When Cinderella is a Sister: Finding Space and Grace as Black Teacher Educators in Predominantly White Institutions

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Abstract:
Through four critical race feminist counter-narratives, this article shares intimate portrayals of how three doctoral students and one professor - all Black women- have learned to navigate the often treacherous contexts and conditions of teacher education at predominantly white institutions. These counter-narratives seek to both incite and inform the field of teacher education about the unique experiences of Black women in academia while also providing insight into the interpersonal transformations required by Black women who do the work of educating teachers. By re-casting the work and lives of Black women within the metaphorical fairytale of Cinderella, this paper offers unique lessons of struggle, knowledge, and wisdom that foregrounds Black and critical race feminisms as they are lived, loved and marshaled by Black women academics.

Keywords: Black women, education, counter narrative, Black feminism

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The beauty of a woman is a rare treasure.
To admire it is always a pleasure.
But what they call real grace
Is priceless and wins any race.
(Perrault, 1697/2002, p. 43)

To tell a story is a form of survival (Lorde, 1984). Over and through time, we have created stories that were far beyond what the present reality could offer (Weick, 1995; Berger & Luckman, 1967). Our imagination created magical endings and idealized encounters that often allowed us to settle into some other place than where we were. Within storytelling, the fairytale as a genre gave us a reliable plot, providing something to wish for and to hold in our minds until the reading ended. And the fairytale stays with us. It lingers because somehow deep within our own narratives, we want our fairy tales to come true. They are proof that imagination combined with hope can take us to real places—and those places are much better than we could have ever imagined for ourselves.

Cinderella, perhaps the most famous fairytale of them all, has historically helped to construct idealistic notions of what should happen to the poorly treated and unloved portions of our bodies, minds and spirits. It is the familiar story is of an unwanted stepchild who, despite physical toil and constant abuse, gets a chance to go to the ball where she meets her Prince Charming (Perrault, 1697; Tatar, 2002). As Black women, one part of the fairy tale that resonates with us is also a common trope in Black women's narratives: That is, the idea that despite numerous and continuous obstacles, there is "good luck," favor, and love as our redemption song.

The authors of this piece have chosen the Cinderella story as a fitting metaphor that provides a useful description of our lives as Black women in the academy. In that space, we are working Cinderellas, laboring hard in a

place where our work is needed. This account is an attempt to ground the Cinderella story in a Black feminist home: Out of the imagination and a vivid portrait of lives as Black women teacher educators in predominantly white institutions.

Teacher Education and Black Cinderella: The Counter-Story

That's what the fairy in this tale
Taught Cinderella without fail,
Here's how she could become a queen
Teaching lessons, yet staying serene.
(Perrault, 1697/2002, p. 43)

This research project grew out of our desire to fully narrate the experiences of Black women teacher educators, one that is often left untold in the teacher education literature. But we also seek to purposely place ourselves where we rightfully belong, that is in the larger narrative of teacher education (Dixson &Dingus, 2006). For unlike Cinderella's inadvertent losing of the glass slipper of privilege and access to the ball, Black women are still navigating the "fit" of our own slippers, the slippers that we have worn—and earned—long before someone questioned whether they were real or not. These are navigations of identity, of Black female presence, and enacted feminisms. Centered in our experiences, we marshal tenets of Black feminism and critical race feminisms (Berry, 2010; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006; Wing, 1997) in order to redefine and more deeply understand our roles as Black women teacher educators. Analytically, we use the counter-story as a "tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorazano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Counter-stories interrupt the ideologies of the majority whose voices and perceptions have created and maintained the apparatus of multiple oppressive systems including racism, sexism and classism.

The narratives presented here uniquely represent three primary teacher education program areas at a large southern research university: Elementary

education, Social Studies education, and Secondary English Education. As all authors highlight the privileges, burdens and challenges of teaching undergraduate pre-service teachers and teacher educator preparation, we write to inform the field of teacher education of the unique resistances, hopes, and realities of our work as Black women teacher educators. While the first three narratives share counter-stories of work in undergraduate preservice education, the final narrative is written by a senior faculty member, metaphorically representing the "Fairy Godmother" in the traditional Cinderella story. However, unlike the traditional versions of this fairy tale, her counter-story serves as both a call and response to the underlying themes in the narratives of Black women teacher educators, pointing to the consistent, enduring, and ever-present wisdom of both Black women's struggles, but also our knowledge and wisdom.

