

**Listen To the Past; Look to The Future:**  
**Sankofa and the Development of Teacher-Scholars**

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*Abstract*

*Sankofa is a Ghanaian concept that means to take from the past to enrich the present. It is frequently symbolized as a bird plucking an egg from its own back. Recent scholars have invoked the spirit of Sankofa as both creative inspiration and bold, active scholarship. In this article, four researchers and teacher educators demonstrate how the principles of Sankofa are at play in their work. Writing in a format that echoes the oral traditions of their different heritages, the authors present a “scholarly performance” in which their voices are intertwined to describe their individual research studies. This dialogic script permits the authors to articulate their mutual influences on each other’s works and to underscore the multiple and varied heritages that continue to impact their thinking as they guide graduate students as future scholars. For this unorthodox form of academic writing, the authors draw upon the following research projects: a study of “Tin Women,” a concept constructed to describe Black women writers and scholars; research into the role of listening on a teacher educator’s relationship with preservice and early career teachers; the development of an “ability traitor,” a person who betrays her own privileged ability in order to shed light on the cultural oppression of others. The intermingling of the authors’ voices speaks to the power of Sankofa as they demonstrate the process of continually reaching back and retrieving nourishment from their multiple pasts to enrich their shared present.*

The Ghanaian Adinkra symbol of Sankofa is frequently represented as a woodcut figure of a bird stretching its long neck to pluck an egg from its back. Sankofa means “return to the source and fetch” (Tedla, 1995, as cited in Bastos, 2009, p. 5), and is generally described as the “idea that the present should be continually informed by the past” (Porter, 2001, p. 37). In recent

years, the Sankofa symbol has been taken up by Black artists and researchers as creative inspiration (see Porter, 2001) and a framework through which to practice bold academic scholarship (see Mitchem, 2000; Hotep, 2008). In all cases, it has been taken up as a liberatory call that asks readers to take what is nourishing and useful from the past to enrich present and future action.

We four scholars and teacher educators have come together to enact the spirit of Sankofa in our own research; it was through Rachelle's work that we came to know and embrace the principles of Sankofa as we speak our work. The identity markers salient to us in this dialogue are female, Black, White, lesbian, heterosexual, and members of families with various academic labels. All of us live as individuals segregated, in varying degrees and types, within intellectual and social areas of marginalization—Rachelle, a writer and scholar whose research focuses on schooling narratives of Black girls and Black women; Jill, an educator who finds her identity as a lesbian a tense and fruitful fulcrum in her preservice teaching classes; Teri, a former fiction writer turned teacher educator whose experiences as a member of a family with learning disabilities constantly disrupts her assumptions of “schooling” and “literacy”; and JoBeth, the professor whose mentoring of these three developing scholars challenged her own notions of education and academia.

In the years that the four of us have worked together, we have realized a kind of melded Sankofa, one in which the bird not only stretches to fetch an egg from her own back but also recognizes the value of mingled pasts and varied heritages. In the Sankofa we practice, we not only respect and learn from JoBeth for her wise guidance but also through these traits that we use to describe each other: Rachelle's vision, Jill's courage, and Teri's innovations. Our Sankofa reaches back not only to our own ancestors, but to the nourishment gained from each of our

lineages. Likewise, we fetch and build from the thinkers who came before us—the rich offerings of hooks (1996) and Bell-Scott (1994), Freire (1970/1993) and Greene (1988), Foucault (1977/1995) and Harding (1991), to name just a few.

Embedded in the construct of Sankofa is not only the idea of the past but also the energy of the present and future; fetching does not happen in empty air. With that in mind, as teacher educators, our practice of Sankofa extends to the students with whom we work daily and, as we are constantly aware, to the students whom they will someday teach.

In this article, we present how the research each of us has done separately influences us collectively in our development as teacher educators and scholars. Just as our construct of Sankofa recognizes the multiplicity of heritages and influences, we found that when we spoke of our research, our voices could not be teased apart. In Rachelle’s research, Jill’s imprint is evident; in Teri’s research, JoBeth’s influence is clear. Similarly, we found that the traditional academic article format was not an apt representation for our thinking around Sankofa. It was critical for us that the cadence of our voices—reminiscent of the oral storytellings of our ancestors—be preserved. For that reason, we have constructed an unorthodox reading, a scholarly performance in which our four voices are interwoven with the voices of the many “ancestors” who have affected us, including the students, participants and teachers who have pushed our thinking. In addition, we include the voices of our scholarly ancestors, letting the words of Freire (1998) and Johnson-Bailey (2002), for example, speak for themselves.

