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# The making of the Stepford teacher: a feminist horror story of teacher preparation

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## ABSTRACT

This manuscript explores the gendered nature of teaching using the 1975 film ‘The Stepford Wives’ as an allegory. We argue that teacher preparation, through intentional design, attracts and produces a specific type of teacher while discouraging diversity and critical thinking. Through feminist and critical human geography theories, we examine the structure of teacher preparation. We introduce a ‘Stepford Teacher’ remix, using horror storytelling to convey the terror of the docility, passivity, and subjectification of teachers that is embedded within the process of their preparation. The work questions whether teacher preparation truly prepares critical thinkers or if, in fact, it creates compliant individuals, perpetuating existing power structures.

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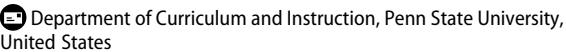
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## KEYWORDS

Feminist theory/geography;  
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In the film *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975), a suburban idyllic setting conceals a horror: wives are remade into compliant automatons who smile, serve, and never dissent. We borrow this allegory to create our own parallel horror story, *The Stepford Teacher*, to examine teacher preparation in the U.S., where the fantasy of the ‘good teacher’ persists through historical moments into today as a moral, gendered, classed, and racialized project. In the U.S., most teachers are white, middle-class women (Luttrell, 2020)—*but why is this exactly?* Reflecting on this reality and leveraging multi-disciplinary theory and methodology helps us step outside our own field for a moment and ponder, what would it take to recast *The Stepford Wives* within the context of teacher preparation?

Within the U.S. context, this transformation unfolds amid policy regimes that reward conformity and punish deviation. From the accountability mandates, e.g. *No Child Left Behind* (2001), to the technocratic measurement systems, e.g. *edTPA* (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016), teacher preparation has been reshaped through neoliberal logics that privilege evidence, efficiency, and control over relationality, criticality, and imagination. This is especially true for urban schools which are often spaces marked by structural inequity, racial segregation, and moral panic, where teachers are imagined as saviors and students as problems (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). Additionally, retention of students of color in university teacher preparation programs is consistently dismal in comparison to

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their white peers (Agiro et al., 2024). Recognizing these inequities, there have been efforts to diversify the teacher workforce including creating pipelines with wrap-around support for students of color to successfully graduate from high school, enter college, and become teachers (Holbert et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, we ask: *What processes produce a largely homogenous teaching force, and reproduce a persistent, dominant notion of the ‘good teacher’, what we term the ‘Stepford Teacher’, and what does this reveal about the gendered, racialized, and neoliberal forces that shape teacher preparation today?* In this article, we trace how compliance, affective regulation, and performative care have been sutured into teacher formation historically and is continued today through teacher preparation. By doing this, our analysis explores the interplay between the subjectification (the process through which one becomes a Stepford teacher) and how the subjectivity of the Stepford Teacher herself reveals and reproduces this production.

## The setting

*The Stepford Wives* film is set in the fictional town of Stepford, Connecticut. The area is presented as a good ol’ American town with traditional family values. Stepford homes are maintained by doting housewives who bake, dress up, and keep organized and clean homes for their husbands. Moving into town, the protagonist, Joanna Eberhart, is taken aback by the docility of the wives. Disturbed by their sameness and emptiness, she, along with her newly-arrived friend, Bobbie, embark on a journey to figure out what is happening to the women. Joanna ultimately discovers that Dis, leader of the town’s ‘Men’s Association’, is producing ‘perfect’ robot wives who subserviently attend to every desire of their husbands.

What happens if we use this story to unsettle us enough to imagine a new horror story—one in which teacher preparation is ‘Stepford?’ What might such a story reveal? Drawing from dramatic and theatrical methodology, we consider how the genre of horror illuminates societal fears – in this case, fear of social control and lack of agency, particularly for white, middle-class women who usually occupy the dominant socio-cultural ideal for the perfect mother and teacher (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Luttrell, 2020). In *The Stepford Wives*, the vivid portrayal of how white women are murdered and replaced as robots for labor exploitation is shocking to viewers. But even more horrific is the wide-spread, intentional, and systematic process, conveying the terrifying message that this will happen to you!

We utilize feminist and critical human geography theories (Butler, 2011; Lefebvre, 2000; McDowell, 1999; Oberhauser et al., 2017; Rose, 1993) to move the analysis from the private, domestic sphere of the home and into the (more) public sphere of teacher preparation. Like Joanna, we, as teacher educators, see that something is off and seek to dive deeper. Others have also noted a particular archetype of teacher that is disempowered, empty, and in many ways devoid of human-ness (Matias, 2020). Drawing from *The Stepford Wives*, we conceptualize ‘Stepfordization’ as the process through which teacher preparation produces compliant, feminized subjects. Stepfordization operates through space (where, how, and for whom teaching happens), embodiment (what teachers must look and act like), and affect (what teachers must feel and suppress). We work to unveil the

system that is attracting, regulating, and producing subjects aligned with typical gendered, racialized, and classed dispositions. Storytelling through horror allows us to demonstrate that it is no accident that most people who enter and successfully graduate from teacher preparation programs are white, middle-class women.

We present a *Stepford Wives* remix: *The Stepford Teacher*. Our horror story centers on teacher production, illuminating how educators live with (and in some cases belong to) a version of the ‘Men’s Association’, a masculinist system of domination and power (Collins & Bilge, 2016). To set up *The Stepford Teacher*, we first briefly unpack the sociopolitical context in which the film, *The Stepford Wives*, was made, and then the similar historical backdrop of teacher preparation. We then establish our theoretical framework and how we used horror storytelling to write our fictional story. Finally, we analyze teacher preparation as Stepfordization, revealing both the experience (i.e. process) and the resulting teacher subjectivity (i.e. product).

