All You Have Gotten Is Tokenism

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Abstract

Tokenism is a sophisticated way of making institutions look progressive, while gender, race, and a host of other factors are the underlying hierarchy determining entrance and advancement in an institution. Psychologist Judith Long Laws provides an alternative foundation for our collective understanding of tokenism to the more often sited scholarship of Rosabeth Moss Kanter. Laws postulates that tokenism is built upon a mutually agreed to, although completely deceptive, relationship between two partners, the token and the sponsor. According to Laws, the relationship between token and sponsor is supported by a cultivated set of beliefs about the social system into which the token is being integrated. Their interaction is undergirded by agreements in several areas: exceptionalism, individualism, meritocratic mystique, boundary maintenance, definition of sponsor's role, the relationship between token and sponsor, and management of stigma. The author uses Laws' framework to illustrate his own tokenized experience in the workplace.

Sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter is viewed by many as a seminal figure in tokenism research. After beginning her academic career at Brandeis University and continuing at Yale University, Kanter joined the faculty of Harvard's Business School in the late 1980s. Her early research in the 1970s on utopian communes in the United States garnered accolades leading to new opportunities beyond the traditional boundaries of sociology in the academy. Kanter received the Guggenheim fellowship in 1975 and subsequently wrote *Men and Women of the Corporation*, published in 1977. Kanter's work during this period centers around how corporate structure either promotes or stymies the success of its workers. Her work also chronicles the impact of being statistically underrepresented in an organization. Kanter found that performance pressure, increased visibility, and isolation together negatively affected the work performance of statistically underrepresented groups. In Kantar's view the crux of the problem was merely statistical and could be largely solved once the underrepresented group crossed the 15% threshold in representation within an organization.

In both the sociological and psychological research arena many have used the foundation

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that Kanter's work provided to strengthen our collective understanding of tokenism from various perspectives. Frequently, psychologists believe Kanter's findings to be incomplete at best and fundamentally flawed at worst. Much of the research, as it stands, fails to view the issue of tokenism comprehensively with the myriad intersectional factors that can play a role in who is allowed to rise in an organization where the power is monopolized by white males.

Catherine Turco challenges Kanter's assertions in her article, "Cultural Foundations of Tokenism: Evidence from the Leverage Buyout Industry." Turco postulates that statistical representation and social standing within the society at large are inadequate factors in attempting to explain a token's experience. Underrepresented and historically marginalized populations have varied experiences when placed in different contexts. Turco's broader argument is that differences in a token's experience are grounded in the narrow context in which the tokenized existence is embedded. In short, the issues are local. While there are certainly regional factors that may give credence to the argument, it should be clearly understood that the system upon which tokenism is built has been in place in the USA for hundreds of years and it would be disingenuous to pretend that the foundation that undergirds all that we do can be repackaged to make us believe these issues are not embedded into the value system of America itself and the institutions built thereupon.

In "Composition of the Workplace and Psychological Well-Being: The Effects of Tokenism on America's Black Elite," Pamela Braboy Jackson, Peggy A. Thoits, and Howard F. Taylor pointed out significant limitations in Kanter's work. First, they felt that tokenism had not been studied systematically. Next, they felt the study focused its attention on women while disregarding other underrepresented groups. And, finally, the study focused on a single occupation failing to provide a general understanding across occupations. While the authors' findings are certainly valid, focusing attention on the elites of an underrepresented group privileges pedigree in a way that perpetuates tokenism at a different layer. If one can criticize tokenism on

the basis of gender and race, it is equally important to challenge tokenism on the basis of class, lest we give in to the prescribed social hierarchy that governs the very system of American democracy. That social hierarchy has always had class as one of its pillars.

Janice Yoder's work on tokenism is in some respects a combination of the work of the aforementioned scholars. She uses Kanter's work as a framework and then builds upon it to go beyond Kanter's more limited scope. Yoder's body of work on gender specifically is extensive but it is the evolution of her work on gender and tokenism that makes her particularly important to this discourse. In 1985 she published a case study about academic women as tokens. The work uses her experiences as one of the first civilian faculty members at a United States military academy to discuss tokenism and its effect on the token. Yoder went on to study the ways in which men can succeed in female dominated professions while the inverse is not at all true. Some 10 years after Kanter's initial work on tokenism, Yoder begins to challenge Kanter's work. She found that gender issues were too complex to solve them simply by changing numbers. Also included in Yoder's body of work is a study of the varying experiences of black and white women in work environments using women firefighters as subject. In many respects Yoder's work can be its own case study of the manner in which academic fields often view studying race and racism as an afterthought, effectively exacerbating the difficulty of diversifying the workforce in too many fields. Additionally, it should be alarming to have more than 40 years of research on the topic of tokenism only to have institutions continue to hold on to the idea that merely increasing the numbers of underrepresented and historically marginalized people is the solution to issues of equity and inclusion.