Berry (2010) writes that counter-stories are a "means of understanding positionalities of individuals…particularly marginalized persons living at the intersections of identities (p. 25). The counter-story provides a critical and necessary space for narratives to be heard. These counter-stories are formed through our lived experiences of teaching, research and service as Black females within predominantly white university spaces. Using the fairytale Cinderella as a metaphor, our aim is to share personal narratives, provide conversations between our theory and practice, and offer insight into how we attempt to create and maintain sacred spaces of grace in environments where our identities are often isolated on the peripheries as raced and gendered perspectives of teaching and learning (Schick, 2002; Berry, 2010).

We draw here from critical race theory which is concerned primarily with the confluence of multiple forms of oppressive structures, including race, gender, and class, within a variety of settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Investigating how these oppressions are maintained in a variety of spaces (and especially within educational settings) is important to our own understanding

of how we, as African American teacher educators, can learn to both marshal and disrupt these structures through our own stories.

All participants in this study identify as Black females. We consider ourselves to be *outsiders/within* (Collins, 1999) in that we all have learned about teaching and teacher education within primarily white, male dominated spheres of education, yet we still remain outsiders within the same structure. As *outsiders/within*, we constructed counter-stories as a way to confront our experiences, in ways that allows others to see our experiences as transformative and necessary acts of empowerment. Thus, the first narrative speaks back to how intersections of race and gender impact the perception of being "qualified" to teach teacher candidates. The second narrative details one author's experience of being the sole Black teacher-educator in a field dominated by white men. The third narrative concerns itself with internal pressure to embody "whiteness" in the teacher-educator role, while at the same time dealing with pre-service teachers feeling the need to embody "blackness" as a way to build relationship with her. The final narrative serves as a synthesizing call and response, which highlights the purpose of counter-story for the Black female teacher educator as a way to reaffirm ourselves, and also to place the wisdom of a senior Black teacher educator as an endarkened (Dillard, 2000; 2006) "fairy god mother" within our collective counter-story.

Stephanie's Story: "Why Don't You Teach Our Cohort?"

> *The poor child endured everything with patience. She didn't dare complain to her father, who would have scolded her, for he was completely under the thumb of his wife. Whenever she finished her chores, she would go over to the corner by the chimney and sit down among the cinders and ashes. And so everyone started calling her Cindertail.* (translation by Maria Tatar, p. 30)

Teaching undergraduate preservice teachers is an important part of the preparation of a teacher educator. But I have to make an admission: As a fourth year doctoral student (and unlike the co-authors of this chapter), I have **not** had the opportunity, as the teacher of record, to teach my own

undergraduate course. As an aspiring professor, it is customary for doctoral candidates to have the experience of teaching at least one course for undergraduate pre-service teachers. To have this type of experience is a demonstration of your ability to not only teach and supervise teacher candidates but, as a future scholar, is indicative of the type of pedagogy and training that will accompany you to a prospective institution. Without this qualification (and a host of other variables), a newly minted Ph.D. will have a difficult time gaining access to positions at a university.

I have spent more than 20 years of my life walking the hallways of predominantly white institutions, from elementary through higher education. There is an inexplicable awareness (call it a sort of external gaze?) that I have about how my words (shaped by cultural Blackness and Southern wisdom) sound as I have attempted to respond critically in doctoral courses. At times, my feet slip easily underneath the red clay of my mother tongue. But as soon as the words slip from my mouth, I attempt to smooth them over and plant new flowers of more "scholarly" words. The awareness of my red clay language is also shaped by six beautiful, often wild years of teaching high school English language arts in a major urban center in the southeastern United States. I brought all these years with me—both memories and experience—to this nationally ranked teacher education program whose campus sits within a self-identified "urban" school district. This school district closest to the campus is filled with classrooms of black and brown faces, faces that looked just like the ones I left behind in my high school. I have always felt *ready* to teach our undergraduates. But I wasn't "qualified."

I learned through Solorzano and Yosso (2002) that counter-stories are "autobiographical reflections of the author, juxtaposed with their critical race analysis of legal cases and within the context of a larger sociopolitical critique" (p. 32). And I debated whether this counter-story would be considered legitimate, because no one had ever told me directly that I was not qualified to

teach pre-service teachers. Nonetheless, it is just a *knowing* that I feel. This knowing is what DuBois (1903) calls "double consciousness" Du Bois describes it as, "a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others…two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 9). DuBois and I share this knowing, this "sensation" that makes us both fully aware of the realities of existing in two conflicted worlds. This knowing is my shadow. I feel as if no one else knows what it is like to be simultaneously qualified and *unwanted*. But every fall semester, a new cohort of excited, naïve undergraduate students enter into the English education program. They are nervous, smart, and really just want to know what to do on Monday mornings. But, eventually, deep into their program, they are interrupted by a discussion of the Other. You know, the racialized, sexualized, classed Other that they don't believe will be their high school students. And, after more than six semesters, I know *that* email is coming: The email inviting me to be a "guest speaker" in somebody else's undergraduate teacher education course. It usually starts off with a rationale coupled with reasons why I am uniquely qualified to be a "guest" teacher:

"I think your research would fit so well with this topic."