### **Sociopolitical context of the *Stepford Wives* film**

*The Stepford Wives* was released in 1975, during a time of feminist social uprisings across the U.S (Garcia, 1997; Rosenstock, 2022; Silver, 2002). This horror/science fiction film was inspired by Betty Freidan’s landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963), which is often recognized as a major catalyst for feminist organizing (i.e. second wave feminism; Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Rosenstock, 2022). During this period, women activists and scholars organized to fight for equal pay, gender equity, and eradication of sexual harassment and violence among other issues. White, middle-class women were often the majority in mainstream feminist movements. However, women of color and working-class women were also heavily involved in grassroots organizing, and other social movements (e.g. Civil Rights, Chicano movement) to address social inequality across race and class (1977/1997; Garcia, 1997). During the 1970s women used their lived experiences to understand and critique the gendered organization of labor across private and public spaces and social expectations of women’s labor (Garcia, 1997; Rosenstock, 2022). For white, middle-class, suburban women in particular, this form of consciousness-raising mobilized their efforts to disrupt traditional notions of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman, mother, and wife (Chodorow, 1978).

*The Stepford Wives* enters this scene, showing how women’s work, particularly within white, middle-class households, is naturalized as feminine, motherly, and nurturing (Chodorow, 1978; Silver, 2002). Historically constructed, gendered divisions of labor result in women traditionally bearing the brunt of care and housework labor (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) – labor positioned as inferior through underappreciation, invisibility, and a taken-for-granted status (Luttrell, 2020). In short, *The Stepford Wives* leveraged a tumultuous moment of critical social examination and transformation and the resulting intense and exaggerated backlash. It is this gendered backlash that we build upon to create a horror story about how it looks when teacher candidates, expected to be nice, docile teachers, undergo intense backlash when they try to engage in social change and transformation as educators.

## Historical context of teaching in the U.S

Historically, teacher preparation has been intertwined with the social context of women's place in U.S. society. In other words, societal expectations for white affluent women to become good mothers and wives are the same social forces and expectations that shaped teaching and teacher preparation in the U.S (Ogren, 2005). However, teaching didn't start this way. Rather, the interest of recruiting white middle-class women to become teachers was an intentional move.

In the 1850s, American public-school teachers were primarily young, white males who viewed teaching as a stepping-stone to more prestigious professions. However, male teachers were often viewed unfavorably; historian Elsbree (1939) wrote, the school-teacher was a 'rogue, scoundrel, defamer, source, or knave' (as cited in Ogren, 2005, p. 12). In response to public dissatisfaction and a need for more teachers, the field turned to formal training. Men became less inclined to pursue the profession or were moved into managerial roles (e.g. principal or superintendent), facilitating the feminization of teaching (Ogren, 2005).

During the latter half of the 19th century, school reformers defined the skills needed for teachers. White, female teachers became ideal instruments for delivering the 'common school doctrine' to educate all children in becoming good moral citizens (Ogren, 2005). This was in part due to their lower cost (Blount, 1996), but also responsive to a focus on good morality and 'family values' which became central to 'Republican Mothers' calling to raise (white) children to be *good, virtuous* citizens who maintained the status quo (Blount, 1996; Ogren, 2005), and engaged in habits of neatness, order, and thrift (Blount, 1996). Interpreted as 'feminized' work, these expectations and standards for teaching were more seamlessly connected to women, while men were meant for more 'masculinized' labor like school administration, or professions outside of education altogether. While teaching offered some benefits, such as a respected public status, overall, this job track held lower status than male professions. This system kept women from becoming too disgruntled by offering the appearance of social progress. Moreover, teaching became a 'holding ground' or a 'safe activity for women outside the home', until they got married and had children (Kumashiro, 2008, p. 34).

This history traces the development of teacher preparation, through which certain raced, classed, and gendered expectations were built in; a system or process that 'purposely includes certain bodies, namely white middle-class women, while excluding anyone who does not fit' (Reyes and Aronson, 2022, pp. 737–38). This preparation process regulates *who* becomes a teacher (e.g. white, female bodies) through *how* teachers are prepared. Normal schools and teacher preparation programs were established (Labaree, 2004) with predominantly-male administrators overseeing female teachers (Blount, 1996; Ogren, 2005). This training became a way to manage teachers' performance and drew from the perception that white women are innately gentle and obedient, making them more 'moldable and thus open to formal training' (Ogren, 2005, p. 12).

In the mid-twentieth century, schooling was co-constructed alongside white, middle-class mothering (Griffith & Smith, 2005). With the post-World War II economic boom, and a growing white-collar managerial job sector, the need for educating this workforce greatly influenced teaching and mothering. Teachers, then,

became responsible for educating the new middle class. Simultaneously, education at home mirrored and seamlessly connected with the school classroom. Drawing upon the latest education psychology research and best parenting practices, white middle-class teachers and mothers became interconnected in raising and teaching children. Today, mainstream education reflects white, middle-class cultural values and customs (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Luttrell, 2020), which in turn shapes teacher preparation.

From a gender perspective, then, the history of teacher preparation is based on the assumption that women are best suited to teach children. Yet, from a racialized lens, these women must be a white to ensure (white, middle-class) children are educated with the appropriate cultural knowledge and capital. An example of this is when white, affluent women, with formal education, reinforce 'best practices'. Thus, the creation of a formal education path to become a teacher offered a way to make certain that this specific population had access to this profession.

