

# The Other Side of Silence

## The Look of Separation

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*Silence...*

- *is golden*
- *has the loudest voice*
- *is the most powerful scream*
- *is an answer to anger*
- *is also speech*
- *is a weapon*
- *is the space in-between*
- *is a counter narrative*
- *Rhetorical silence...*
- *is a concealed narrative*
- *is dialogue in examination*
- *is a response to uncertainty*
- *is an influential practice*
- *is speech's parallel dimension*
- *is the art of tone and timing*
- *speaks in hushed tunes*
- *is a communicative tool*

**A**S A NEWLY MINTED tenure-track faculty member I had been asked to serve on a search committee to fill a departmental vacancy at a private university in the South. The committee was charged with the responsibility of completing the initial paper screenings, phone interviews, and arranging the timelines for the onsite interviews of qualified candidates. We met routinely to discuss the merits and shortcomings of the various applicants based on their submitted packets. After narrowing the pool of candidates, based on their paper proxies, the committee arranged phone interviews with a select number of qualified applicants. At this point the process took, what I believe to be, an interesting turn. No longer simply a set of neatly stapled sheets of paper,

the candidates were now *voiced* selves. A level of cognitive awareness had replaced the vagueness of impersonality. Perceptions, interpretations, assumptions, and experiential expectations were brought into play by the insertion of voice.

Voice also prompted theoretical and philosophical connections made through the interpretation of situational intonations, insinuations, references, and the appropriate use of idiomatic expressions. Listening just below the noise (LeClaire, 2009) of the formality of search committee business and amidst the din of diverse professional voices, I discovered what I believed to be a line of association based in similar research interests, experiential correlations and philosophical associations with one of the applicants. The revealed points of entry created the possibility to make a professional and personal connection. Through the connection, prompted by voice, we dared to bridge the divide of initial human contact-- contact often characterized by uncertainty, awkwardness, anxiety, ignorance, and silent observation. Instead, we made the decision to push past the awkward phase often associated with the process of establishing a new association. We agreed to continue to create the space necessary to further develop the fledgling professional conversation.

Time constraints, the dailiness of life, and distance moved the conversation to the back and forth of emails. Once under the obscurity of cyberspace, the relationship was once again defined as unvoiced and impersonal. As our personal voices had been silenced, the written word became the privileged format of communication. The written word, a standardized tool of association, implies the use of universally accepted social, professional, and communicative norms. The set of norms, when applied to representatives of the tower of academe, also implies taken-for-granted, or common, experiential, educative, professional, as well as cultural experiences. The communicative expectations were met online and the professional relationship was provided the requisite space to continue its development. Despite the silencing of voices and a level of anonymity characterized by online communication, an excitement about our professional connection ensued. We worked diligently, over time, to understand one another's professionally situated experience. Our jointly crafted professional dialogue helped us to develop a common academic vocabulary which we used to explore research questions, theories, methodologies, and possible publication agendas. An appreciation of our individually situated research expertise and perceived personal value helped us to envision a number of possible outcomes which would serve to jointly enhance our professional careers. We had begun to develop a mutual level of respect based in our combined and assumed professional capital.

A few months after the initial phone interview session, I attended a professional conference. After receiving my registration packet, I began to search through the conference program to highlight sessions of interest. I was pleasantly surprised to discover the name of the applicant with whom I had developed a recent professional connection. I arrived at the assigned room as the session chair was completing the introductions and explaining the timing format. I now had a face to match the name and the voice.

At the end of the session I made my way to the front of the room where I introduced myself to the voice and the physical embodiment of the recently made professional connection. And without warning I stood on the receiving end of - *the look!* The possibility of connection, a bond, of philosophical and theoretical ties had, in an instant, been betrayed by *the look!* The look of dualistic surprise; the look of duplicity betrayed the liability and constraints of language and understanding. When confronted with a narrative that runs counter to dominant culture standards, the look speaks volumes and breaks the silence without the utterance of a word. Just below the look was a desperate search for words of camouflage and graceful retreat!

It is a look that African Americans cannot substantiate or authenticate, but are able to recognize and categorize immediately. It is a look that conveys a message of splintered racial astonishment and fractured cultural misalignment. It is a look that can be classified and interpreted as a racial microaggression (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2010); a non-verbal or non-voiced assault based in an assumption of negative, or deficit minority value, ability, and perceived intellect. This mini-assault, despite being statistically unconfirmed and unverified, prompted in me a series concerns and questions related to the double consciousness, and at times tri-dimensional reality (Grant, 1989) of my life experiences. Weighed against the grand narrative of minority value in a racialized society, I had come up short. The representation of two distinct realities occupied by one vastly different-than-expected individual in-the-flesh had created a schism of perception in the mind of this new academic acquaintance. The body language, the silence abbreviated by a number of blinks in rapid succession, and the too-quick, yet shallow smile, said what a sudden lack of shared language had not been able to do. The ability to bridge the gap between my anticipated professional, assumed racial membership and the face-to-face counter reality proved too difficult a task during this, instantaneous and impromptu introduction.