"They need to hear about diversity."

"They are really sheltered and could use some shaking up."

Without hesitation, I respond, confirming my agreement to speak. I do it without considering the paradoxical nature of making Black teachers responsible for lessons on diversity as if we are the only ones able to "shake" students to their white, privileged cores or whose research on adolescent Black girls makes us experts on what *all* Black kids want to read. Still, I *want* to teach my own class. But this is the only kind of teaching I get to do.

After I teach, I am always met with a barrage of students, seeking relief from their questions about race, wanting confirmation that their ideas about

colorblindness are still valid teaching ideologies. Usually, one curious student asks me (not the director of the program itself) why I don't "teach in their cohort." I never know how to respond. That tension of not being "qualified" to teach them, yet used as invaluable resource, means that I am forced to choose between not wanting to jeopardize a possible future position and being honest about what I feel is ongoing institutional racism and discrimination. My teaching experience, in this way, is only temporary, filled with short relationships, and topics that only skim the surface. While it feels exhilarating to introduce concepts and incite meaningful debate, the context of real teaching means making meaningful decisions, and creating meaningful relationships with my students over time

> *"Alas, dear ladies! You're just making fun of me. That's not a place where I could be seen."*
> *"You're right, everyone would have a good laugh if they saw Cinderella going to the ball."* (Tatar, 1697/2002, p. 34)

Year after year, I see newly-hooded Ph.D. graduates move on to tenure track positions. And right after they leave, I see new doctoral students take their place. Each of those years, I kept thinking that I was in the line. I even had the audacity at times to think I was first in that imaginary line. I didn't have the courage to ask. I didn't have the nerve to confront. My vita, splattered with teaching awards and grants was unshakable. But now I question whether I am enough. Had I taught long enough? Yes, Stephanie. Were they making decisions about graduate teaching assistantships based on GRE scores? As far as I know, there is no list of requirements to teach. I needed an advocate, someone who would tell me the truth.

My major professor (who is white and female) was/is my primary advocate. But I have come to realize that out of respect and care for my spirit, she was trying to shield me from this fact of Blackness (Fanon, 1952/2008). But Black awareness knows that this silence still speaks. I try to be careful about mentioning race (sometimes to a fault). I know that when I speak of

what I know about race, and speak of it openly, I could be accused of having an agenda or falsely placing race in context in which it doesn't belong. I just knew that not receiving a graduate teaching position had to be based in personal lack, but when I compared the qualifications of those who have positions to my own, my self-doubt just can not stand as a plausible excuse. For my own spiritual safety, I didn't want it to be about race. If it was, I would have to add it to a growing list of racial disturbances in my life—being called a nigger as a child, accused of acting "white" given my use in school of standard English, being labeled as the "angry Black one." I didn't need another addition to this list—and I especially didn't need from a department who seemed to speak glowingly of the aims of diversity.

Eventually, a truth that I could not repel settled within me. I simply was not *wanted*, for no good reason. I received invitations to speak to future doctoral students, served on graduate school panels, spoke to incoming doctoral students about best strategies to use in graduate school. Yet, I consistently overruled my own story to present a loving picture of what I thought the university was to me. From then to now, I still labor in love in the work of teacher education.

> *They threw themselves at her feet, begging her forgiveness for treating her so badly and for making her suffer. Cinderella helped them get up, kissed them, and said that she was willing to forgive them with all her heart.* (Perrault, 1697/2002, p. 43)

How can Cinderella, whose very name originates from abuse at the hands of her sisters, still choose to share her kindness with those who had treated her unfairly? Beneath the cinders which soiled Cinderella's dress, beneath the perception of being "qualified" to teach, this Cinderella knows what it is like to live under what Du Bois refers to as the veil (Du Bois 1903, p. 8).

Similar to the earlier explanation of double consciousness, it is possible that this veil of oppression, the sensation of examining one's self through eyes

of others could be used for our own empowerment as Black women teacher educators. Staying in a love-less relationship, either with family or in my case, the academy, has taught me to see that although others may not see my worth, *I need to stay*. The shift within me was not inspired by proving my worth to others: It is inspired by my own recognition that that cinders can be washed away. Now, I seek mentors, fairy godmothers, other Sister scholars who have shaken off and washed the cinders from their clothes. It is the work that once defined and labeled Cinderella that eventually liberates her. Thus, the work of teacher education and scholarship—albeit dirty work at times—is work that I have embraced.