Seven Years a Token

Psychologist Judith Long Laws provides an alternative foundation for understanding tokenism that has the potential to consider multiple factors

at once. Defined as a conservative institution aimed at preserving the status quo, Laws postulates that tokenism is built upon a mutually agreed to, although completely deceptive, relationship between two partners: the token, a member of the "deviant class," and the sponsor, a member of the "dominant class." According to Laws, the relationship between token and sponsor is supported by a cultivated set of beliefs about the social system into which the token is being integrated. Their interaction is undergirded by agreements in several areas: exceptionalism, individualism, meritocratic mystique, boundary maintenance, definition of sponsor's role, the relationship between token and sponsor, and management of stigma. Although Laws' analysis was specific to women in the context of academia, her framework can be applicable to a myriad of tokenized existences in professions and institutions.

It should be pointed out that the sponsor can be seen as both institutional and individual. The institution as sponsor provides the structure necessary for this inequitable system to be perpetuated. The individual as sponsor acts as the agent of the institution to defend and protect it against attack from forces not dedicated to the perpetuation of the system. It is therefore difficult to know who to hold accountable and how to push back against these forces. Working against an individual may prove beneficial in the short term because it may initiate a personnel change. But as long as the structure remains the same, any personnel choice will still act as an agent of the institution. Working toward institutional change, especially in academia where everything is filtered through the veil of a committee, requires both a ground swell of support for change from the masses and an institutional leadership committed to real diversity, equity, and inclusion. A system that makes historically marginalized and underrepresented groups merely servants of the dominant group and not full members of the community with all the rights, privileges, and opportunities for advancement afforded to the dominant group might be diverse but it is not equitable or inclusive. For the purposes of this discourse, Laws' work will be used to understand how tokenism upholds the status quo in organizations through

the lens of my own tokenized existence in the academy.

I arrived in Reno, NV, to begin my first full-time appointment after completing the Doctor of Music in Vocal Performance at Florida State University. Having completed a bachelor's and master's degree immediately after high school and spending 8 years as a professional singer in the classical genre, the terminal degree was the beginning of a newly balanced career where performing and teaching would be coequal pillars of my professional life. As a black man, from a single parent, working class home in an inner city, I was well aware of how privileged I was to have had the education and experiences I had. I was also keenly aware of the treacherous path that would lie ahead as I pursued my new professional aspirations.

While I felt very prepared to begin this new phase of my career, the uncertainty of what I would find when I began my new assignment was daunting. I was facing a new region of the country, a new institution, new colleagues, new students, and no easily identifiable community outside of my professional life where I would not be the only black person. After making an initial assessment of student performance in the department, I knew there was a great deal to accomplish in my teaching role. As a freelance classical singer with roots in the northeast, and having spent the previous 3 years in northern Florida, I would also be challenged in the area of my creative activity and research because I would be far removed from my field's center of gravity. While I was not on a tenure track when I arrived in Reno, if I aspired to achieve a tenure track position and earn tenure, it would be imperative for me to continue performing and to find new outlets for my research interests.

Thankfully, my concerns were greatly assuaged in my first few weeks in Reno. My department chair was very diligent in attempting to integrate me into the musical community on campus. I was introduced to new social and professional circles and was asked to perform the national anthem with the university orchestra for the new president of the university's inauguration. The most surprising overture came when I was informed that I would be featured on the

front page of the university's website as a new faculty member. While I was excited for these opportunities, the latter seemed peculiar considering my status as a lecturer and not a tenure track faculty member. It would have been less peculiar if it was the music department's page but this feature was going to be on the main page of the university's website. I was honored but I also understood that my race was at play here and I was about to be catapulted into a level of visibility for which I had not planned.

My first semester was both productive and tumultuous. Within the first few weeks Kanter's assertion about performance pressure, increased visibility, and isolation began to have an effect. What saved me was the fact that I was too busy to succumb. In that first semester, I completed my first recording project alongside several other performances. During the same period, I found out that my position as lecturer had been converted to tenure track and I would have to apply and be considered as part of another national search if I wanted to remain at the institution.