This dynamic, however, is different within the context of urban schools in the U.S. As previously mentioned, the historical construction of the ideal teacher, along with the erasure of scholars' and educators' of color work (Grant et al., 2015), has led to a predominately white, middle-class, female teaching force (Aronson, B., & Meyers, L. 2022). This trajectory resulted in a cultural mismatch between teachers and minoritized students, particularly in schools labeled as 'urban'. In the U.S., the term urban often suggests the racial and class dimensions of students (i.e. Black and Brown, and low-income students; Milner, 2012), rather than a geographical space. Students in urban schools often face inadequate funding and resources – including poor teacher quality, high teacher turnover, limited curricular opportunities, and rigid disciplinary policies (Reyes, G. 2023).

Given the structural inequality in 'urban' schools, and the cultural mismatch between the teacher workforce and students in these spaces, teacher education in the U.S. has some programming to prepare future teachers for the complex reality of these schools. Unfortunately, this is often surface-level and undefined. While 'urban education' within teacher preparation is generally viewed favorably as social-justice oriented, it nonetheless stands apart from traditional teacher preparation programming. Urban teacher education is often organized as an alternative track or a cohort of students who seek social justice education outside the mainstream program (Chu & Wang, 2024). Urban teacher education often requires students to add in extra coursework and experiences. It is from this context that we situate our story.

### **Feminist theorizing on the regulation of bodies through places**

To construct the notion of Stepfordization, we draw upon feminist and critical human geography theory (McDowell, 1999; Puwar, 2004; Rose, 1993) and Butler's (1997) notion of performativity. Each of these theories focus on a different aspect of how gender is constructed, maintained and regulated. For Butler (2011) bodies actively perform and (re)produce gender and gendered spaces through repetitive, citational practices. Feminist critical human geographers brought place centrally into focus, theorizing 'the ways gender is lived in and through bodies, ranging across various scales such as homes, workplaces, cities, regions and nations' (Longhurst & Johnston,

2014, p. 268). Together these theories demonstrate how gender, bodies, and place are interconnected (McDowell, 1999; Puwar, 2004; Rose, 1993). These theoretical lenses call for recognition that spaces are dynamic and never new, but rather reconstructions of past spaces (Banda, R. 2024; Lefebvre, 2000; Rothrock, R. M. 2017). It is for this reason we traced some history as a starting point for understanding how current spaces for teachers serve to regulate bodies.

An example of the link between bodies, identity, culture, and place is the construction of suburban spaces, most clearly defined during the post-World War II era (Griffith & Smith, 2005). During this moment, the suburbs were created as single-family residential spaces located away from compact urban areas. The distance between urban and suburban areas became a geographic buffer, ostensibly ensuring ‘safety’ for white, middle-class women and children, while men commuted into urban spaces for office and managerial jobs. Suburbia became a space to nestle local schools, accessible to white, middle-class children (Griffith & Smith, 2005). A pervasive legacy of this geographic arrangement was the intentional exclusion of families of color from the suburbs, leading to racial and class segregation (including in schools), unequal distribution of resources, and legal systems and public policies that curtailed the rights of people of color (Rothstein, 2014). Hence, the ideal housewife was constructed through the intersections of gender (i.e. female), class (i.e. middle-class), race (i.e. white), place (i.e. suburbs), and power (i.e. access and exclusion; Griffith & Smith, 2005).

In addition to geographic boundaries, spaces are identified as private and public, also serving to regulate identity as certain bodies are viewed as natural to the space (e.g. the housewife in the home or the man in the downtown office). Historically, we see spaces in dialogue with identity, intertwined through performativity and co-construction (Butler, 2011; Rose, 1993). Spaces are not neutral, but rather, normalize which bodies belong within certain spaces and which social roles these bodies should serve. Private and public spaces, then, take on gendered codes and serve to regulate bodies (i.e. private spaces are feminized while public spaces are viewed as masculine).

Over time it became commonly accepted that women are ‘naturally good’ at housework and providing care (Hochschild, 2012), whereas men are not (Luttrell, 2020). Historically, this gendered notion of caregiving was transferred to the teaching profession (Ogren, 2005) as women became viewed as naturally good at teaching children (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Luttrell, 2020). The making and naturalization of the white middle-class mother and teacher, reveals how certain bodies fit and *matter* (Butler, 2011) in feminized, private spaces like the home and classroom. This is part of a larger regulatory process in which spatialized and gendered norms provide external pressure, which are also internalized and naturalized so that bodies themselves also maintain and reproduce these norms. Specifically, individuals internalize expectations of gender in order to be understood by others without question. These gendered reiterative and citational practices structure future actions within spaces, so that a gendered status quo is maintained. In other words, gender is not a social construction that is simply imposed on bodies, rather gender is produced or materialized through bodies and their interactions within spaces as part of a normalizing and coercive process. This theorization of place, space, bodies, and performativity compels us to consider how spaces, such as teacher preparation programs, create identities and how those identities reproduce the space. Through horror

storytelling, we work to uncover the hidden, everyday systems of production, regulation, even domination, that have been historically built into the space of teacher preparation.

### Stepfordization process and the Stepford teacher

In parallel with the Stepford wife, the Stepford teacher is a compliant, passive, white, middle-class, monolingual woman regulated, mind and body. Intellectually, critical thinking is erased and replaced with scripted and specific direction in how to write lessons, teach, and manage students. Bodies are similarly regulated through white, middle-class cultural norms that dictate dress, appearance, and docile mannerisms. Reflecting the white savior trope (Aronson, B. 2017), the Stepford teacher is preoccupied with disciplining students, ‘helping’ them to also become compliant. Translating notions of a good housewife, the Stepford teacher similarly keeps an organized and decorated classroom to make it feel ‘homey’, ‘cute’, and ‘fun’. For this reason, we intentionally use the terminology of teacher *preparation* to describe Stepfordization – a process that is anything but *educating* critical thinkers.