Kristen's Story: When Your Family Don't Love you Back

"Whatever. That's it. We're done. Move on." I was in complete shock and disbelief at his words and did not know how to proceed. I just stood in place, attempting to read my other students' faces, trying to discern whether or not they agreed with the student who had just spoken. The bubble aside my head was as clear as in a comic book: "Wait! Did he just cut off my thought and tell me to move on in front of the rest of the class? This is so embarrassing!" I silently began to panic as I realized that Cinderella had just been exposed as the poor, unprivileged girl I was in this new context of teacher education. It was clear that I did not have his respect, but how could I make sure I maintained other students' respect? How would I keep myself from losing the entire class? How did this happen? Why was this happening to me? These and many other questions sprinted through my mind in the moments immediately after this student spoke out.

As a middle school teacher, I had grown accustomed to students responding to me in ways that might be considered unpleasant. However, having just made the leap from being a middle school social studies teacher to being a doctoral student and preservice teacher educator, I never imagined that a student would blatantly tell me my physical scholarly *body* AND the

scholars whose work we were discussing that we were inaccurate and invalid. And then proceed to instruct me to move along in my teaching!??!!?

I don't think that in my entire life I had ever been as angry as I was in that moment. The scribbled handwriting in my journal reveals that my hand shook as I wrote, *"I can't even begin to describe the emotions running through my body right now"* (Duncan, Personal journal, January 23, 2013). I can still picture myself moving around the classroom where three-fourths of the students were White men. In contrast, all of the students in this preservice teacher course were completing their practicum placements in a school where the majority of students were Black or Hispanic—and where I had taught many of the now high school students when they were middle school students. The fact that I had personal relationships with so many of their students added to the passion with which I'd tried to engage this group of preservice teachers in a discussion of stereotypes and how they can affect academic performance. My passion and increased excitement, however, clearly had not lead all of my students to embrace the concept of stereotype threat, the topic of discussion when this incident took place. In this particular moment, the offending student—a White male—had in a few swift statements attempted to invalidate my knowledge and the work of multiple prominent Black scholars as he abruptly attempted to end our class discussion on stereotype threat. "*Whatever. That's it. We're done. Move on."* He also sought to invalidate my power and exercise his own, as he attempted to force me to proceed to another portion of the class activity. It was as if this student had told me that I was not worthy of being a teacher educator, and that he, a preservice teacher, was more adept at directing the class than I was. Through his White male privilege, he also believed that he knew more about Black children than I did as an experienced Black teacher educator who spent her classroom teaching years teaching predominantly Black students.

This is not an uncommon occurrence, as many White educators feel that they are more knowledgeable than Black educators regarding what is best for Black students (Delpit, 2006). For the sake of full disclosure, I should add that this particular student was also about 5 years older than I was. His embodiment as a White man, along with his age, in his mind gave him power. As a Black woman younger than him, I was not supposed to have any—at least not over him. For this student, young Black women who were his teachers were not only supposed to be powerless, we were supposed to lack knowledge.

Unfortunately, this would not be the only encounter I had where a student attempted to invalidate me as a teacher educator. As a Black woman teaching in a program where the majority of students are White men, there were multiple events in which my students, typically White men, attempted to make me feel like Cinderella: Clearly out of my league with no place at this ball called teacher education. While my faculty "family" in my program trusted my ability enough to teach this course and most students were receptive to me and my ideas, there always seem to be a few wicked stepbrothers who felt as though I had somehow managed to arrive at a place where I did not belong. These stepbrothers make their feelings known by blatantly disregarding my positionality as their instructor and attempting to go over my head to others whose positions they respect. Even given the highly selective admissions process at our university, these students' assumptions of my expertise to serve as their teacher educator is made even more interesting by the fact that I matriculated through the *same* social studies teacher education program in which they were enrolled just a few short years prior to them before returning to the doctoral program to serve as an instructor.