Less than half way through the first semester, I was made aware that there had been complaints that I was intimidating. I was not informed of the source of these complaints. When I inquired about what I had said or done that rose to the level of intimidation, I was provided with no evidence of a no tangible accusation and was told that I should not worry because it was "not a bad thing." I was told that people were merely responding to my high standards and the way that I confidently went about my work. But the fact that I was called into the chair's office to discuss an accusation that did not seem to have merit was a sign that there was cause for concern. If it was not a warning of some sort, there would have been no reason to share this information with me. An institution committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion would have trained leaders with knowledge of pejorative terms, intimidating being one of several, that have been used against marginalized groups to further isolate them and put them on the defensive. In this early period of my affiliation with the institution, it was evident that its verbal commitment to diversity had no real structure, support, or tangible mandate from leadership or the community.

There is an adage that black parents in America often teach their children: you have to be twice as good to get half as much. One can debate the validity of such an assertion but, suffice it to say, the high standard I set for my students and the standard I set for my interactions with my colleagues was merely a reflection of the standard I set for myself. I worked diligently to "fit in" with my new colleagues while also making sure my work was above reproach in every way. I understood early on that if I were to be successful in this new context, I would have to manage how I was perceived in my department and build relationships outside of my department both to understand the institutional culture and as an antidote to the isolation I was beginning to feel, and I would need to be exceptional in every aspect of my work. There would be no room for error but I also had to temper my personal dedication to always be my best as to avoid negative attention from others.

Exceptionalism

It was only as I undertook the research for this project that I realized I had willingly but unknowingly entered into what is, according to Judith Long Laws, the first stage of a tokenized existence. Believing oneself to be exceptional is a part of what undergirds any lofty pursuit. That, in and of itself, was not the problem. Not only did I believe I was exceptional; the institution treated me as such while coupling it with veiled and not so veiled attempts to undermine my confidence and my ability to grow. The general assertion by the institution that I was "unusually able and competent" is consistent with Laws' work. In her analysis on the psychology of tokenism, Laws asks an extremely salient question about the idea of exceptionalism: exception to what? A token is exceptional "in exhibiting to a minimal degree the devalued attributes of the primary-deviant class, and to an exceptional degree the highly-valued attributes of the dominant class."

Exceptionalism lifts a token into rarefied air while simultaneously separating him or her from supportive connections to aspects of their identity be it gender, gender identity, race, sexual orienta-

tion, national origin, ability, and all of the categories often included in discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This separation from potential avenues of support happens all while the token is not really received by the dominant group as an equal. It is important to point out that the idea of exceptionalism only tokenizes a person when it is an agreement between the token and institutional forces. In some respect the token's sense of self is validated while also being made to believe that the institution sees him or her as a valued member of the community. While it would be easy to simply blame the institutions for this, tokens must bear some responsibility in making this conscious or unconscious agreement with the institution. The institution is responsible for the deception around the idea of exceptionalism. The token is responsible for buying into the delusion in the face of all evidence that points to a lack of respect and a lack of appreciation for actual contributions they are making to an institution.

Laws goes on to state that the token's psychological distance from the primary-deviant class may make it easy for him or her to take on a role often assigned to tokens in any situation, that of gatekeeper. As a teacher, I had become guilty of demanding from black students a level of exceptionalism that I had required of myself and the system had required of me. Even before undertaking this research, I realized how unfair and ineffective I had become to students for whom my presence should have been a beacon of hope and understanding as they made their way through college. I recognized that I was becoming what frustrated me most during my doctoral studies, token professors operating as gatekeeper who might privately be supportive of my work but who would publically challenge me at every juncture without preparing me to meet the challenge. As a teacher, I decided that I would not change the standards but I would inform students in the beginning what I was grappling with as their teacher and ask them to meet me on the journey to discovering our highest and best as both teacher and student. This approach humanized me to my students and provided an atmosphere that both challenged and supported students of all backgrounds. I would go a step

further than Laws and say that it is both psychological and physical distance that perpetuates this phenomenon. For me, at a university where the black student population has hovered around 3%, black academic faculty are significantly less, and the black population in the city at large also hovers around 3%, merely discussing psychological distance is an incomplete assertion.

