented, so it was not uncommon to see students who might say hello. We had lunch and wrote, and it was lovely. The next day in class, a student asked if I'd had Mexican for lunch the day before. I said I had and asked if she'd been there too. She confirmed that she had and told me that she'd seen me walk in and sit with my friend, the only other Black woman graduate student who was instructing writing in the department at the time. As she chattered on about the food and about seeing me there and wanting to speak but being unsure, she commented casually,

“I thought it was you, but I really couldn't tell even after I saw your face. It was your hair that convinced me. No other teachers have your hair.”

She meant this as a compliment. I didn't think much of it at the time. But in retrospect, it reminds me of the ways that my hair, even when it is admired, marks me as other in my community of scholars. It reminds me that my students and even my colleagues probably, use my body to mark and distinguish me from other Black people—not my research interests, or my teaching style, or my (too) big smile, or my affinity for cardigans. Though her technique for

recognizing me worked for her, it was clearly based in a social system that doesn't require her to distinguish between multiple Black bodies in her everyday life and one that has taught her that teachers don't typically, "have hair like" mine. Funny that she'd made this conclusion likely before she'd even worked in a professional environment herself. Another hair-work related experience I had just a year ago demonstrated just how common her sense-making of the world actually is.

Keeping with the theme here, my hair is often a point of conversation when I meet new people—kids included. I am a parent, which involves all kinds of kid related activities. The first time I met one of my daughter's classmates, she was especially excited and full of questions. Some of her questions had specifically to do with my daughter's hair: Why is it always braided? How long does it take? How do you take it down? Her mom stopped her daughter's questions, sensing that they were bordering inappropriate and visibly grateful for my patience. She introduced herself to me and we had the typical, our friends are kids but do we like each other talk. Eventually my attention turned back to the girl. She had already learned all about me from her friend, my kid. She was now standing facing me, while I sat. We were at eye level. She looked at me carefully, asking:

"You're a teacher, right?"

"Yes, I am. I'll be heading to teach college students when I leave here."

Now her gaze drifted away from eye contact. She was looking around my face. She glanced at my daughter. Then back at me. Then at my daughter and back again. She was not looking at my face...she was looking at my hair. She tilted her head slightly and squinted her eyes (this is true—it is not for literary effect).

"You're nothing like I imagined".

We both stared momentarily. I realized that she was trying to make sense of what a teacher was to her and how little I fit the description. Despite my "teacher clothes" casual slacks, a simple shirt, a cardigan, and flats, she seemed to be grappling with how much my body—specifically the hair that she was fascinated with—didn't fit the description of a teacher that she'd come to expect. Her own teacher, a petite and friendly white woman (and a really great teacher, I might add) was not unlike her expectations as I was. And while I'm hopeful that her concept of a teacher expanded that day, what stands out to me is how early her concept of a teacher had solidified—these were 10 year olds.

These three experiences are small, almost insignificant recollections; they are things I might have forgotten if I hadn't been prompted to interrogate my embodiment and its relationship to my professionalism. But the truth is that these kinds of interactions remind me that I am the "other" and that my explicit commitment to my natural, racial features emphasizes and highlights that otherness. None of the people with whom I spoke likely saw themselves as microaggressors—my stylist was being "helpful"; my student was being "complimentary"; my daughter's friend was being "curious." But their ideas about who a professor can be don't

include me at first glance. Our argument is that “first glance”, the one that our students, and colleagues, and neighbors take when we reveal our professional qualification, is imbued with white, hetero-patriarchy and it harms us.

## **Conclusion**

We understand the risks we take by sharing these experiences, connecting them to our bodies, and attributing them to race and racism. We risk not being believed. We risk our experiences being rationalized, explained away by the possibility of what the various interlocutors we recount could have meant. We risk that they will be given the benefit of the doubt and that we will be doubted. This is not uncommon for Black women.

But we also recognize that our testimony and our ability to make sense of that testimony in relationship to embodiment and professionalism has the potential to be enlightening and persuasive; not sharing and making sense of these narratives is risky too when we consider the potential to change how people think about professionalism on Black women’s bodies and the benefit of identifying with the complexity of our experiences for other Black women and women of color in the academy.

This in-between position, one where neither sharing what you know and nor withholding what you know seems like a viable option, has been described as one of the indicators of epistemic oppression by Black feminist epistemologist Kristie Dotson (podcast citation). Dotson (2014) formally defines epistemic oppression as “persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production” (pg. 115). One way that this oppression can occur is through silencing, a form of epistemic violence and related concept, which happens when “members of oppressed groups are silenced with respect to giving testimony” (Dotson, 2011 p. 237). This silencing occurs in two forms—testimonial quieting, wherein “an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower” and testimonial smothering, wherein one’s own testimony is truncated “order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (Dotson, p. 244).

A white, Western, hetero-normative epistemology governs the controlling narratives in each of the environments where our reflections take place—the classroom, conferences, and public space. When the people with whom we work, interact, teach, and learn all subscribe to this epistemology, it can be difficult to disrupt the norms that determine what is and isn’t acceptable. We have each experienced silencing of the kind Dotson references; the kind that either assumes that we don’t know what we are talking about or that grows out of the hearer’s incapacity to know what we testify to based on their ignorance (for example, a three year old cannot be expected to “know” the voting rules in Michigan, as Dotson explains). We persist in giving testimony because “it is by locating the forms of epistemic violence in silencing that we can begin to delineate, with contextual detail, practices of silencing on the ground” (Dotson, 2011, p. 327). The meaning of “professional” in the academy is the ground upon which we hope to make space for bodies like ours.

Sharing accounts of the intentional ways that we compose our bodies as raced, gendered, *and* professional might help our academic colleagues, our students, our administrators, and the publics with whom we interface to understand professionalism as a construction that can be stifling for Black women and gender non-conforming people. Tracing the ways that we've been silenced and the ways that we subvert those silences offers insight to bridge the gap in knowledge that our white colleagues likely have around our clothing, adornment, hairstyling, and other presentation practices. Even if not, our testimony stands as a beacon to other Black women in the academy: wear that t-shirt, sis; rock them big door knocker earrings; let them locs cascade over your shoulders; speak in your vernacular; be you! We need you!

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