As Black women teachers, our work in teacher education is necessary, but it is not always well received. Black teacher educators who operate in predominantly White spaces frequently face backlash that stems from the

student's reaction to the teacher educator's race (Dixson & Dingus, 2007; McNeil, 2011). These tense interactions take place, because many White preservice teachers have lived and continue to live in contexts that are nearly or exclusively White and are unaware of their own White privilege (McIntosh, 1989). They frequently remain unaware of this privilege until they encounter a Black person (in this case, the instructor) with more privilege than they have. This becomes even more important to address when we consider that one of the key tasks of social studies teachers is to teach their students how to function democratically, with diversity a necessary component of democracy (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Parker, 2003). Coupled with issues of race and privilege is also the issue of gender, wherein a White male dominated society has used race and gender privilege to objectify Black women in multiple ways (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1972; hooks, 1989; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Race and gender not only play a role in how my students interpret my body and my words, but they also play a huge role in the options I have in responding to students' challenges about my embodied identities. While many instructors may have chosen to verbally express their anger in the moment I described previously, being a Black woman does not entitle me to that privilege without extreme consequences for myself and other Black women teacher educators, as Black women have traditionally been – and continue to be -- defined by incredibly narrow controlling images by a White male dominated society (Collins, 2000). Sapphire is the "image of Black women as stubborn, bitchy, bossy, and hateful" (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 89). And I was not willing to let my anger present itself in a manner that would resemble the image of Sapphire! Had I embodied this image, not only would I have confirmed a prevalent and enduring stereotype of Black women, but I would have made it far more difficult for my students to take me and any other Black women in academia seriously.

In my first year as a teacher educator, these challenges to my very person would sometimes render me unsure of myself, as students challenged my knowledge. These challenged would sometimes even lead me to the point of wondering if I even knew what I was talking about! This Cinderella became unsure of whether or not I belonged in the academy. These challenges made me feel like a fraud, as if I didn't belong in the academy. One student even went so far as to contact an administrator about an assignment I had given the class simply because he didn't like it!

Black women are frequently made to feel as though they do not belong in the academy because it is so heavily steeped in Whiteness (hooks, 1994; White, 2007; Wright, Thompson, & Channer, 2007). Understanding this was simultaneously relieving and disheartening. With the support of my teacher education colleagues and many Black feminist scholars (like Collins, 2000; Dixson, & Dingus, 2008; hooks, 1998, my fairy godmothers), I came to understand that I was actually doing great work in my preservice teacher courses. This was also reinforced by feedback from other students and course evaluations. While I began to stop questioning my knowledge and abilities, I also realized that incidents like this will likely to happen again in my future positions as faculty in teacher education simply because I am a Black woman. No matter what I do, there will be people who continue to step on my toes because they believe I am out of place and do not belong at the ball! As someone who has already experienced the rejection that Cinderella felt, there are some things that I would like future Black women teacher educators to think about as they enter the academy. While this information may not make Black Cinderellas feel that better received, it may help us all remember that the ball is also our party.

I often tell preservice teachers that many of their students will not automatically respect them as the authority figure in the classroom because they hold the title of teacher. My experiences have shown me that this is also

the case for Black women teacher educators teaching preservice teachers in overwhelmingly White contexts. Some of my students were not willing to recognize authority in me simply because of my positionality as their instructor. In the case of preservice teachers, I often explain that they will have to earn their students' respect by acting as the authority figure in the classroom and earning students' trust. I suggest that they build positive relationships with their students and maintain a committed stance to their classroom rituals and routines in an effort to do so. I am not sure, however, that building positive relationships with students would have prevented the troubling interaction I described earlier. While I definitely make an effort to build such relationships with my students, I believe it might take much more for some White students to respect me as a Black woman and a teacher educator, given years of racism and racist thinking. I have finally come to the realization that they may not give this Cinderella her glass slipper, but I have learned to dance in my own shoes.

As a Black woman in the field of teacher education, dancing in my own shoes means that I have to continue to do what I think is best in my efforts to prepare preservice teachers for the field: I owe that to the students of different races and ethnicities whom my preservice teachers will teach when they have their own classrooms. These students will need teachers who are equipped with more than simple content knowledge. They will need teachers who are able to establish soul connections, understand different students' identities, and hold inclusive attitudes. This means that I must continue to address issues of race in my teacher education courses because it is the duty of teacher educators to help preservice teachers develop these understandings. Although my students may not be receptive initially, I must continue to incorporate discussion topics and class readings that stretch their thinking beyond the sphere of Whiteness that they have lived in for so long, in order for them to serve and teach **all** of their future social studies students.

My final note for Black teacher educators is this: We must claim our power and our privilege. While I am certainly not advocating that anyone should turn into a power wielding tyrant, we have earned our positions in academia, and we should not be made to feel as though we do not belong in our positions by students who feel they are entitled to certain privileges by the mere fact that they were born White and/or male. Black female teacher educators need to critically affirm each other (hooks and West, 1991), reminding one another that we have earned the right to be where we are when the doubt that comes from living in a racist society seeps into our minds and spirits. This critical affirmation will aid us in claiming our power and our privilege, and it will allow us to continue to do the transformative and emancipatory work that we entered the academy to do. And when we've worked so hard, we deserve to enjoy our time at the ball as much as Cinderella did, knowing that our carriage will not revert to a pumpkin at midnight! We belong at the ball: We've earned our ticket and our place there.