For this manuscript, the focus of our horror story and analysis is on the Stepfordization *process*, or production of a Stepford teacher (i.e. the *product*). Similar to the movie, our narrative centers Jo as the protagonist of the story to reveal the Stepfordization experience. We utilize a character who brings an ‘outsider’ perspective, similar to Joanna in the movie, in order to highlight the process through a disruption. Jo, our protagonist, renders visible the violence that lurks beneath the pastel aesthetics of teacher preparation. Her ‘glitch’ – her hesitation, her refusal to smile, her critical questioning – momentarily ruptures the system, revealing the machinery of Stepfordization at work. A horror story methodology enables us to exaggerate the process as a tool for analysis and point of departure for change.

### Horror storytelling methodology

Our methodological approach of horror storytelling blends creative fiction, cultural critique, and speculative storytelling to render visible the emotional and ideological system of teacher preparation. We term this approach: *Horror Storytelling Methodology*, leveraging horror as an opportunity to highlight societal fears and anxieties through our storytelling, including themes like control, domination, and existentialism (Boruzkowski, 1987). More specifically, horror narratives magnify the impact of social norms and provide cultural analysis through exaggerated, grotesque, and terrifying portrayals. Building upon critical methodologies of drama and theater (Caldas, 2020; Courtney & McGinity, 2021; Gordon, 2008), Horror Storytelling Methodology exposes internalized logics of domination and submission. In *The Stepford Teacher* we use horror to explain how teacher preparation reproduces patterns of control under the guise of care and professionalism.

*The Stepford Wives* served as an allegorical device to inspire our own story of how teacher preparation, as a gendered profession, is connected to larger social constructions of women’s work, gendered divisions of labor, and devaluation of care work (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). This goes beyond mere exploitation or devaluation. *The Stepford Wives* positions white women’s roles in suburbia as part of our

public psyche and understanding of how U.S. society works (Arrow, 2022). While seemingly normal at first glance, the Stepford wife, as the perfect woman, mother, and housewife, translates into something horrifying when the literal meaning of perfection is a machine. As Boruzkowski (1987) explained:

*The Stepford Wives* specifically addresses the changing role of women in contemporary society and apprehensions about technology. The ‘horror’ has its basis in current social and cultural ideologies. The evil is not ‘out there’, but in our culture, our society, our home, our family, and the very beliefs which govern our lives. (p. 3)

Boruzkowski further articulated that the horror film deals ‘with fears which our unconscious mind prefers to repress’ including ‘changing social structures, and loss of control’ which can ‘include loss of control of one’s body, or one’s mind’ (pp. 2–3). It is downright terrifying to see how men in the film justify their actions of murdering women and replacing them with compliant robots.

Horror can also provoke scholarly discussion by analyzing power and control by telling unsettling stories. For example, Derrick Bell’s (1992) *The Space Traders* employed horror within science fiction. He used the readiness of white Americans to sacrifice the Black population to extraterrestrial beings in exchange for wealth and technology to demonstrate how white supremacist ideologies prevail. Whereas Bell’s storytelling attends to the horror of structural racism and social control, *The Stepford Wives* takes up sexism and capitalism as examples of societal forces that similarly curtail agency and autonomy. For this manuscript, we channel horror as a mode of analysis to make sense of teaching and teacher preparation as a deeply gendered, raced, and classed mode of social control. We illuminate this through a reimaged version of the film: *The Stepford Teachers*.

### **Writing ‘the Stepford teacher’**

In writing our story, we referenced key moments from the movie to inspire our story: *The Stepford Teacher*. We used three specific scenes:

- ‘I’ll Just Die’ - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dCx65u6-V4>
- ‘Easy-on Spray Starch’ - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjtM8XhcA-M>
- ‘Discovers the Truth’ - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_0y\\_BGIZSU&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_0y_BGIZSU&t=4s)

To provide the context for *The Stepford Teacher*, we provide a quick summary of each movie scene. In the first scene, Joanna and her husband attend a social gathering shortly after arriving in Stepford. Throughout the gathering, one of the wives is behaving strangely, appearing to malfunction. She keeps repeating, ‘I’ll just die (1975) if I don’t get this recipe’. After witnessing this unfold, Joanna becomes perplexed and worried about the woman.

In the second scene, ‘Easy-on Spray Starch’ (1975), characters Joanna, Bobbie, Charmaine, and the other wives are seated in Joanna’s living room for the first consciousness-raising circle. Initially excited, Joanna and Bobbie are quickly disillusioned and discouraged from the Stepford wives’ preoccupation with housework, and in particular using Easy-on spray starch for ironing their husband’s shirts. The space Joanna had

set up for critical dialogue and empowerment, turned into a housewives' 'help session' on cleaning tips.

Our third scene aligns with the film's 'Discovers the Truth' (1975) scene in which Joanna learns the horrifying truth that Stepford Wives have been replaced with robots. In response to Joanna's discovery, the men work to re-stabilize their system by tricking her into going to the Men's Association, housed in a Victorian mansion, luring her to her own demise. Joanna pleads with Dis, the leader and mastermind, wanting to know why. He replies, 'Because we can. We found a way of doing it and it's just perfect. It's perfect for us and perfect for you'. Joanna desperately runs for her life, but is trapped, ultimately encountering her robot replacement. The scene leaves the viewer assuming Joanna has been overtaken.

### Our Stepford teacher story

For our story, we used Joanna from the film as inspiration to create Jo, the main protagonist. Excited to have transferred into the urban teaching program at Stepford University, Jo's story begins with her first day of class. Jo, a young, white woman from a middle-class family in New York City, is privileged through her race and class social positioning, yet has developed awareness of racialized and classed discrimination through her urban experiences and student activism with a social justice club in high school. We also reference Bobbie, Joanna's friend, to create Dani, the second character for our story. Dani comes from a more segregated, working-class community. She is a light-skinned, multi-racial young woman with a passion to give back to her community once she graduates. Below, we tell our story through three main scenes.