With regard to the role of gatekeeping, one could reframe the narrative around student/faculty relationships and look at the roll of the token in hiring processes. In the token's role as gatekeeper, the bar for applicants coming through a search process who may represent different types of diversity becomes even higher. The level of exceptionality a token sees in themselves becomes the litmus test for others with similar identity to gain entry into the institution. Additionally, if one ascribes a sense of actual power to their role as token, the possibility of their being another is threatening to the token. This is why any effort to diversify an institution without addressing the systemic issues already at play, while placing tokens as ceremonial figureheads in those efforts is destined to fail. It should also be investigated how the gatekeeping phenomenon plays itself out among different groups. Anecdotally, my experience has shown a particularly high bar across all competencies for black people in relation to other underrepresented and historically marginalized groups. I have consistently witnessed other groups advocate for each other specifically in hiring processes. I have not witnessed the same among black people. And where multiple types of diversity exist, for example, race and gender or race and sexual orientation/gender identity, one has to wonder how much more daunting the road is. Further research in these areas would provide more information to aid in understanding the depths of the issue.

In the summation of her discussion on exceptionalism, Laws warns of the result when a token accepts the responsibility of gatekeeper. The fundamental structure of the institution or the profession is preserved. The token's existence in the structure and their work to perpetuate the structure is used to defend the system against charges of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and the like. Laws astutely points out the value of tokens

when the dominant group is the object of criticism, protest, and demands for change from primary-deviant groups. The token can become the target in these instances while members of the dominant group continue to operate unchecked. If institutions are truly interested in changing the campus climate for underrepresented and historically marginalized groups, this aspect of the tokenized existence must be addressed. Every effort must be made to encourage people to remain connected to every aspect of their identity. While there is no simple methodology to dismantling the practice of tokenization, creating safe spaces without direct influence from the dominant group could begin to facilitate an institutional culture where underrepresented groups have adequate opportunity to connect without what can often feel like the ever-watchful eye of the dominant group. Instead, organizations endeavor to manage and control narratives of underrepresented groups while keeping them siloed. The result of these efforts is ultimately the protection of privelege for the already powerful while simultaneously insuring that efforts to challenge that privilege can be put down before they gain traction.

Individualism

It should be said that I did not come to any part of my career as a novice with regard to operating in spaces that were not predominantly black. With the exception of family life and religious community, I was normally one of a very few black people in any given context. Because I was always deemed "exceptional" in those spaces, whether it be for my singing or intellectual engagement, it was difficult for me to fully embrace the notion that race could be a significant factor in one's success or failure. My mother demanded that there be no excuses for preventable failures. And while she would point out situations that she deemed problematic during my educational journey, I was reluctant to buy into the idea that my race could play a role in opportunities that I did not receive. I was raised to believe that determined effort would ultimately

dictate my destiny. While there is some truth to this notion, in essence, I was inadvertently preparing to be tokenized. It was easier to allow myself to be tokenized than to confront the reality that I would never be fully recognized for the fullness of what I can offer an institution.

Individualism is the second aspect of the token/sponsor reciprocal agreement. Individualism, as Laws describes it, "involves a belief that all outcomes are the result of individual effort. Success is one's own achievement, and failure, one's own fault. No category or class membership is acknowledged as relevant to achievement or failure." Despite statistical and anecdotal evidence contradicting this ideology, individualism is a convenient belief system further separating tokens from aspects of their identity in service of preserving the underlying institutional structure. It also perpetuates a false notion that those in power in an institution achieved their status through individual effort alone. It is as if race, class, gender, and other factors have no bearing on institutional perception of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups and their collective ability to advance their careers against a backdrop of nepotism and cronyism. In contemporary culture it is no longer simply the "good old boys" doing this. It's the good old boys and the women who protect and perpetuate unequal, unethical, and unjust institutional practices. For all of the statistical progress women have enjoyed since tokenism research began, it is disconcerting to see the ways in which that progress has not be extended to other groups in a robust manner.

Laws concludes her discussion on individualism with a keen observation about those occupying the token role. Individualism does not only preserve the status quo in a given institution; it also serves to exacerbate the delusion that there are not structural forces at play undermining their influence, their contribution, and their potential for growth within the institution. As long as the token holds on to the ideas of exceptionalism and individualism without acknowledging how these ideas are used, they never realize the true nature of their status within the organization and the institution celebrates themselves for diverse hires

without doing the difficult work of wholesale cultural change that allows an institution to truly be transformed. Diverse hires become a revolving door because the environment is not conducive to growth or even survival in some instances when you are not a member of the dominant group.