Latoya's Story: If the Shoe Fits

My counter-story of Cinderella is quite different from the traditional versions of the fairytale. Unlike the traditional (and mostly white) Cinderella, I grew up a Black girl, economically poor and very happy. Most dominant versions of this story suggest that all poor people are unhappy and need to be rescued by White males to survive. Whether a fairytale or real tale, this has always been the storyline. The stories are told so often that even the "oppressed" believe and internalize them (Freire, 1970; Lorde, 1995; Thomas, Speight & Witherspoon, 2004). Poor Cinderella had to be rescued by Prince Charming to escape the brutal treatment of her stepmother and stepsisters (Yolen, 1977). In contemporary versions such as the film *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon had to be rescued by a nice plantation owner to escape slavery (Northup, 2013). These stories emphasize the privileges White elites possess

and the ways that the poor and people of color must work—and desire to work—to inherit these privileges.

What these stories fail to highlight is how people of color abandon their cultural capital (Marshall, 1983) in an attempt to inherit these privileges. Furthermore, these stories position people of color, especially Black women, as having no power or privileges (Collins, 2000). My contradicting version of Cinderella tells the story of a young Black girl who was not rescued by White males, but Black women. After years of abandoning her cultural capital in her efforts to succeed, Cinderella becomes a teacher educator at a predominantly White institution (PWI) and realizes she possesses privileges that her White preservice teachers desired and in some cases needed to be effective with the students of color in their classrooms. It is this same Black privilege that has led educational administrators and researchers to place White preservice teachers with Black teachers in hopes of preparing them to teach students of color (Moule & Higgins, 2007). This counter-story highlights the privilege of Black people, specifically Black women teacher educators, and challenges privilege as traditionally defined in mainstream stories. Drawing upon Afrocentric feminist thought, the wisdom and knowledge drawn from the experiences of Black women is articulated as "privilege" within this story (Collins, 1990, 1998; Guy-Shefthall, 1995; hooks, 1989; Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011). Here is my counter-story.

Once upon a time in rural Mississippi, there lived a happy, poor Black girl. Her mother was a single-mom and the only girl of five siblings. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, her mother encouraged the little girl to build relationships with Black women who were more experienced and knowledgeable for guidance and support. She would often say, "It is not what you know, Daughter, but who you know." The single-mother recognized that Black women possessed valuable knowledge that was necessary for her daughter's survival.

Hearing the phrase consistently, the young girl established relationships with an abundance of Black women who played different roles in her life. By the time she was in eighth grade, she had a host of "othermothers"—a godmother, spiritual mother, and several adopted aunts (Collins, 2000). This young Cinderella was rescued by this Black women network and seemed to have forgotten that her father was no longer around. She enjoyed hearing the ladies' stories of surviving bad relationships, stretching the "last dollar", and stepping out in faith. In fact, Cinderella "(re)membered" these stories when she later was in an abusive relationship and got evicted (Dillard, 2012). These Black women's wisdom saved Cinderella's life.

Cinderella's journey of building relationships took a turn in high school. Her mother's advice changed and began to sound much like the mainstream stories. No longer was building relationships with experienced and knowledgeable Black women enough for her daughter's survival. Her mother worried that her daughter would not escape their world of poverty without the help of Whites. Close to adulthood, Cinderella needed to be "rescued" again. And according to her Mother's new stories, She now needed to build relationships with Whites to get access to the ball or a promising future. The mother attempted to enroll Cinderella in the predominantly White suburban high school in the district about thirty minutes away, but she could not because it was outside of her school zone. This shift in her mother's perspectives and behaviors confused Cinderella, as White students from the same school were being bussed in to take advantage of her school's magnet program. At this moment, Cinderella began to feel powerless. "Why is Mama now forcing me to build relationships with Whites?" she thought. "Are Black women no longer valuable?" "What privileges do Whites have that Black women do not?"

Yielding to her mother's advice, Cinderella attended a predominantly White university for her undergraduate studies. Cinderella's pursuit to build

relationships with White faculty and students on the college campus was challenging and often less exciting. She was concerned about the Ebonics she used, tried to avoid saying things that may offend them, and often thought about how they perceived her. She found herself "acting White" to fit in. "In exchange for what is conventionally identified as success," Cinderella's racially demarcated Black body was forced to perform a White identity "by mimicking the cultural, linguistic, and economic practices historically affiliated with the hegemonic rule of Euro-Americans" (Fordham, 2008, p. 227).