#### Scene 1: arrival at Stepford University

*[Jo walks down the hallway in the education building on her new campus, Stepford University. Joanna thinks to herself]:*

*Jo: 'These classrooms are not as modernized as my last university, but I'm excited I got into their urban education track! Ok, room 312, this should be it . . . "Methods in the Elementary Classroom".'*

*[Jo enters the classroom, scanning for a seat among desks organized in rows. Jo notices her peers all looking the same, with carefully styled blonde hair, similar name brand clothing, and sitting in the same posture. Even their school bags and cell phones were the same, just a different color variation. Jo spots a student looking different from the rest, wearing a hoodie, reminding Jo of her home in Brooklyn. Jo walks up to the empty seat next to the student who looks up to meet Jo's gaze.]*

*Jo[pointing to the seat]: 'Hi! I'm Jo, is it fine if I sit here?'*

*Dani: 'Hi, I'm Dani. Sure, no problem. This is actually my first class. I'm transferring in from Valley Community College.'*

*Jo*: ‘Oh, no way, me too! Well, from Upstate University, I mean. This is my first class too. I’m in the urban education track’.

*Dani*: ‘Oh really? Me too – that’s why I’m here. Well, also my community college offered a scholarship to finish my bachelor’s. But, anyway, urban education is important to me because the schools at home were terrible and none of the teachers cared about us. I want to go back and teach there. I know the students, and I know what it’s like to grow up without . . .’

*Instructor* (interrupts): ‘Hello everyone, it is 8:45, so let’s get started. I’m Mrs. Jennifer Miller, but you can call me Miss Jenn. That’s what my second graders call me! Since this is our first class, I’m going to share about the final project you will be working on to complete by the end of this semester. This course is going to prepare you to teach elementary students, and I have some great resources to share with you. You will love them. But first, let’s talk about the final project. Please take notes.

*[Miss Jenn, who looks similar to Jo’s peers, pauses as students pull out their tablets.]*

*Miss Jenn* [continues with repetition]: ‘This course is going to prepare you to teach elementary students and I have great resources to share with you. You will love them. You are going to love this final project. In this class we will focus on student engagement. For the final, you are going to design a lesson plan for each content area that you can use in any classroom that will engage your students! I know we have some urban education students in this course, but these are best practices for any student, even minorities. What I want to see is that you integrate all the best practices we learn through the semester while also teaching the standards for each content area. In past semesters, I have had really creative students do super fun things like making a vocabulary practice into a jeopardy game or having students compete to see who can complete multiplication questions the fastest’.

*[Students’ hands fly into the air around the room. Miss Jenn calls on a student in the front]*

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Yes, Maddy?’

*Maddy*: ‘How are we going to know what to include in our lesson plans?’

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Oh don’t worry I will give you a template. Yes Madelyn?’

*Madelyn*: ‘I mean student engagement is important, but what if . . .’

*[Another student in the back jumps in to complete Madelyn’s thought]*

*Maddi*: ‘What if the students start getting too excited about a game and don’t focus on learning?’

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Well that’s precisely why we will use our knowledge of best practices and center the standards’.

*[Miss Jenn calls on another student with her hand raised]*

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Yes, Madison?’

*Madison:* 'But what about classroom management? I mean a game ... what if students start talking over each other and get out of control?'

*Miss Jenn:* 'Now remember, there are many options here. You might do something engaging like creating a crossword puzzle for learning vocabulary or a mystery-solving multiplication practice worksheet instead of a game. And if you get stuck, there are some websites with really amazing teacher resources. You will love them'.

*[Jo raises her hand.]*

*Miss Jenn* [eyes lock onto Jo]: 'Yes?'

*Jo:* 'What if we connected the content to students' lives? Like if students thought about how they could use the vocab words to describe things they love about their community, or use math to show injustices through ...'

*Miss Jenn* [interrupts her]: 'Oh, urban ed ... urban ed ... [slight head jerk]. Now I don't recognize you ... have I had you in class before?'

*Jo:* 'Oh, no, I just transferred. I'm Jo and I'm in the urban education track'.

*Miss Jenn:* 'Ah, I see, I knew we had a couple of new urban education students. Well Jo, that's quite interesting, but what we are really trying to do is make sure we meet all the standards so students are on level. But don't worry, I will give you great resources. You will love them'.

*[After class, Jo and Dani exchange puzzled looks in the hallway.]*

*Jo:* 'Hey what did you think about that class?'

*Dani:* 'Not what I was expecting. I liked your idea. We talked a lot about community knowledge at my college'.

*Jo:* 'Thanks! I'm not sure Miss Jenn liked it. I hope we get to do more than make a worksheet or jeopardy game for this class. I want to be a teacher who supports my students in advocating for changes in their communities. We have so many injustices in our society and students I've known want to talk about these issues'.

*Dani:* 'Me too! Well maybe we can do something'.

*Jo:* 'You know, I have an idea!'

*Dani:* 'Yeah?'

*Jo:* 'What if we started a club? A social justice club for teachers. I was in a small group like that at my high school.'

*Dani:* 'That's a great idea, let's do it! We can talk about real issues and come up with ways teachers can work with students and their communities to advocate for neighborhood change. Something that really makes a difference and *truly* engages students!'

*Jo:* 'Sounds great! Let's find out how to make a student org, then post flyers and hold our first meeting next month'.

Dani: 'Yeah, and we can ask Miss Jenn to be our sponsor. I will set up a meeting with her to talk about this!'