We had moved from connection based in a shared understanding of the invisible and silent structures of language and professionally-based literacy into separation constructed through years of silent and invisible social structures. The reality of my physical presence had broken the silence and highlighted a lack of desire to use a commonly-crafted language through which we could discuss the racial giant in the room. Our meeting, the joint occupation of a single space from distinct racial standpoints had created a professionally and personally uncomfortable situation. The polite small talk spoke life to the meaning of the silence just below the surface. Audre Lorde (1984) points out that the “transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (p. 42). Had our silently framed association turned dangerous in light of my revealed racial membership, or was I simply taller/shorter in person? In the midst of what was now an uncomfortable cross-cultural situation, I remember the confusion of trying to decide if I should confront or disregard, rescue or abandon, dignify or disguise, dismiss or discuss. I was torn, angry, and most of all hurt. At the same time I also wondered if my acquaintance felt the same level of cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-professional connective angst. Or, as Lorde suggests, was this another example when “oppressed people are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity” (p. 132). In the instant of questioning my instincts, second-guessing my next move, and nonetheless, acknowledging my human desire for connection, I lost my ability to connect genuinely with self and in turn my ability to connect authentically with other, “we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other” (p.44). As we stood there surrounded by the discomfort of a silence broken, I recognized that this moment likely signaled the end of our young professional association. The anonymity of technology had provided an escape that the face-to-face reality could not tolerate or sustain. We would not be able to *unring the bell* which had signaled the change of course to cross-racial misunderstanding and cross-cultural misinterpretation, and cross-technological distrust.

However uncomfortable and dangerously revealing this moment was for two racially diverse faculty members, there is a greater danger--the ever-present danger that this scenario is repeated on a daily basis in classrooms across the country. Teachers remain the single most important and powerful factor in the education of students. The danger of contrived negative subjectivity imposed by the lack of professional objectivity in the classroom and in interactions with the family members of students is frightening. Without an innate desire or language to

facilitate possible cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-technological connections and understandings, how are we to ever eradicate the stunned silence and microaggressive power of a disparaging *look*? If *the teacher look*, a look that has historically been used as a behavior modification tool, is reconfigured and reconceptualized to convey messages of deficit expectations from minority students, what will be the effect on the performance and outcomes of that same student population? If insufficiency and devalued capacity lie just below the surface of silence and racialized vision, what will continue to be the level of cultural dissonance in the classroom? If membership in minority communities is viewed as lacking in value and cultural capital, how will the development of culturally situated pedagogical practices, designed to enhance academic and personal achievement, ever develop? How will the profession come to know and incorporate culturally-based, pedagogical practices designed to elevate learning outcomes across cultures. Might *the look* continue to exact a price of lost opportunities to extend opportunities for cultural, racial, gendered, and social understanding? How do educational scholars and practitioners objectively weigh the divergent cultural merits and reconfigure perceived demerits to positively engender minority student outcome? What role might the cultural perceptions held by African American and White American female teachers play in the reconceptualization of the use of education as an authentic social justice tool? As Joan Martin (1993) asks in her article entitled, *The Notion of Difference for Emerging Womanist Ethics*, “can a notion of difference be instrumental in the dismantling of oppressive and exploitative discursive structures” (p.41). Without question, cultural misunderstandings, which cause the initiation of cross-cultural silences, exact a price paid through lost opportunities for human connection, social justice potentialities, and social transformation possibilities.

### **Autobiographical Roots: I Am From Othered Community Possibilities**

The passion for my inquiry is rooted in the acknowledgement of the negative cross-cultural look. It is presented as a counter story of positivity, affirmation, success and achievement shaped while growing up as a member of a segregated majority-minority community. My story runs counter to the narrative which presents minority communities, and the individuals who emerge triumphantly from them as rife with despair, hopelessness, and misery. This is a story of difference which highlights a proud, rich, and supportive cultural heritage. My interest and my purpose in examining the complexities of my jump rope community and the use of silence as a strategic tool of survival is grounded in the conceptualized theoretical competencies of African American women’s daily lives. It originates from the varied intersections and consciousnesses of my personal and professional life experiences. Each entity, the status of cultural community, gendered minority perceptions, and silenced standard forms of coming to know is worthy of a singular, and focused philosophical examination. However, each of these disparate entities combine to shape a complicated, complex, contradictory, and contested story based in the life experiences of a single individual. This story is not shared in an attempt to create an-othered set of master narratives (Romero, 1999) as told from “the” African American woman perspective. My story is a counter story that exists in-between.

This inquiry serves as an invitation to connect, understand, and prevent *the look* which supplants the establishment and use of a cross-cultural language and in the creation of pedagogical strategies in the educational environment designed to connect and unite. To teach students of color, researchers and practitioners need devise pedagogical methods to *unbank the*

*fire* (Hale, 1994) of praxis and position minority students, their communities, and their culture based literacies (Kinloch, 2012; also see Darling-Hammond 2010; Greene, 2000). We also need to recognize that “it is not the difference [but the silence] which immobilizes us” (Lorde, 1984, p. 44). I hope that my inquiry into the silenced counter narrative will add to the growing body of work to end the practice of operating from a mindset of diminished educational expectations for minority students.