Meritocratic Mystique

The third tenet in Laws' analysis of the psychology of tokenism is meritocratic mystique. Meritocratic mystique, as Laws describes, is based upon four tenets: membership into the elite is gained through achievement and not merely the domain of a certain group; institutionally high standards are justification for the organization's exclusivity; both of the aforementioned ideals must be upheld by members of the organization; and excellence will be rewarded. These four beliefs are often taken by members of the dominant group to deem any effort to diversify the workforce as compromising the lofty ideals of the field or the institution. Meritocratic mystique, in consort with exceptionalism and individualism, acts as an institutional buffer against outcries of discrimination. A token's willing participation in the structure provides a defense against accusations of discrimination to the constituency that matters most, the majority. As long as the dominant group believes their presence at the institution and the presence of those who look like them is based on meritorious standards, there is little cause for concern. The lack of diversity can be viewed as a lack of excellence outside of the dominant group, not a lack of access for the deviant group.

The idea of America as a meritocracy is the subject of extensive discussion in opinion editorials and research projects in various academic fields. One would be naïve to think that the same governing thought upon which the United States is founded would not translate to a belief that academia and other institutions are comprised of employees that are there purely on the basis of merit. In the absence of being a part of the dominant group, one has to be more than meritorious to enter these institutions and work twice as hard to be great at every aspect of the job in order to successfully advance in their career pursuits. The alternative for those not in the dominant group is to be more than meritorious but to check one's ambition at the door upon arrival. A token content in playing the role and not advancing up the career ladder will always have a place in an organization that does not truly understand what diversity, equity, and inclusion actually looks like in practice.

With regard to the four tenets Laws' lays out, my own experience tells a very different story. After a successful first year as a lecturer and after winning the tenure track position at the University of Nevada, Reno, albeit under circumstances that saw my immediate colleague and search committee chair removed from the process for making insensitive comments about the finalists for the position, my relationship with my colleague changed drastically. That change in relationship would not have been so challenging if strong standards of accountability for inappropriate behavior were a part of the institutional culture. Instead, I had to manage my relationship with my colleague without assistance from the department chair who was made aware of the challenges I was facing but offered nothing to remedy the situation.

Vague bylaws gave me no concrete information regarding what I should be working toward. There were no instructions or mentorship provided to navigate the tenure journey. And when racist and homophobic remarks were made by an immediate colleague, they were literally laughed off by the department chair. The idea of institutionally high standards was a farce. The standard for tenure and promotion were based on the meandering whims of the tenured faculty. The real truth is that when the idea of excellence in any institution is defined by the dominant group alone, those standards often lack the type of inclusivity that allows other groups to be viewed as excellent under the same metrics. Because my research interests and most important performances were not of the standard canon of classical music, that work was not viewed as important in the field. While I was able to achieve tenure one year earlier than the normal course, I did so by doing what my mother taught me to do; I worked twice as hard. The frustration is that

although I was demonstrating excellence at every juncture, when it was time to reward me for that excellence, that reward was not freely given. I had to fight for it.

Boundary Maintenance

Boundary maintenance, as Laws describes it, serves to maintain relative distance between the classes or groups in an effort to uphold the credibility of the system. If those outside of the dominant group are ignorant of the inner workings of the system, there is no risk that the system will be credibly critiqued. The system's flaws function as privilege to the dominant group and as long as boundaries are maintained, those flaws remain unaddressed. The role of tokens here again protects the system from accusations of impropriety. In the token's role as gatekeeper, he or she is expected to act as a shield against infiltration from other members of the deviant class who are not willing to go along with the status quo. The assumption on the token's part is that while they are operating as gatekeeper, they are being fully integrated into the dominant group either. The evidence almost never supports a token's assumption of eventual integration into the primary group unless some aspect of the token's identity is being suppressed to make inclusion palatable. That, of course, is still tokenism.

To complicate the matter even more, boundary maintenance, when coupled with exceptionalism and individuality, keeps the deviant group separate and also deeply skeptical of one another. It is much easier to believe oneself to be exceptional when you are the only one or one of a very few working in the organization. Institutions that want to support underrepresented and historically marginalized populations will both encourage and facilitate the efforts of such persons to gather and support one another. Ultimately, this sense of community makes those segments of the university population feel supported and in a better position to be productive members of the institution. It also can expose practices within the organization that challenge members of the deviant group working in different areas but facing similar

methods of marginalization. This type of effort requires a relatively small amount of resources to launch and maintain, yet at too many institutions, such work goes undone even when suggested repeatedly.