## **Scene 2: easy-on worksheets!**

*[Later that semester, Jo convenes the first gathering of the Social Justice Teacher's club. Dani enters the room and sits down next to Jo. Dani's clothing more closely resembles the pastel aesthetic and name brand clothing of her peers, and her hair carefully styled to match the popular wavy hair look.]*

Jo: 'Oh, wow, Dani. You look ... so different. Your hair and ... there's just something about you'.

Dani [smiles]: 'Miss Jenn helped me build my teacher wardrobe'.

Jo: 'Miss Jenn ... ?'

*[Three other teacher preparation students enter and join them on the couches.]*

Jo: 'Hi everyone, I'm so glad you all are here and have interest in how we can advocate for social change as teachers. We are going to start student teaching soon, so I'd like to hear ideas you have for connecting with our students and their communities'.

Madelyn [staring blankly at the wall]: 'Social justice ... social justice ... Extra credit, Miss Jenn said I can get extra credit'.

Jo [looks at her perplexed then turns to the others]: 'Ok ... For example, what are some issues our students may be facing in their communities?'

Maddy [in a monotone voice responds]: 'Yes, extra credit. Miss Jenn. Extra credit. Oh, a fun mystery-solving worksheet'.

*[Jo looks around the room, perplexed, but continues]*

Jo: 'Well, I did some research to learn about the communities our schools are located in, and some ideas that came up for me are food deserts and a lack of access to ... '

Madison [interrupts]: 'We can create a crossword puzzle to teach the standards'.

*[Jo turns to Dani with a confused look]*

Jo: 'Dani, we have talked about some cool ideas for this, do you want to share?'

Dani: 'Yes ... well Miss Jenn showed me some websites ... some websites with really amazing teacher resources. Really amazing teacher resources, you will love them. Teachers share their lesson plans and some really amazing worksheets. You will love them'.

Jo [looks at Dani in disbelief]: 'Websites with worksheets? Dani, we talked about organizing after-school events with families and local businesses ... what happened?'

*Dani* [turns to look directly at Jo and smiles]: ‘You will love them. Teachers share their lesson plans and some really amazing worksheets. You will love them’.

*Jo* [continues staring in disbelief]: ‘Uhhh . . . are you okay?’

### **Scene 3: Jo Discovers the Truth!**

*Jo is walking alone down the empty hallway on the university campus after her day of student teaching when Miss Jenn suddenly appears from around a corner.*

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Urban ed, urban, oh hello Jo. I’m glad I found you’.

*Jo*: ‘Oh, hi Miss Jenn. You were looking for me?’

*Miss Jenn*: ‘I found you. Jo, I want to speak with you about your student teaching. I heard from the principal that you are organizing an after-school program with parents’.

*Jo*: ‘Oh, yeah, it’s going really well, we are planning to hold an event next month!’

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Next month . . . organizing, well, that’s interesting, but what we are really trying to do is make sure we meet all the standards so students are on level’.

*Jo*: ‘Well, students and their families really want more than . . .’

*Miss Jenn* [interrupts]: ‘Oh I have a lovely idea, Jo. My office is just down the hallway. Why don’t you come with me? I want to show you some websites with really amazing teacher resources. Really amazing teacher resources, you will love them’.

*Jo* [with hesitation]: ‘Ok . . . I guess so, but I only have a few minutes to . . .’

*Miss Jenn* [interrupts with a huge smile yet blank gaze]: ‘Don’t worry, everything will be ok soon. It won’t take long’.

*[Jo follows Miss Jenn down the darkening hallway as the sun sets. They arrive at Miss Jenn’s office.]*

*Miss Jenn* [gestures towards the door]: ‘Go right in . . .’

*[Jo starts to panic but slowly walks in. As soon as Jo makes it past the door, Miss Jenn follows and closes the door. Jo stands in the middle of the room feeling frozen. The office is dark with only a small lamp offering some light. Miss Jenn walks up to Jo, still with the blank expression.]*

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Jo, I think you are ready to become a teacher’.

*Jo* [confused]: ‘What do you mean, I thought I was already becoming a teacher. That’s the whole reason I am here’.

*Miss Jenn*: ‘Is it your whole reason? Are you really giving your whole self?’

*Jo*: ‘My whole self?’

*Miss Jenn:* ‘I’ve been observing you, and I know I can help you. Help you give yourself fully into becoming a teacher. It’s time. You don’t need social justice; you don’t need to work with the community. You don’t need to figure out anything for yourself, just follow the state program. It will be so much easier for you this way, and . . . [she pauses, then looks right at Jo] . . . you will get along with your friend Dani again. She gave herself to become a teacher, and now look how much better she is doing . . . I helped her . . .’

*Jo [stunned]:* ‘Wait, what?! What did you do to Dani?!’

*[Miss Jenn walks towards Jo. She grabs her shoulders, clenching her, not letting go. Her smile still intact.]*

*Miss Jenn:* ‘I’ll show you’.

*[Jo, panicking, manages to pull away from Miss Jenn’s grasp, get to the door, open it, and run toward the building exit, but everything seems so foreign. Suddenly Maddie emerges from around a corner.]*

*Maddie [with a smile]:* ‘Jo, let Miss Jenn help you’.

*[Jo backs away and runs a different direction only to run into Madelyn. In horror, Jo turns again, this time running into Maddy.]*

*Jo [screams]:* ‘NO! LEAVE ME ALONE!’

*Maddy [with a big smile yet distant look]:* It’s okay, just go over there’. [Maddy points towards a closet in the hallway. Dani is standing right by the door.]

*Jo:* ‘DANI! HELP ME PLEASE! WHAT IS HAPPENING?!’