I draw upon the research heritage of cultural community, strategic silence, and gendered-minority triumph. I also draw from a wide array of works such as the valuation of minority-cultured home and community literacy of (Heath, 1983; Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2001); the research into the affirmation of minority community funds of knowledge by (Moll, 1994; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005); Siddle-Walker, 2004; hooks, 2003; Hill, 2011); critical and community literacy theory (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1987; Heath, 1983; Ong, 2002; Shor, 1992, 1999; Tatum, 1997; Wink, 2004; Hill, 2011; Kinloch, 2009, 2011, 2012); feminism without borders (Mohanty, 2003; also hooks, 2000); Lorde, 1984); and the positioning of the student at the center of learning (Hale, 1994; Compton-Lilly, 2004); Kinloch, 2009, 2011, 2012); the social responsibility of teachers in a diverse society (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007); and perspectives on the varied uses of silence and listening (Saville-Troike & Tannen, 1985; Hedges & Fishkin, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Schultz, 2003). Hopefully, this inquiry will provide the space necessary for researchers, teacher educators, and teachers to discover that they are the *same kind of different as me* (Hall, Moore, & Vincent, 2006).

There is a more subtle dynamic than similarity when groups withdraw from the majority and hang out together, and this is the pleasure of differing among themselves. It is true that social scientists can predict much of what each of us is likely to think or do from a set of descriptors - age, gender, class, ethnicity, and background- but there is a core that is distinctive and individual for every person. That core of individuality shines out when I am with others who are similar but not the same. Ironically, we seek out similarity to discover and celebrate uniqueness (Bateson, 2000, p. 8.)

I am from concurrence and juxtaposition - not yet arrived and from here by way of there. I am an example of a life lived out in variance, divergence, and from a counter stance. I am from distinction defined by legalized segregation, then offered desegregation, and finally the one-sided, unfulfilled promises of integration. My life has been framed by the multiplicity of potentialities and the singularity of exceeding anticipated probabilities. I have achieved against and as a result of expectation. Living in offset, carved-out spaces and places *in-between* (He, 2003, 2010; He, Scott-Simmons, Haynes, & Tennial, 2010), creates a uniquely synergistic reality which uses tension to maintain a level of existent honesty. I am from a space created by the intersection of dominant culture individuality and *jump rope community* collectivity (Scott-Simmons, 2007, 2008). I subsist and exist in a world framed by duality – despite yet because, without yet of, denied yet triumphant, silenced yet voiced. I am from just below the sight line of racial invisibility, beyond the veil (DuBois, 1903) and above the fault line of racial disparagement. I am from silence, not merely as the converse of noise; listening not merely as the opposite of speech; and visibility not merely as the reverse of invisibility. I am from an *othered* realm of possibility; a space fed by and through watching and listening, listening and watching to learn; a space carved in-between which encourages contemplation, awareness, and strategic endurance. My life, as African American, woman, integrator, educator, and faculty member represents the embodiment of a storied life and life lived *as* story. My narrative, as an educator of educators, is grounded in and extends the possibilities for curricular change through

an exploration of counter and paradoxical connections of self with others and others within self. My narrative begins with the examination into the resilient strength of cultural community--jump rope community (Scott-Simmons, 2007, 2008) in motion.

I was raised in a jump rope community (Scott-Simmons, 2007, 2008) – metaphorically characterized by the coordinated, united, and synchronicity of a jump rope session. Despite the use of metaphor to elicit a more tangible image, alternatively described as *phantasmatic* by Lois Weis (2008), my home community was not “an imagined political community” (Anderson, 1991) afforded the rights of nationalistic, or cultural, sovereignty and individual autonomy. This community, structured along class and racial lines, “organizes the social, cultural, and material world in exceptionally powerful ways” and “has its roots in economic realities, individuals and collectivities [which] create and live class in response to such realities” (Weis, 2008, p. 2). While perhaps a *phantasmatic* apparition, in the pre-Civil Rights political climate, the legalized segregationist restrictions (personal, economic, geographic, educational, and societal) of the time definitely played a role in shaping and maintaining our *othered* community. Despite the racial basis, the cultural divergence, and the societal segregation, the jump ropes continued to turn in our community and we learned to use it to create spaces for divergent self-expression within the established and constricting boundaries of exclusive difference. This is a narrative exploration into the spaces and places in-between the ropes that tie, bind, and convey messages of determination as they pass overhead.

### *Tap-whoosh-tap, tap-whoosh-tap, tap-whoosh-tap*

Jumping rope to jump rope rhymes was a popular pastime on the streets and in the side alleys during my childhood. The *tap-whoosh-tap, tap-whoosh-tap, tap-whoosh-tap* sound of the ropes hitting the ground and then cutting through the air transmits a rhythm that could evoke an unconscious sway of the body or a head nod based in experiential familiarity. *Tap-whoosh-tap, tap-whoosh-tap*, the sound and beat of the ropes as well as the lyrical messages of the jump rope rhymes possess the power to draw smiles of recognition and nods of understanding. They cause fingers to snap – *tap-whoosh-tap* – and a recitation of the accompanying rhymes by any passers-by connected to and cognizant of the message of unity gained through shared struggle. Rope-turn to rope-turn, jump-step to jump-step, and generation to generation, messages of resistance and survival were passed in the rhymes and the syncopation of the jumping steps.