One must not be naïve. There is a valuable incentive for institutions not to engage in these efforts as an institutional priority. No matter the falsity and moral repugnance of the notion of white, male superiority, no one who's power is derived from that system is giving up their advantage willingly. In the absence of written policy and accountability around issues of micro- and macro-aggressive behavior, there can be no systemic change. Many attempt to point to the progress women have made in the workforce as a sign that efforts are proving successful. But the inclusion of white women into the realm of privilege is merely another act of tokenism where white women act as the gatekeepers against non-white peoples. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the ranks of women supports this assertion. Efforts to appear equitable and inclusive with no tangible policy and institutional structure to support the rhetoric are most of what we see. The time and effort it requires to debunk the institutional rhetoric as not being reflected in policy, action, or institutional culture leaves those working to dismantle such systems completely depleted and in danger of not being able to effectively do the work for which they were hired. And the system is left intact. The dominant group simply waits out those who would challenge the system in hopes that for one reason or another, they will move on.

Definition of Sponsor's Role and Relationship Between Token and Sponsor

The sponsor's role and the relationship between sponsor and token has already been defined to some degree. However, there is another layer that should be understood. The sponsor is viewed as liberal on the issues of diversity by all involved, according to Laws. That fact is borne out by the presence of the token. The sponsor is given credit

for the presence of the token and is, therefore, shielded from criticism around issues that may arise. Laws also points out that the sponsor, while being liberal on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, is not viewed as a radical. In Laws' view, radicalism on the part of the sponsor is advocacy for all members of marginalized groups not simply the individual token. While that may not seem radical to some, any move that would upend the social order, push the sponsor out of favor with the dominant group, and therefore make the sponsor's hold on power precarious, is taken to be radical. Academia's perceived liberalism makes it the perfect incubator for tokenism to grow and flourish. The parallels one can draw between liberalism in the academic context and our more liberal political party as it relates to how deviant groups are included are startling. The same struggles for equity and inclusion are had by every institution where intentional efforts are not being made to truly make rhetoric actionable.

The relationship between the token and sponsor is a complex one. While the sponsor's liberalism may make them more sympathetic to the challenges a token may face, the sponsor also views the token through a lens that separates the token from the deviant group at large. The sponsor vouches for the token and helps to manage the way in which the token's presence is perceived, making the token dependent on the sponsor for their survival within the institution. The relationship is often rife with stereotypes, microaggressions, and an overall exacerbation of the problems. It is masked by a general liberalism and a relationship agreement that does not easily allow the token to challenge the sponsor in any meaningful way.

For me, accusations that I was intimidating were never substantiated with any type of evidence. The lack of accountability for these baseless accusations created an environment where the innuendo could be offered as fact because it was not summarily rejected by leaders within the dominant group as not only false but tinged with racial animus. The dog whistle was clear to me but somehow unrecognized by those supposedly committed to liberalism. My error was assuming that this liberalism included me.

Management Stigma

The final area that Laws puts forward in her research is called management stigma. Management stigma's primary goal is the integration of the token into the dominant class. Although it is known that the token cannot actually escape their origins in the deviant group and, therefore, can never be fully identified with the dominant group, the token's acceptance of the illusion signals to the sponsor that the token is ready to inhabit the role completely without the need for sponsorship. Getting to this place is a consequence of subtle maneuvering that happens over time and again with full agreement of both parties. As Laws describes it, compartmentalization is the mechanism through which the sponsor manages a token's stigma. The token is coached to present different aspects of themselves in different contexts to avoid upsetting the sensibilities of the dominant group. The expectation is that the token will act in the manner that the dominant group dictates. Any ambition beyond the role that the token has been assigned to is met with opposition. In some instances that opposition is severe.