*Dani:* ‘It’s ok, just give yourself to become a teacher as Miss Jenn asked.

*[Dani opens the door to reveal a clone of Jo with a blank stare and empty eyes. No pupil, just emptiness. Jo stares, frozen, unable to comprehend.]*

*Jo:* ‘WHAT?! That . . . THAT’S ME!’ No! I don’t want this – I don’t want to be a teacher anymore!

## **The Stepfordization process: analysis**

Through the telling of our own horror story of teacher preparation, we directly link the gendered making of the ‘Stepford wife’ to reveal the similar forces at work to make the ‘Stepford teacher’. We use horror to exaggerate this social phenomenon in order to better examine the gendered system that we, as teacher educators, are surrounded by and that is easily taken-for-granted. We now offer an analysis of each of our scenes.

### **Analysis of scene 1**

In the first scene, Jo and Dani are new students, transferring from other institutions. Both are excited to start the urban education track, hoping to learn how to

meaningfully connect to their future students and their communities. They want to be transformative and teach for social change. However, on their first day of class, they are taken aback by the instructor's superficial approach for lesson planning, making learning *fun* for students, and meeting state standards. They notice how their peers' questions reveal anxiety for compliance and maintaining control of students in their field placements. The instructor targets Jo and notices she is not asking technical questions like her peers. Jo's questions seem 'off script'. The instructor identifies Jo as an urban education student, categorizing her as different from her peers. After class, Jo and Dani process how class went and consider how they can teach for social change. In the story, Dani stands out from the sea of blonde-haired young women who dress and present themselves in a uniform way. Miss Jenn's appearance also looks similar to the PSTs, mirroring the robotization of transmitting not just knowledge, but even gendered bodily dispositions and culture – essentially, Miss Jenn communicates what a teacher should look like, sound like, and be. We crafted this element to highlight the sameness and automatization that comes from the way white young women are pressured by social expectations of femininity (Chodorow, 1978).

### ***Analysis of scene 2***

In the second scene, Jo organizes the first social justice club meeting as a critical-consciousness group. As the meeting progresses, it is revealed that most, if not all, only attended because Miss Jenn offered extra credit. Jo, trying her hardest to inspire her peers to care about social issues, is frustrated by the lack of critical thinking. Rather, the other students want to talk about 'making learning fun' and finding worksheets. Jo is left feeling confused by what is happening around her, as her peers talk and operate in a machine-like way, unable to think or engage in discussion on complex issues. Instead, they show compliance as they regurgitate standardized and scripted curriculum provided to them. Additionally, Dani shows signs that she is striving to fit the Stepford Teacher mold. Her disposition and appearance changed after Miss Jenn helped Dani look more 'teacher-like', changing her hair and clothing style. Here 'teacher-like' serves as code for white femininity which portrays 'niceness' through both demeanor and aesthetic (Authors, 2022; Luttrell, 2020).

### ***Analysis of scene 3***

In the final scene, we find Jo returning to campus after being in a school classroom placement. Miss Jenn mysteriously appears, apparently having sought her out. Miss Jenn suggests that she has been in communication with her host teacher and the school's principal and that they are displeased with Jo's practices which are disrupting the status quo. Our scene culminates into Jo's horrifying realization that something is completely wrong at the university. Miss Jenn draws Jo into her office and begins convincing, even seducing, her to give into becoming a Stepford teacher. Miss Jenn's eerie and suspicious behavior frightens Jo, and her immediate reaction is to run away. Yet, rather than escaping,

the situation gets worse and even more terrifying as the campus hallways become maze-like. Finally, Jo comes to her transformed friend, Dani, who reveals Jo's robot replacement.

This part of our story parallels the final scene of *The Stepford Wives*, as already described. These parallel scenes symbolize how women, and in our story teachers, cannot escape the structure in which they are being produced. It is important to note that the gendered, historical foundation of teacher preparation is not separate from the rest of U.S. society, rather it is an extension of how white, middle-class women are socialized through racialized, and even sexualized, expectations of femininity. Using our theoretical framing, we see the production and regulation of gendered bodies is supported through particular spaces and systems and, in turn, individuals maintain the spaces through alignment and enactment of these norms. That is, patriarchal structures are most effective when women, like Miss Jenn, take up the role of perpetuating normed societal scripts, such as the gendered, classed, raced, sexualized teacher prototype: the Stepford teacher. Teacher preparation is embedded within societal structures, and the true horror is in wondering whether anyone can escape these deeply entrenched systems.

### Stepfordization through teacher preparation

We use horror, feminist and critical human geography theory, and historical context, to reveal a deep-seated problem in teacher preparation. As education scholars and practitioners, we constantly emphasize that most teachers are white middle-class women (Luttrell, 2020), but rarely do we ask why. Here, we draw from an interdisciplinary, horror methodology to help us step outside the field of teacher education to critically examine why we continue to see a particular demographic within our teaching force and how this may be woven into the very structure of preparation programs. Through the literature and history of teacher education, we show how the ideal teacher is a white, middle-class monolingual, suburban woman. This ideal teacher creates a classroom that serves as an extension of the suburban home.

She makes learning 'fun' for what is assumed to be a homogenous group of students (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Luttrell, 2020). *But what happens when teacher candidates don't immediately fit this ideal?* Our horror story exaggerates the process of teacher preparation, or in this case the regulation of bodies, to produce the ideal Stepford teacher.