Jumping rope, more specifically Double Dutch, is a community endeavor in microcosm. A successful jump rope session requires coordination among the members, an understanding of expected roles, and the call and response interplay of a common language – found and conveyed in the jump rope rhymes. Jumping Double Dutch is the coordinated movement of two opposing ropes turned by the individual expression of two different *enders*, or rope *turners*. The pair of *enders* must be willing to establish and maintain the coordinated beat and rhythm of the whirling ropes. The *enders*, to the untrained and unaccustomed eye, appear to be operating in tandem. They turn the double ropes to a rhythm in a precise motion so that one rope hits the ground just as the other hits its upward peak. The joint, yet conflicting motion, when operated correctly, appears effortless. Upon closer examination you are able to discern the unique and individual styles of the *enders*; a bob of the head on the upbeat, a shake of the hips on the downbeat, a tap of the right foot – switching of the left from side to side, smile or scowl and the synchronized popping of chewing gum to the rhythm of the ropes. There is independence within the

codependence; diversity within the unity; and a widening of the narrow space between the ropes to allow for the creation of an expansive yet interdependent sense of community.

The jumper, whose main focus is the rope, appears to be unaware of the enders' presence. She is engrossed in her own world amidst the session – concentrating on the ropes, arms swaying back and forth, lower body poised, searching for the creation of her own personal space between the passing ropes. With a more critical eye, you are able to see that even in her concentration on the task at hand – the smooth entry between the turning ropes - she must be tuned into the rhythm and the tempo established by the enders; possessive of a level of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) in order to succeed. Without this awareness, without this ability to function in and attend to both worlds, her success is unattainable, improbable. Seeing a space in which to claim self between the ropes, the jumper dives in and matches personal rhythm to communal expectations.

The action of jumping takes over; initially slow, then fast, with hops, spins on one foot, skipping, and touching the ground to match an improvised pace. Everything about Double Dutch runs counter to simplicity and normality and yet it is simple in its complexity. Apparent unrelated tasks are united in the hope for group success – solitary focus supported by group manifestations. Double Dutch works as an example of counter balance in motion. Double Dutch is unity within the frenzy. It is simple in its very complexity; static in its continual flow. It is the “challenge of the speed and the ropes that [you] jump for. It was all in fun, but deadly serious at the same time” (Draper, 2002, p. 33). It is a social system in microcosm.

Every team member is aware of their responsibilities and knows the importance of their position in the overall game. The overall objective is teamwork and solidarity while permitting and respecting the individuality of style, the power of persistence, and the determination to claim a place based on uniquely developed prowess, as well as silently observed and claimed abilities. Successful participation conveys an understanding that you can do and be something that not everyone can manage. There is power in the awareness of complexity conquered.

...there is no better symbol of girl power than Double Dutch...The strength of each girl is not just in her obvious athletic ability as she does hand-spins or spins while still jumping, but also in the support she gives others. No one can get good at Double Dutch working alone. You learn from your sisters, you grow with the help of your sisters, and you teach and encourage your friends. This is a lesson that clearly must remain with each girl in her life beyond the days of Double Dutch. (Chambers, 2002, p. 6)

The complexity of this child's game represents, in general the complexity of a people, and in particular the women who work to support the community. To the untrained observer, and based purely on race and racial perceptions, there exists a designation of simplicity, transparency, and inconsequentiality. To those unaccustomed to the intricacies of the African American culture and its members, the union of choreographed moves is all that is seen, a commonality based on perceived coordinated efforts. To the careful and concerned observer, just as with the Double Dutch participants, there is so much more to be seen just below the surface of the superficial. The lilt of the voice, the bodily mannerisms, the artistry of the movement, and the creativity of unique verbal and bodily expressions belie the complexity of the session. Cornel West (1989) describes this as *kinetic orality*, a way of coming to know, of gaining knowledge through the connection of body and word. African Americans, and their incubated jump rope

communities, are simple only in the consistency of their complexity and the counter of their shared story of survival.

Jump Rope communities existed as populations segregated by physical, social, geographic, and resourced boundaries. While segregation had meant *less than* in terms of material resources and access to the culture of power, it meant *more than* enough in terms of support, familiarity and all that was needed for survival. Toni Morrison (1992) describes this othered communal existence in her book, *Jazz*.

... because everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox, (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper, vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable. (Morrison, 1992, p. 10)

My community was filled with stay-at-home moms who collectively watched, listened, and learned to raise the children of the segregated village. Smitty's was the barbershop. This was where the men gathered to discuss the passing of time, passing of lives, flickering dreams and long gone hopes. Pam's was the main beauty shop where the women met to enjoy a bit of female fellowship, away from the men. Couch's Corner Store sold penny candy, wax lips, dill pickles from the barrel and was the children's haven of treats and sweet smells. The one funeral parlor in town, Edmondson's, was where many were dressed for their final rest. Next door, Mrs. Sadler, the neighborhood and school music teacher, gave piano lessons in her home. There was also the small post office that was situated on the first floor of a local store.