Here are several examples using my experience as the point of reference. I received little attention when I was content to simply teach my classes, sing my performances, and remain a quiet presence in the department and on the campus. I became the head of the voice program purely by default. As I began to have success in that capacity, while also having success in my role as a teacher, and being a standout in my field, thus putting me on a path to early tenure, I bucked the agreement I unknowingly made early on to stay in my place. As long as I was serving on diversity committees that had no substantive charges or authority to enact policy and giving speeches at campus forums illuminating the concerns of the marginalized and underrepresented, I was operating in the capacity acceptable to the sponsor. When I was elected to the faculty senate, nominated for department chair, and nominated for Director of the School of the Arts, I had overstepped my bounds. Accusations that I was intimidating metastasized. I was accused of being intimidating, unapproachable, dictatorial, threat-

ening, and noncommunicative. While there was never credible evidence to support the accusation, the mere suggestion of this historical trope was enough to stifle any forward motion to my own career aspirations. What is most peculiar is the ways in which the dominant group will sacrifice their own programs to prevent a member of the deviant group from moving outside of the role established for them. But then again, it is not peculiar at all. What it tells us is that within the academy, the program may not actually be as important as the member of the deviant group thinks it is. What is primary is that the social order be maintained by any means necessary. The notion of merit and much of the agreement between token and sponsor are exposed for what they are, a farce.

Understanding Tokenism Through the Lens of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

Predating the work of Kanter, Laws, and other psychologists and sociologists on the subject of tokenism, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1964 book, *Why We Can't Wait*, addresses the issue. Dr. King came to the following conclusion:

> In the last decade, still another technique had begun to replace the old methods for thwarting the Negroes' dreams and aspirations. This is the method known as "tokenism." The dictionary interprets the word "token" in the following manner: "A symbol. Indication, evidence, as a token of friendship, a keepsake. A piece of metal used in place of a coin, as for paying carfare on conveyances operated by those who sell the token. A sign, a mark, emblem, memorial, omen." When the Supreme Court modified its decision on school desegregation by approving the Pupil Placement Law, it permitted tokenism to corrupt its intent. It meant that Negroes could be handed the glitter of metal symbolizing the true coin, and authorizing a short-term trip toward democracy. But he who sells you the token instead of the coin always retains the power to revoke its worth, and to command you to get off the bus before you have reached your destination. Tokenism is a promise to pay. Democracy, in its finest sense is payment.

Predating Dr. King, in a 1963 interview with famed journalist and author Louis Lomax, civil rights icon Malcolm X vehemently pushed back against Lomax's assertion of black progress in the era:

> All you have gotten is tokenism–one or two Negroes in a job or at a lunch counter so the rest of you will be quiet. It took the United States Army to get one Negro into the University of Mississippi; it took troops to get a few Negroes in the white schools at Little Rock and another dozen places in the South. It has been nine years since the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated schools, yet less than ten percent of the Negro students in the South are in integrated schools. That isn't integration, that's tokenism! In spite of all the dogs, and fire hoses, and club swinging policemen, I have yet to read of anybody eating an integrated hamburger in Birmingham.

> You Negroes are not willing to admit it yet, but integration will not work. Why, it is against the white man's nature to integrate you into his house. Even if he wanted to, he could no more do it than a Model T can sprout wings and fly. It just isn't in him.

In briefly summarizing their world view and strategies to attract converts to their thinking, Dr. King believed that the promise of democracy inherent in our governing documents demanded equity and inclusion in all vestiges of American life. His challenge to America as a whole was both a legal and moral one demanding that America live up to its commitments.

Malcolm X believed the only way forward for members of the African diaspora in America was to separate and create their own system. Malcolm X believed that the power structures in America would never acquiesce to include blacks except on a token basis.

While the legacy of Malcolm X is often dismissed as incendiary and divisive in mainstream culture, it is illuminating to look at the divergent legacies of these two pillars of the civil rights movement through our understanding of tokenism as presented by Laws. Dr. King was viewed by the sponsor (America) as ripe for token status in our system. Fundamentally, Dr. King was not calling for a dismantling of America's system; he was seeking broad applicability of the system's largess to all citizens. Conversely, Malcolm X was viewed as a radical. The way to neutralize the radical is to tokenize the most palatable of the deviant group. In almost every way, America has done this in the way it presents the civil rights

movement to students and to its citizens at large. We have placed on a pedestal the work of Dr. King while ignoring many of the other voices and movements that collectively made up the civil rights movement. What is even more telling is that at the point that Dr. King begins moving in the direction of Malcolm X's world view by questioning whether advocacy for the integration of black people into a "burning house" was indeed the best way forward and deciding to broaden the scope of the movement to include economic justice for all people, he is assassinated. Poet and musician Carl Wendell Hines pens the following:

> Now that he is safely dead let us praise him, build monuments to his glory, sing hosannas to his name.
> Dead men make such convenient heroes.
> They cannot rise to challenge the images we would fashion from their lives.
> And besides, it is easier to build monuments than to make a better world.