Despite the challenges and discomfort, Cinderella did manage to build relationships with several Whites on campus. She believed these White connections earned her the title of Freshmen of the Year and President of Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society. Although Cinderella had achieved such success, she was still dissatisfied with the progress she had made at the end of her undergraduate studies and decided to attend a different PWI to receive her Masters degree. But after two more years of trying to fulfill her mother's request to surround herself with Whites, Cinderella began to grow weary of working to inherit the privileges of Whites. She wanted to discover her own value. "What privileges do I have to offer to a Eurocentric world?" she pondered. Cinderella was soon to find out at the next PWI she attended.

Cinderella as Teacher Educator

"These students don't listen to me." "It doesn't matter. I want to work at a private school any way." Cinderella, now a teacher educator at a predominantly White institution was disturbed by the comments of the White preservice teachers in her class. Many of them did not feel competent to teach students of color and struggled to construct culturally relevant lessons. When conducting observations, she even noticed some of the preservice teachers engaging in actions that they perceived as acting "Black" (e.g., using slang or rap music) to gain the approval of the students and herself.

Cinderella started in this position as she had at the last two predominantly White institutions she attended by "acting White" but quickly discovered this performance was not necessary in this space. As a doctoral student, Cinderella was empowered by new readings on Black feminisms and gatherings with Black female doctoral students and faculty who helped her to realize the value she possessed. She was no longer the powerless, Black woman lacking knowledge who needed to surround herself with accoutrements of Whiteness. Instead, she became (to her students) the Black expert. This was often a burdensome role, as her students expected her to know everything about teaching Black students. After abandoning her cultural capital and "acting White" for more than six years to inherit the privileges of Whites, Cinderella realized her cultural capital, wisdom, and experience teaching at an urban school in Mississippi had become "privileges" her students sought in their work with Black students. She was no longer the one needing to be saved: Her students needed to be rescued from the stereotypes of Black people embedded in their brains and their hearts that prevented them from being good teachers for **all** students. They needed Cinderella's help to survive as future teachers of students of color. Cinderella knew teaching these White preservice teachers was critical: Saving them meant saving her own daughters and sons whom they will teach.

Where is Black Cinderella's Mama?: A Call to (Re)member in Teacher Education

As Black woman who serve as teacher educators, marshaling the story of Cinderella reminds us that, while Blacks have moved a great distance from the days of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation in the U.S., we are still too often characterized as those "humble creatures who discharge the household chores and [are] subjugated to humiliating treatment" (Perrault, 1697, p. 28-29). But, as Black women, *we know better*: We know that we must tell the story of our lives in the academy in a way that honors the tradition of Black women,

particularly those who engage in the important vocation as teachers and keepers of our stories. We must tell our *truth*.

So, in most commonly known versions of the popular fairy tale of Cinderella, salvation or redemption for this mistreated slave girl is often found in altruistic persons who do good, those who have magical powers or handsome princes who lifts her out of her poverty and oppressive realities. But for Black women today, Sojourner Truth is still calling:

"Ain't I a woman?"

Our response?

"We still jumpin over mud puddles and climbing unassisted into our carriages."

Interestingly, in most mainstream versions of the Cinderella fairy tale, her biological mother does not appear. She is absent. Cinderella is solely and always portrayed as a sort of orphan, the dutiful servant to her mean stepmother and step sisters.

The narratives gathered here tell a different story. And for Black women, the traditional Cinderella story above begins with a problematic: Where is Cinderella's Mama? As a Black feminist scholar I begin this counter-story with the following declaration:

Black folks would never leave their "real" Mama out of any story worth telling.

Whether a biological mother, a trusted auntie, or an auntie, we know that Black Cinderella *always* has a "real" Mama who is always with her, whom she carries in her heart and her spirit. This Mama is always alive and active, nurturing Cinderella through constant feelings of helplessness, difficult ugly encounters, and other people's resentments. Cinderella's Mama gives her courage to stand in her own beauty, knowledge, kindness and character on her own terms.