The row homes, on my street were grouped in six home sections. They formed an extended L-shape that bordered the community playground. A creek, which lay just beyond the playground, formed the outer boundary of the neighborhood. The kitchen windows of each home faced the playground. The children of the community were well aware of the fact that every move, by every child occurred under the watchful gaze of the *Window Queens*. The Window Queens, community matriarchs, doled out reprimands and punishments for behavioral infractions from their windowed thrones. Blood relationships need not exist for sentences to be handed down. Behavior was shaped with love, genuine concern, and a cultural ethic of care (Siddle Walker, 2004). Mutual respect, pride in the self and lack of need or desire to create an-*other* supported positive identity development. We had yet to experience what Britzman describes as "identificatory thinking" (Britzman, 1998, p. 31). Our egos had yet to come under assault by a separate *other culture, other ethnic, other racial*, and counter societal standard. Our learning was communal, cultural, ethnic and racially based, and as such lacked any paradox caused by an awareness of a failure to be defined based on an-other set of experiential standards. Growing up under this ethic of care and concern provided fertile ground for courage, risk, resilience, and achievement to become internalized and common characteristics.

The internalization of positive identities, used to meet expectations of educational achievement, began at home and continued at our community elementary school. The school stood at the heart of the 1.4 square miles that was designated as my segregated jump rope community. This was the only school on our side of town. It was, however, more than a neighborhood school. Along with the volunteer fire house, the local polling site, it served as the community's main refuge; the central gathering location for cultural and social entertainment.

This school was our version of what Marc Lamont Hill (2011) describes as a *counterpublic*. This was a central location for May Day celebrations, track meets, community bar-be-cues, black top ball games, book fairs, and the establishment of a community literacy which was used to seamlessly transfer strategies for resistance and survival from member to member and generation to generation. We learned, in and around the small school, to read the word and to feel secure in the community's expectations of success and achievement. We learned to accept and extend the mantle of community pride and to develop strategies which would ensure marginalized community survival.

The teachers were neighbors, friends and even family members. Many had fled to this and other segregated jump rope communities, following the mass dismissals of Negro teachers in the wake of Brown and desegregation, in order to continue the art and passion of teaching. The school was a second home not only to us as students but also to our teachers. These were women and men who possessed the characteristics of dreamkeeper (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and cultural caregiver. Vanessa Siddle-Walker (2004) describes this ethic of care as possessive of "a strong emphasis on responsibility, commitment, and a parentlike morality" (p. 16). These dreamkeepers accepted the dual responsibility for not only knowing the dreams and history of our culture, but also transferring that knowledge from the previous generations to our generation.

The playgrounds, school yards, and side streets served as extensions of the classroom as we sang, explored, and cemented our lessons in the repeated jump rope rhymes and chants. The jump rope rhymes, in turn, were used by our teachers to support our academic development.

*Here comes teacher -  
Better think quick!  
Now it's time for arithmetic  
1 and 1 are 2  
2 and 2 are 4  
3 and 3 are 6  
4 and 4 are 8*

The safety and security of our community, as well as the support we received on a daily basis from family and teachers, left us free to examine the material in a context that encouraged discovery and expression of self. We learned through culturally-situated lessons and made promises to do our community proud. In this way we had created a re-imagination of curriculum from the perspective of, for, and by *the other*. In our segregated school building, the brick and mortar space which served as our neighborhood *counterpublic*, we witnessed the re-forging of student-teacher, teacher-teacher, and teacher-family connections; thereby re-framing curricular possibilities that are *culturally organized and socially enacted* (Dyson & Genishi, p. 91) and transforming classroom environments through a reconceptualization of universally accepted pedagogical practices.

My story of the *jump rope community* counters to the negativity which characterizes the grand and stock narrative of minority communities. It is a counter story to the discourse of racial failure, submission, and inferiority. I encourage educators to consider the limiting yet limitless method of using culturally linguistic practices in order to interrogate the valuation and devaluation of community histories; the circumstantial and circumvented use of divergent life and literacy experiences; and the motioned and motionless manner of critiquing cultural communicative systems created by diverse populations. I hope that researchers will be able to

interrogate methods of transforming teacher education programs and the pedagogical practices of educators. Innovative practices are envisioned through the use of a *Freirean cultural circle*; the development of social literacy capital and social survival strategies built upon the daily power inherent in conversation, dialogue, questioning, and culturally compassionate caring within the community.

This may mean taking a step back in order to move forward. However, the value of experiential knowledge to be found in the minority community may be well worth the backwards steps for practitioners seeking to reconceptualize culturally-based curricular strategies. Minorities are accustomed to the unjust math of forward social momentum – taking three steps forward before being forced to take two steps back. Knowledge and experience gained through reflective retrieval and silenced observations have been survival strategies of the minority communities for generations.

### **Moving Back, Moving Forward: Silent and Fringed Observation**

The *Sankofa* is a mythical bird that moves its body through space with focused forward momentum while the head and gaze remain fixed on its previously traveled path. It moves through space and time with a cloaked silence that facilitates unobserved surveillance and thoughtful reflection. The bird recognizes the power of transformation that is possible through reflection and the reevaluation of knowledge gained. The *Sankofa* bird embodies the possibilities inherent in examining the contradiction of forward motion aligned with reflective introspection. This symbolic creature represents the contradictory, yet entwined negotiation, the back and forth, of the story of self.

African American women, jumping back while looking forward, are at the culture's core of the community. They silently and diligently do the work necessary to move themselves, their families, and the race forward while looking back for new insights with a watchful and reflective gaze. Jacqueline Jones (1995) describes the work of African American women as a triple duty; caring for the home, the man, and the family. They represent the complex intersectional embodiments of race, gender, and class; the tri-dimensional figure. The task of maintaining trilaterally shaped identities adds to the development of survival strategies based in layer upon layer of determined resistance. Resultant strategies for survival and success are shaped by and through the power of silent observation as members of the *othered* community. This process of observation, from the fringes, recognizes the power of going back to retrieve past *awarenesses* while moving forward to add to individual and community expertise.