The research studies we have each done are the data we have analyzed to show how we are living Sankofa as scholars. For this reading, we analyzed the following studies: Rachelle’s work on schooling narratives of Black women writers and scholars, whom she terms “Tin Women;” Jill’s work on how listening to her students led her to question her own resistances and

to focus on agentive early career teachers; and Teri's work on how her personal and professional experiences compelled her to adopt the stance of an "ability traitor." Twined through our presentations is the voice of JoBeth, who mentored the other three throughout their doctoral programs. The intermingling of our voices speaks to the power of Sankofa: we continually reach back to fetch and enrich our present with what is nourishing from our convergent and divergent pasts.

*Act I: Rachelle D. Washington--Tin Women*

**Rachelle:** The spirit of Sankofa provides the platform for us to tell our stories related to consideration of alternate methodologies, adoption of theoretical frameworks, evolution of methodologies, and examination of epistemologies and ontologies. Sankofa, a West Ghanaian word, has multiple meanings and implications; for instance, Sankofa represents the idea of "looking back to go forward."

**Jill:** Sankofa is alive in my work because where I have been and who I have learned from both haunt and inform my actions with whomever I am present. My stumbles have left gentle bruises that smooth the future path, and my successes become future blunders when I forget to be present with a current context. This cycle is how I live my work.

**Rachelle:** We want to give you the experience of traveling with us as we share our thinking about our research influences—past, present and future. As university literacy teacher educators we look back to look forward, as we conceive our futures as well as the futures of those we educate: preservice teachers, inservice teachers and graduate students as emerging scholars.

**Teri:** In my research, I invoke Sankofa as I look back to take not only what is positive and nurturing and needs cultivation, but also to decide what needs to be dislodged,

disrupted, broken up—so that if it is carried forward, it is carried forward in new ways that advance justice.

**Rachelle:** Sankofa spirit has ignited interest in Africanist customs and traditions, as well as those vested in culturally relevant connections to pedagogical delivery. Sankofa represents the wisdom of ancestors who can show the way to the future.

**JoBeth:** My critical theoretical framework constantly challenges me, and not so gently, both to look back at my work and the work of others and critique it, and to move forward by listening to and engaging with the voices of activist teacher scholars and agentive students.

**Rachelle:** Sankofa spirit is useful for me to look back to my short history as a researcher as a basis for creating the kind of synergy needed to go forward with knowledge and strength. I have argued, as has Dillard (2006), that “Black women as a cultural group ‘theorize’ and embody extensive life experiences which, while diverse, shape a coherent body” (p.25). To this end, Black women researchers must look back at their experiences, in general and schooling narratives, specifically, in a practice of qualitative inquiry.

My research influence: I taught elementary school in an area of Atlanta where pockets of poverty were deep. Yet, the students I encountered were not solely defined by society’s mappings. I saluted the little Black girls entering the classrooms with fresh ideas, fresh mouths, and fresh pressed heads or trendy natural tresses. These kindergarten and first grade girls arrived at school the first day embellished with bows, barrettes, and *bravada*. They navigated the classrooms and hallways with a certainty that rivaled adults maneuvering in a new setting. They took charge in

classroom discussions. They took charge on the playground even as their pressed back plaits gave way to unmanageable tresses. These little girls had purpose. The spirit of these young girls is in me; indeed, it leads me to consider the impact of their lived experiences and what propels girls like them to become teachers and teacher educators. I wanted to know their stories.

**bell:** [T]o bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed (hooks, 1992, p. 172).

**Rachelle:** To develop a plan of research that would illuminate silenced voices and erase pained faces of Black girls—whom I’ve taught, seen and *been*—I peer back and forward through mirrors that refract broken images. I draw from two cultural wells to help me talk about how to solder narrative inquiry to Black women’s lived experiences: Sankofa and *The Wiz* (Brown, 1979). I am particularly drawn to the Tin Man character for purposes of my scholarship among what I term *Tin Women*—Black women writers and researchers. Tin is a “malleable, silvery metallic element used to coat other metals to prevent corrosion” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/>). Tin’s metaphorical use signifies the search for the heart of stories. If we believe as Dorothy that we can “go home,” then through stories we can unveil cultural ideology. As the Tin Man searched for a heart, Tin Women search for the heart of their history and being in stories. These stories of teachers and teacher educators whom I have either researched or conversed with disrupt standard narratives of teaching and invite newer perspectives, paradigms and pedagogical possibilities. Narrative is the tin coating. Tin is not only malleable, but it preserves—in this case, *our stories*.

**Teri:** Narratives told by Black women offer cultural foci. Bell-Scott (1998) offers that our stories can “uncover the layers of our experience and stand us in the light so that our beauty can be seen, our souls healed, and our lives transformed” (p. xx).

Black women’s life stories reside at the tumultuous intersection of race, class, gender, religion, age, sexuality and various other subject groups.