But the teacher education literature knows very little about how Black women teachers (or Black people more broadly) engage in healing and self

affirmation of who we are the way we are in contexts where we live and work, particularly in predominantly white institutions. And as could be seen in the previous narratives, a certain kind of fear and nervousness often grips us in the academy. We don't know the level of honesty and our humanity we can really bring to these spaces. My heart just breaks (in recognition, mostly) as Stephanie, Kristen and Latoya so clearly articulated the persistent, enduring "norm" in the academy and in society of being silenced, ignored, and shut-down in attempts to name and speak truth to racial issues, racial understandings and racism as Black women. And I found myself (re)membering the power of Audre Lorde's words about the transformation of silence into language and action in my first reading of her book *Sister Outsider* (1984). As a masters degree student at a rural PWI, I'd begun reading the emerging body of published works on Black feminism and feminists of color in the 1980's. Reading these Black women's words changed my life—and shaped my life's work as a teacher educator whose scholarship focuses on Black feminism and endarkened epistemologies. And Audre Lorde's voice—the voice of trusted sister—that has served and continues to serve as a touchstone for the work of teacher educators in our own prac'tice and a valuable life-affirming lesson (albeit implicitly articulated) in the previous narratives: "I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you either" (p. 41). Lorde (like Black Cinderella's Mama, maybe?) goes on to say what I believe is the actual work done as we respond to being oppressed by others when we articulate our realities as Black women:

> But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women, while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (p. 41)

These narratives suggest that, like Cinderella, it is only when we shed the soot, dust, and cinders—other people's vision of us as Black women—that we will show up as who we *are*. That we will continue to be "summoned" by others in the academy (including our students) is a given. But it is only when We recognize that we have been "summoned" **because** of our inherent beauty, our exquisite sense of taste and style and the depth of cultural knowledge and wisdom that spans millennia, that we will Speak. OUT LOUD.
Yes, we will Speak.
And we will Speak some more.
We will Speak until the words feel comfortable in our mouths.
We will Speak them in ways that have love at the center, especially love of Ourselves.
And we will Speak them because, as these narratives echo the late Maya Angelou's words: We have the responsibility, once we have learned something or have healed something, to go and teach and heal someone else.

And We heal by showing up.

Showing up healthy, strong, *whole*, and with a clear sense of what OUR part of the work is, our nia (purpose) for being here at this moment on this earth in these beautiful Black women bodies. Again Audre Lorde's (1984) words inspire:

> My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from my particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restriction of externally imposed definitions. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living. (p. 121)

I am struck by the way that these narratives both (re)member and (re)frame the contexts of teacher education and the work of teacher educators when these Black women teacher educators said out loud: "I can't live like this: I

need to be free." or me, these counter-stories embody a sort of consciousness that must consistently and consciously be expressed and lived: I *choose*. Despite the anger. Despite the pain. Despite the weariness we feel as folks continue to expect us to "teach" even when we are off duty. Despite the ignorant questions and assumptions about us. As bell hooks' (1992) argues:

I choose to create in my daily life
Spaces of reconciliation and forgiveness
Where I let go of past hurt, fear and shame
And hold each other close.
It is only in the act *and* practice
Of loving Blackness
That we are able to reach and embrace the world
Without destructive bitterness
And ongoing collective rage (p. ii)

Don't be fooled. As we read in Kristen's story, there are serious consequences when Black Cinderella refuses to carry the burdens for others of the work that **they** have not done – and need to do – for themselves. But that is when the voice of Cinderella's Mama reminds us of the serious questions that each of us will need to answer. These are questions that speak to our hearts as Black women, work that we must first do in the quiet of our own spirits and souls. Work that requires that we ask for our Mama's guidance to help us work through the conflicts of being Black women educators in predominantly white spaces:

- "What is **your** work in the world, Black Cinderella?"
- "How will you manifest that work that is only yours to do?"

- "Who are the people who can help you to do the work, your allies?"

- "What strategies will help you stay committed and focused in the work, to not get distracted by other peoples' work?

- Who are you working on behalf of?

- How will they know? Can they see the work in your everyday interactions?

- How do you consistently "be" yourself and stay true to higher principles and powers bigger than yourself?

It is when we respond to the Cinderella Mamas who speak to us that Black women teacher educators can thoughtfully and consciously respond to these everyday assaults on our spirits. But my years in the academy suggest that our response is also about being being honest and focused in dogged pursuit of our *own* work and not simply our jobs. Our work does not require a benevolent benefactor or handsome prince, but a transformation in our *own* minds, bodies, and spirits, as these authors have shared. Our Mamas provided us all we need to make a splendid appearance at the ball when she brought us forth into this world. But the shift we must make is from the inside out. Yes, in the wave of the wand of her Fairy Godmother, traditional Cinderella is transformed, through beautiful garments of gold and silver, glass slippers, and magical carriages. But when Cinderella is a sister, there is a different truth: *We find our grace and transform our work in teacher education when we recognize and center the spirit of Black womanhood within us. And, when this happens, teacher education is transformed, too.*

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