Adding to the cultural capital of the community has always been an expectation for the women in my family. These are women who have been characterized as authoritative, driven, cunning, and silently relentless. Their collective narrative is a profile in the use of silence as a tool of speech, self-determination, and collective transformation. Individually, the story, or narrative, of my maternal grandmother was one of taking personal steps backward in order to help her family take collective steps forward. These were, and continue to be women, who willingly add their unique ingredients to the collective recipe of segregated community.

*Hambone, Hambone where you been?  
'Round the world and back again!  
Hambone, Hambone where's your wife?*

*In the kitchen cooking rice.  
Hambone, Hambone have you heard?  
Papa's gonna buy me a mockingbird.  
If that mockingbird don't sing,  
Papa's gonna buy me a diamond ring.  
If that diamond ring don't shine,  
Papa's gonna buy me a fishing line.  
Hambone, Hambone where you been?  
'Round the world and I'm goin' again!*

The Hambone, Hambone jump rope rhyme is a story of possibility, of dreams, of hopes, of setting new goals, and of the potential borne of options. It is also a story of community, relation, and survival. The Hambone was passed and shared 'Round the world from pot to pot, neighbor to neighbor to flavor the soup. As it was passed it picked up new flavors and deposited remnants of previous meals. The hambone was passed bringing fellowship, relation, and connection. To serve the needs of the community, to resist, and to provide sustenance for the struggle, it would keep *goin' again*.

Cooking among the African American community is a combined story of creativity, invention, and survival. It is a story that is passed 'round the world among the community. My grandmother used to save not only the hambone and the pot liquor it seasoned when cooking the collards. She also recognized her role as contributor to the collective taste and flavor of this soup which symbolized survival borne of economic struggle and denied access to societal resources.

My *Mom Mom* was a domestic, a polite term for cleaning lady, for many years during my childhood. She left the city's center each day, before dawn, and joined the throng of uniformed domestic servants making the public transportation commute to the upper class homes in suburban neighborhoods. Upon arrival these women served as cooks, laundresses, cleaning ladies, and primary caregivers. Mom Mom frequently returned home bearing gifts of leftover food, outdated books, linens, gently used toys, shoes, and designer label clothing. Each gift was presented neatly wrapped in brown paper and sealed with a piece of twine or ribbon. She was not only a doting grandmother; she was our private fairy godmother, seemingly able to provide treasures at will.

As an adolescent, I had been one of *the chosen* to integrate a private girls' school as a representative of the jump rope community. The decision to attend was made based on promises for the mutual sharing of and exposure to cultural, racial, and social practices. I remember the pride with which my grandmother shared the news of my admission with anyone who would listen. She shared this news despite knowing that the school was located in the very neighborhood where she worked each day.

Her worlds collided one afternoon at the school when she attended, as my honored guest, an annual Mother-Grandmother-Daughter Tea. I became aware of her truer-in-life position when she lowered her gaze to avoid making eye contact with a group of women aiming white-gloved whispers in her direction. Their collective looks spoke of disapproval and condemnation. This is one of my earliest recollections of *the look* that I would recognize years later as a newly minted tenure-track faculty member. Suddenly aware that my grandmother was the object of such an open manner of disrespect created shifts in my personal belief system and a number of questions.

Upon returning to the safety of our home and with the ignorance borne of our rising middle class status, I remember asking her once (and only once) why she wore the uniform and

continued to do such menial work for such demeaning women. Her simple reply rocked me to shame. “I do this, clean toilets, stand over a hot stove, and rock other people’s babies, so that you won’t ever have to.” My grandmother then proceeded to provide me with a lesson in using access from the fringes, as a silent and invisible observer, to watch and learn – learn and continue to watch. She explained that when she cleaned their closets she made note of the labels in the suits; when she served their dinners she made note of the flatware, crystal, and china patterns used; when they entertained she worked overtime, not only to earn extra income, but also to listen, silently and invisibly from the fringes, to their experiential stories of association, privilege and power.

My grandmother, without the benefit of a dereed education, had learned to theorize the dailiness of her life position, her actions, and her identity in order to craft strategies for personal survival and enduring generational success. She willingly used her invisibility and silence as tools of access. Her gained and shared access stands as a living counter story to her perceived devalued personal and social position. Through access and the observance provided as a result of invisible status, she had learned to read their world (Freire, 1987) and worked to bring the messages and methods of outsider-within resistance home to her world. She was determined to use her access, gained through silenced invisibility, to help us understand and maneuver in the world she assured us that we would one day occupy.

As I look back on my experience of growing up in a jump rope community filled with daily struggles endured by my elders, I begin to gain knowledge about the resistance and survival strategies crafted by members of a minority jump rope community across a number of *othered* generations. I begin to understand the power of outsider and outsider-within status (Lorde, 1984; Hill-Collins, 1986). I begin to recognize the power of silence through segregation and the power of silent speaking and of speaking to/through silence.