One might believe that the poet is speaking specifically of Dr. King, but the date of composition in 1965, soon after the assassination of Malcolm X, gives greater understanding of what inspired the poet's word. The poem, however, appropriately encapsulates the way in which America has taken the King message, sanitized it, and tokenized him as a hero without actually doing the real work of institutional change.

The Way Forward

This discussion opened by introducing a foundational figure in the study of tokenism research. Currently, Rosabeth Moss Kantar holds the Ernest L. Arbuckle Professorship specializing in strategy, innovation, and leadership for change. Additionally, she is the chair and director of the Harvard University Advanced Leadership Initiative, an international model that helps successful leaders at the top of their fields apply their skills to national and global challenges in an effort to build a new leadership force for the world. What message are we to take from Kantar's fundamental misunderstanding of tokenism as the foundation for her ascendancy to one of the most revered business schools in the

world? It would seem to suggest that we are accepting of and willing to reward "groundbreaking" work on the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion as long as they in no way threaten the structure that keeps the powerful in power while only sharing power with those who demonstrate a complete commitment to the system as it is, no matter how inequitable we all know it to be.

More than 50 years after both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X discussed tokenism in their speeches and writing, we are left to wonder why and how the research on the topic picks up tremendously in subsequent years without the groups for whom Dr. King and Malcolm X ultimately gave their lives attempting to improve being included in the research. One must inquire about the culpability of the field of psychology in its lack of research specifically focused on tokenism outside of a gender construct. The advancement in the statistical representation of women that has occurred alongside that body of research can be viewed as an achievement for the field, but the lack of representation and even representative research that goes beyond gender should raise extreme concern in the field. You cannot celebrate victory for what you have achieved without accepting culpability for what you have ignored. In this regard, tokenism as diversification will take more than a few trainings, updated hiring guidelines, and shifts in rhetoric.

In many respects, tokenism is the subtle method that has undergirded power structures as they are threatened by outside forces. With every movement, be it the struggle for the abolishment of slavery, women's rights, civil rights, LGBTQIA+ equality, immigrants' rights, and any movement like it, tokenism is used to squelch dissent and stymie progress. The perceived ordering of our social structure with regard to which movements make progress and who within those movements are the first tokens chosen is telling. Movements for women's equality have not actually benefitted all women. In similar fashion, the LGBTQIA+ movements and the organizations that support them have not benefitted all LGBTQIA+ people. Those for whom benefits have been realized have almost always been similar in terms of race. The movement for the abolishment of slavery and later for civil

rights has been a little different. Many of the beneficiaries of those movements have been those who come from highly educated and often more affluent members of the group. What we begin to see is a social order that establishes race as primary and then a competition for gender and class as the secondary category that defines our social order. What does this mean? For all the talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion currently happening, if we wish to see progress on these issues, we must dismantle the tokenization of non-white, non-male members of our organizations who have a certain pedigree. If not, we are fooling ourselves into believing there is progress when people who are not white men are still bearing an undue burden in striving for professional advancement.

The system as we know has been built upon racial caste since the very founding of the country and it has not changed. Tokenism is a sophisticated way of making institutions look progressive, while racial caste, gender, and a host of other means of exclusion become the real guidelines for who is allowed to enter an institution and who is allowed to advance. This happens all while people suffer under the oppressive weight of daily macro- and micro-aggressions. In some instances, the token does not even realize it is happening and cannot pinpoint the cause of their challenges. Most often they take the burden upon themselves to fix and never challenge the context that is the driver of those challenges. Most want desperately to believe that the system is fair and people in leadership are operating with the stated value system of the institution as their guiding force. What may be even more deceitful are the ways in which the pleadings of those who recognize the injustice and demonstrate a commitment to improving the institution are seemingly taken seriously in meetings and public forums. Behind closed doors, those voices are marginalized around the tables of power within the institution so their influence cannot translate into real policy changes. Without systemic change, undergirded with measures of accountability, it will always be easiest to find members of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups to be the face of diversity efforts within an organization while not actually creating an environment where people are encouraged to bring themselves wholly to their work. The real conclusion is that the dominant group has no intention of giving up their advantage and the deviant groups have not sufficiently created the political climate for substantive change to actually occur. Until then, all you have got is tokenism.

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