Our story centers on Jo, a critically conscious young woman, committed to social justice, excited to become a teacher and work with students from all backgrounds. As the story progresses, Jo's agency, identity, and critical thought is devalued, sidelined, and eventually crushed as she increasingly faces the pressure to conform into a Stepford teacher. Jo's race, class, and gender identities positioned her in close proximity with becoming a compliant Stepford teacher. However, her critical consciousness and drive to take ownership of her education made her an outlier of the typical societal expectations and processing of white middle-class women (Griffith & Smith, 2005). Instead of being embraced by Miss Jenn and finding space in the curriculum, Jo was forced into a regulatory teacher preparation program that enforces social expectations of white middle-class femininity and docility. Yet, Jo continued to resist and question the education she was experiencing, which ultimately led to her tragic end. At the end of the story, no matter how much Jo tried to run away and escape from the violent process, she faced her inevitable demise.

Dani, a multiracial woman on the other hand, embarked on a different path early on in the story. While she initially came into the university and teacher preparation program with the same enthusiasm and commitment to social justice as Jo, Dani quickly conformed to the expectations of her professor and the program. Dani began carrying herself and dressing like the rest of her peers to align with white feminine norms, and her initial passion in social justice teaching turned into compliance. Perhaps Dani chose this path or she was turned into a robot, but whether she conformed willingly or was forced is not apparent. We intentionally left this unclear to show that while individuals may choose to fit in and conform to a set of expectations, these choices can happen within certain limitations. Although Dani was not white, she may have adopted the demeanor, style, and expression of her white female peers to fit into a race-class-gendered Stepford teacher ideal, perhaps out of survival.

Drawing upon Butler (1997), we recognize societal norms and hierarchies can be forced, which was the case for Jo, however, domination does not always require direct force. Rather, those subjected, in this case, Dani, may also buy in or align with dominant norms and expectations (whether consciously or subconsciously). This enables the subject to avoid the pressure of standing out or pushing against normalizing structures which can lead to more overt disciplinary action or punishment. Assuming that Dani was not turned into a robot, had she continued on a path similar to Jo, she would have also met direct force. Additionally, Dani not only conformed to become a Stepford teacher, but she was also complicit in the regulatory process of forcing Jo to become a Stepford teacher.

Dani and Miss Jenn, demonstrate how the Stepford teacher herself also becomes a piece of this regulatory system, maintaining the societal status quo and systems of power, through embodiment and buy-in of the Stepford process. This reveals a sort of hegemonic, self-regulation amongst white women teachers, who may also be fulfilling societal expectations as wives and mothers. Such subtle coercion is truly the stuff of horror stories.

Our horror story also dislodges the taken-for-granted reality of teacher education to emphasize how it is part of the normed life trajectory and societal expectations of white femininity. While *The Stepford Wives* horror film exaggerates the processing of white women to become the ideal and subservient wives and mothers, this horror story device seamlessly connects white femininity with the journey and expectations of becoming a teacher. In other words, the Stepfordization process is not something that exists in a vacuum that only happens to those who go into teacher preparation, but rather it is part of the overall subjectification of white middle-class women. It's creepy to think that teaching is made for a certain population, yet it also seeks to reproduce the disposition of this population onto others like Dani, who doesn't quite fit, but nonetheless contorts into this ideal.

But why is considering race, gender, and class in teacher preparation important? First, from a critical human geography lens, it is hard for people of color, men, working-class individuals, or queer identities to become teachers when teacher preparation is not meant for them. This reality connects to initiatives to diversify the teacher workforce (Holbert et al., 2025), and create teacher pipelines to bring students of color into the teaching profession (Agiro et al., 2024). However, if teacher preparation is shaped for white middle-class women, then how do we expect other bodies and identities to connect

with this experience? This emphasizes the need for teacher education, itself, to be changed so that bodies are not pressured or pushed out.

Additionally, the trajectory of getting into higher education serves the Stepford teacher process by sorting and excluding anyone who doesn't have the ability or interest to continue post-secondary education. Historically, institutions of higher education serve as an initial sorting mechanism. Most mainstream teacher education programs are housed within four-year institutions, so if young women are funneling right into these teacher preparation programs while others are already excluded, then it is easier to regulate that space into the Stepfordization process. This ensures a seamless route for the same population of people to become teachers.

The Stepford teacher process also reveals how social justice efforts and structural changes in education and teaching are faced with fierce opposition and resistance. Major policy decisions like the *No Child Left Behind*, scripted teacher curriculum, and high stakes testing also regulate and control teachers' agency to ensure that schools uphold the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). In our story, we also show how mainstream teacher preparation is preserved by sidelining social justice education to the periphery – an extra-credit club. Additionally, Jo is pushed to abide by state mandates when Miss Jenn tells her that she does not need to work in community or think for herself. When teachers are forced to be prescriptive, social justice stays as an alternative space, positioning social justice as unimportant, and leaving mainstream teacher preparation intact. Feminist and critical human geography helps us see that the regulation of teachers is not accidental, and any change in education is met with backlash or co-optation.

## Conclusion

We position the horror story, *The Stepford Teacher*, as a revealing, unsettling tale and call for further discussion and analysis. We brought together feminist theories, critical human geography, horror storytelling methodology, a film with social commentary, and teacher education history in order to dislodge teacher education and examine its origins, trajectory, and current status. This, however, is only a start. More interdisciplinary approaches are needed to deeply examine teaching from a race-class-gender lens (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Such intersectional analysis is necessary to directly unveil systems of power in education, as well as identities that differentially occupy positions of authority in education, like teachers and administrators.

As education scholars and practitioners, we need to name the intentionality of Stepfordization, and we need to challenge and change the very core structures of teacher education. We must move away from teacher regulation, and continue working towards radical, and foundational shifts toward a liberating teacher education. We don't simply want to *prepare* teachers, we want to facilitate *education* toward critical intellectualism. To reconfigure mainstream teacher education, we must also begin with ourselves as teacher educators and scholars and not take for granted the standardized, raced, classed, and gendered systems in which we operate.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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