Silence is often viewed and described as the opposite of noise. Silence, the noun, is defined as the complete absence of sound; as a verb it is defined as the prohibition of speech. Silence is manifest in a variety of ways and under a number of conditions. Silence may be forced or chosen. It may be controlling or claimed. Silence may be accepted or strategic; acquiesced or preferred. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1996) also describes the use of silence as a weapon.

It is the dimension in which ordinary and extraordinary events take their proper places. In the Indian world, a word is spoken or a song is sung not against, but within the silence. In the telling of a story, there are silences in which words are anticipated or held on to, heard to echo in the still depths of the imagination. In the oral tradition, silence is the sanctuary of sound. Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence; they are sacred. (Momaday, 1997, p. 16)

The power of looking back, in silent reflection, in search of knowledge which will fuel the resiliency of spirit necessary to move forward, is invaluable. Looking back to move forward is a complex and, at times, a process of silent observation and reflection that moves to the varied beat of possibility bound by the contextual flows of time, place, space, and history. In examining the other side of silence, I am able to imagine alternative explanations. Perhaps the silent look, portrayed by my new professional acquaintance, spoke to the personal readjustment of previously held cultural beliefs. Perhaps my sudden presence in the life of my new colleague created just enough silence to prompt self examination and interrogation. Perhaps the silence prompted the search for speech; the commitment to develop a shared vocabulary which might

prevent future cross-cultural silences. Perhaps the silence was a chosen expression of cross-cultural connective need and possibility. Perhaps the silence had indeed created an *othering* – an *othering* of interpretation leading to progressive and transformative habits of mind. Perhaps all that was needed had been time for silent contemplation leading to newly framed points of connection and the hope of possibility.

### Invigorating Possibilities

Hope is fed by possibility. Possibility is silently crafted in the secure folds of the mind's imagination. Silence is fed by listening. Listening to learn and connect, especially across cultural and racial divides, must become the battle cry of teachers and teacher educators. For, education, the grand social experiment, is the institutionalized expression of a society's hope for the future. Teachers and teacher educators must become adept at interrogating the story of self as it relates to the possibility of understanding the diverse story of others. This paradox, that of knowing self to enhance others, must be conquered in order to retrieve and identify, "assumptions regarding the nature of self, the relation of self to other and to culture, and conceptions of knowing, meaning, and purpose" (Witherell, 1991, p. 84). Teachers and teacher educators, who recognize the paradoxes of self as "defined by our social and cultural contexts" and "the collective norms, mores, values, prejudices, and preconceptions that have evolved over time and are sustained with minimal consciousness" (p.85) must also recognize the role that community, more specifically cultural community, plays in shaping our persistently adaptive identities. Space and time must be carved out to silently reflect upon the abilities, discoveries, and triumphs of self and others. Teachers must learn to listen to, and interrogate multiple explanations for, the silence.

My story as African American female educator adds to the body of work aimed at troubling and reframing the practitioner's formation of self-as-teacher, teacher-as-self, and self-as-other in the realm of a greater social community. This exploration of counter story as possible story seeks to stir up old questions while suggesting new questions. "What is the purpose of education?" "What are the characteristics of an educated populace?" "Who benefits / suffers the most from restricted educational access?" "What are the advocacious and social justice responsibilities of teachers and teacher educators in an ever-growing multi-cultural society?"

Teaching is not an ethically, politically, or socially neutral endeavor. It is "based on identifiable assumptions regarding the nature of self, the relationship of self to other and to culture, and conceptions of knowing, meaning, and purpose" (Witherell, 1991, p. 84). Embedded societal, racial, and cultural notions of dominant-culture advantage and minority-culture disadvantage among members of the predominantly white teaching community have hindered the potential for success in students of color. It may be time to deeply trouble the waters of educational neglect and indifference.

In *Red River*, Lalita Tademy (2007) uses artistic imagery and words in self dialogue to convey the thoughts of her character Polly. Polly expresses in the prologue the hope, the power, and the contested challenge of going back, *to stir up old messes* through *rememory* (Morrison, 1987). Have we committed to the difficult and contested back and forth of knowledge retrieval? Have we collectively decided, in the interest of societal progression, that the retrieval and use of discovered knowledge is needed to foster cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-class accomplishments?

Come closer. This is not a story to go down easy, and backwash still got hold of us today. The history of a family. The history of a country. From bondage to the joy of freedom, and almost ten hopeful years drinking up the promise of Reconstruction, and then back into darkness, so fearsome don't nobody want to talk about the scary time. Don't nobody want to remember even now, decades removed, now things better some. Why stir up all that old mess from way back in 1873? I don't hold with that point of view. I was there, watching, like all the women done, up close some of the time but mostways from a distance. They all dead and buried now. I outlast each one, using up my time on earth and some of theirs too. One hundred last birthday, trapped in this wasted body. All I do now is remember and pray the story don't get lost forever. (Tademy, 2007, p. 1)

Memory, just as this research project, is personal, is participatory, and is an extremely passionate (He & Phillion, 2008) journey into the slippery folds of the mind's spaces. "Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 19) and is a "way of knowing reality which affirms continually not only the primacy of resistance but the necessity of resistance that is sustained by remembrance of the past" (hooks, 1990, p. 342). It is "the subject as well as the source of oral history" (Perks & Thompson, 1998, p. 211) and is used as a tool of the present to interpret events and experiences from the past. It is used to ensure that *the story don't get lost forever*.