**Rachelle:** Oral narratives as a mode of inquiry are malleable—like tin—and unlike some traditional structures used for inquiry. For example, one of my first interviews with another Black woman resulted in both of us feeling awkward as I plowed through an interview guide. We stared at each other and finally said: “Girl, this isn’t working!”

**JoBeth:** What came to mind in that moment was Etter-Lewis’s (1993) work and how she met her participants, Black women in the professions, at their kitchen tables and in living rooms.

**Rachelle:** I met Clovia on her farm. Visiting her reminded me of the delicate yet powerful nature of Black women inviting one another into private spaces. With my visit to Clovia’s an awareness of communal connections surfaced as we talked candidly and explored the terrain—physically and contextually. With each plunge into the earth, uprooting lemongrass and Mexican oregano, we dug deeper into conversation (Washington, 2006).

**Jill:** Regarding their schooling experiences in the apartheid south, many colleagues discussed that with desegregation, the tenuous position of how people viewed Black children entering and performing in their schools became evident. Pat, a noted university teacher literacy educator, shared her story.

**Pat:** *They told me that I could not participate in the State debate team meeting, but I did. That critical incident, followed by many more, led me to take carefully choreographed steps along the stony road propelled by self-determination and familial support. I have obtained advanced degrees, educational appointments and positions by cutting a swath along the road a long way from home (To read more dialogues, please see Washington, 2008).*

**Rachelle:** *We need to know the stories.* Tin's properties reveal it as one of few metals used to solder other metals together that might not otherwise occur. Tin is to other metals what Black women are to narratives.

**Teri:** hooks' (1996) assertion that "there is no one story of Black girlhood" (p xiii) melds with Henry's (1998) plea for Black women researchers—*Tin Women*—to devote some aspect of their work specifically to exploring schooling narratives of young Black girls. These calls warrant attention and action; Rachelle's work adds to the dearth of girlhood and schooling narratives while informing her and colleagues' praxis.

**Rachelle:** *Tin Women* present stories requiring special handling, precious and rare; yet, often hardened (coated) or battered from daily social and educational institutional challenges. Stories of the marginalized—our own and others—need deep consideration for telling. When we were in graduate school, Jill and I shared an independent study related to narratives. We pushed our thinking with help from hooks and Freire "who suggest that critical consciousness by coming face-to-face with contradictions in life that require a reexamination of values, cultural understanding and decision making . . ." (Dillard, 2006, p. 62). Through JoBeth's kneading, we read critical texts, engaged in rich conversations and considered ways to make stories an

integral part of our work; we were vulnerable as we sought to resist and transform our respective contested cultural spaces. Our spaces contested exclusionary dialogues—especially those related to race, gender, class, religion and sexual orientation in educational research. Our resistance brought forth a wellspring of ideas for our practice and praxis, especially ways to use personal experiences alongside of research texts. In our work with teacher education students and emerging scholars the opportunity to reflect on our teaching, research, and scholarship is ever present.

**JoBeth:** The rich stories told by Tin Women are extracted from multiple spaces—familial, communal, social, and intellectual. For instance, many of us talked about our grandmothers. While most grandmothers did not participate in higher education arenas, their life histories can be ushered into academic discourses by their granddaughters. Their life stories, like the stories of other Black women of their generation, leads to the development of theories, methodologies and research (Collins, 1990; Dillard, 2006; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997)It is precisely women like our grandmas whose subjective locations shift the locus of education to rearticulate what counts as research and/or theory.

**Teri:** *We need insulation.* James (2000) cautions about essentializing experiences of already marginalized populations. Our stories are not monolithic; instead our stories elevate our experiences beyond the angles as just race or gender.

**Elena:** I recall spending time with my grandmother and helping her with household chores while my grandfather worked as a carpenter during the day. I always enjoyed helping her wash clothes and hang them on the line to dry, and I loved sweeping, mopping, and setting the table for dinner. One day while I was helping to fold my

grandfather's newly washed and dried clothes, I told my grandmother, "When I grow up, I want to do housework like you, Grandmommie." I couldn't have been more than 5 or 6 years old at the time. She looked at me, sighed, and said, 'Oh, no, Elena, I don't want that for you. You'll never have a day's rest.' I recount this brief conversation as my grandmother's way of instilling, early on, the importance of my getting an education to 'improve my lot in life.' (Washington, 2006)

**Rachelle:** I think of my Grandma.

*Beads of sugar drip from the phone each time we speak – Grandma's voice is the sweetest that I know. She has used that sugary voice as a cheerleader for "book learning" as she calls it. Grandma was forced to abandon school at an early age. She worked as a domestic for over 30 years, never losing hope that her dedication to education would produce a legacy of formally educated kin with a better station in life. The kernels of knowledge that seemed in her eyes accessible to white folks' world charged her teachings of children. My grandmother relied on mother wit to direct her children and grandchildren... Even now when talking with my grandmother, who is plagued with Alzheimer's, her message is, "Get that paper, girl!"*

(Washington, 2006).