Oral history is a reflective and fluid attempt at creating meaningful accounts through the storied lives of those relating the tales. Rememory (Morrison, 1987) frames the theory of self-definition and moves the narrative beyond societal attempts at confinement due to the pervasiveness and burden of race. I seek, with the sharing of these vignettes, to improve the condition of the African American children in our nation's schools. Heeding Schwab's call *to do good* through research rather than simply attempting to theorize (He, 2003), we must continually turn the ropes while asking, "Have we, in positions of influence, done enough to provide spaces for the next generation of triumphant chanters and jumpers to discover their uniqueness, their personal worth, and extend the collective game?"

Members of the educational community have a great deal of work to do until we arduously acknowledge and deconstruct the negative social effects perpetuated by "the seductiveness of deficit theories" (Konkol, 2012). This is a teaching force which continues, through shrinking in percentages, to be predominantly white. C. Emily Feistritzer (2011), on behalf of the National Center for Education Information recently released figures which show that 84 percent of the 2011 teaching force was White, as compared to 85 percent in 2005, 89 percent in 1996, and 92 percent in 1990. The overall percentage of Black teachers, during that same period, has remained steady at between 5-7 percent.

The ever-increasing browning of this nation's overall student populations poses a series of challenges for educators. According to the 2012 US Census Bureau as of July 1, 2011, 50.4 percent of children under the age of one were minorities or of more than one race, up from 49.5 percent in 2010. 49.7 percent of children younger than age five were minorities or of mixed race in 2011, up from 49.0 percent in 2010. The bureau's 2012 data also shows that 36.6 percent of the U.S. population was comprised of individuals identifying as minorities in 2011 compared to 36.1 percent in 2010 and 31.4 percent at the turn of the century. Projections based on current demographic trends put the percentage of students of color, in our nation's schools, at 46 percent by the year 2020.

This increasing diversity demands that practitioners take an honest and forthright look at self in relation to othered selves. Seeing and being seen with valued eyes, rather than critiquing through looks of dismay that serve to dismiss and devalue is a good place to start. This will mean an acknowledgment of and an impassioned commitment to incorporating the varied funds of community knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) students bring with them to school each day. An area of desired focus will need to be the exploration, valuation, and transformation of varied forms of literacy, developed in neighborhood counterpublics, into hierarchical structures and perceptions of educative power. Cultural literacy, family literacy, community literacy, music literacy, artistic literacy, oral literacy, and generational literacy represent funds of knowledge (Moll, 1994; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) which can be used to enhance the academic capabilities of all students, not merely students of color. Literacy, varied literacy, grounded in multiplicities, emotion and relation must be explored; communicative literacy, transformative literacy, cultural literacy, translate into different ways of being, different ways of understanding, different ways of accessing knowledge and different ways of reading the world.

The art, music, food, communication, mannerisms and oral histories all serve to form cultural literacy. Troubling, questioning, and creating spaces between the conversations, intonations, expectations and generalizations with varied forms of inquiry will also serve to help educators conceptualize numerous pedagogical practices which build upon accumulated community knowledge. Teaching students to recognize, interrogate, deconstruct, and reconceptualize the existence of *phantasmatic*, as well as tangible, structures of difference and denial, will facilitate a critique of growing the “growing racial, economic, and linguistic boundaries between students and teachers” (Kinloch, 2011, p. 1), teachers and families, families and the school community. The recognition, situation, valuation, and standardization of counter experiential narratives within the day-to-day curricular choices will serve to broaden the scope of what counts as knowledge; enlarge the scope of the group membership for those who make decisions surrounding the value of culturally-derived knowledge, and expand the lines of possible methods of self-expression. In this way educators will become proficient at “utilizing creative pedagogical strategies and tools in our work with students in order for them to enhance academic skills, critical literacies, and civic responsibilities as they prepare [students] for participation in a multicultural democracy” (p.1).

This work is presented as merely one jump in-between the ropes of theoretical and antithetical understandings of coming to know and being known. It highlights the existence of counter lives that have been framed on the fringes and in-between worlds bordered by denial and determined access. It is a narrative that highlights potentialities that exist *in* the in-between spaces of intolerance and enlightenment – the collective, institutional movement from isolated and inanimate existences to an integration of personally-derived, yet collectively situated narratives. The next moves will demand recognition and deconstruction of self as teacher in order to better recognize invisibility of othered personalities and their subjective construction of funds of knowledge (Moll, 1994; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) developed through resistance and opposition; interrogation of varied ways of coming to know; inclusion of cultural beliefs and practice; incorporation of counterpublicly derived cultural capital; and the resultant information, inquiry, and intersection of self.

I sincerely hope that the counter narrative I have shared in this article which highlights the devalued minority community wisdoms and the kept and silent struggled histories of African American women helps claim a space for culturally and racially inherent funds of knowledge. I am who I am because who they are. They keep filling the gap created by all forms of exclusion

and suppression. We can move past looks of despair and disappointment only if our funds of knowledge of “self, others, and jump rope community” (Scott-Simmons, 2007, 2008) are used to interrogate, critique, and challenge the meta narrative that marginalize, suppress, and silence us and only if we insist on a stronger commitment to antiracist stewardship to thrive in silently carved out spaces in-between ropes moving into the realm of liberation.

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