*Sidebar:* When I graduated, I traveled to see Grandma with paper in hand. A year later she was called home.

As the Tin Man in *The Wiz* (Brown, 1979) searched for a heart, Tin Women—Black women writers and researchers—search for the *heart* of stories.

**JoBeth:** We need to help dismantle stereotypes. Nina recalled how her mother signified the value of standing up for yourself and claiming the type of education you wanted...She pierced her words with the bitterness of being denied opportunities to reach her highest potential:

**Nina:** I had to push myself, I had to push myself to know, not to just fluff my way through school, but to actually do more than the average student. I distinctly remember I was in the 11th grade year. I was looking at colleges and where to go to college. I went to my counselor, a white man. He had pulled out all these different institutions, and the institutions that he presented to me were technical schools, they were, they weren't quote unquote elite, or A1 universities. They were not the top of the line schools, and that disturbed me. I went home. I actually was crying. I went home and told my mom and she was like, "Why are you are crying?" She got all upset and she pulled me aside and said, "Look, we need to go back. You need to talk to the counselor and tell him how that made you feel by him not presenting to you other alternatives. And that there were better schools out there." And sure enough, about an hour or so later—she was giving me time to recoup (laughing)—we went straight to the school! She said, "Look, you offended my daughter." And she made me tell him how I felt.

**Rachelle:** Finally, tin prevents corrosion. We prevent corrosion by using analysis tool(s) to capture and maintain the integrity of our stories. However, there is a caution to be considered when preserving the stories of others....

**Juanita:** “[O]verall, in the academic arena, disenfranchised groups, which include women, women of color, and poor people, are ‘othered’ in the telling of their stories” (Johnson-Bailey, 2002, p. 325).

**Rachelle:** I teach preservice teachers and graduate students. As a result of my ongoing work, all students are called upon to examine their subjectivities (Peskin, 1988). Students engage in scaffolding discussions of how their backgrounds—mostly privileged—impact their worldviews.

**Jill:** Black women’s stories extend the dialogue on authoring oneself and emerging no longer silenced or admonished by society. Indeed, Black women must tell their stories and move beyond the constraints that may limit their telling.

**Rachelle:** That we can find and examine ourselves in our work is useful as a barometer for shaping our lives, peering at our journeys, and capturing our transitions. As such, I desire to go forward in search of schooling and life stories related to schooling narratives of Black girls and Black women. My research and dialogues are framed within the constructs of Africanist cultural roots and traditions while simultaneously exposing issues relative to resistance, social justice, equity and humanity.

I leave you with a quote that holds me accountable each and every time I write:

“The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared with us. And in return, this sharing will allow us to write life documents that speak to the human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the lives gained and the lives lost by the people that we study” (Denzin, 1980, p.83).

*Act II: Jill Hermann-Wilmarth—Cyclical Listening*

**Jill:** When I started graduate school, it was after three years of teaching, first at a public school where students and families were an afterthought to the curriculum, and then at a private school where the experiences of our students were completely isolated, by

their privilege, from the realities of the larger communities in which we lived. As a religion major in college, I had read Freire's (1970/1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and had eagerly hoped to live the praxis that so inspired me when I entered the classroom. Like my young students and their families might have, I felt isolated as a teacher. I wasn't listening to my students, I wasn't being listened to as a teacher, we weren't listening to the world around us. I wanted to learn how to listen. To listen and then to act.

**Maxine:** “Does not one have to act upon one's freedom along with others—to take the initiative, to break through some boundary? Does not one have to claim what are called ‘human rights’ to incarnate them in the life of community?” (Greene, 1988, p. 3)

**Jill:** That first year of teaching and studying in graduate school was a time of reading and listening. And data gathering. I struggled with one particularly challenging student—Anthony—in that first year of teaching undergraduates.

**Anthony:** I didn't do the reading,  
You aren't listening to me.  
Because I'm different.

**Jill:** As annoying as his classmates and I found his persistent refusal to engage with the course material and his regular outbursts in class, Anthony would not go away. He forced me to engage. He forced me to listen. When he wrote me an email at the end of our two semesters together that told me that I wasn't the compassionate teacher that I thought I was, I wrote back. We dialogued. We figured it out. But it was just a letter. An

email that spoke what he couldn't say out loud. It wasn't planned. It was just an honest exchange.

**Paulo:** “I cannot escape being evaluated by the students, and the way they evaluate me is of significance for my modus operandi as a teacher. As a consequence, one of my major preoccupations is the approximation between what I say and what I do, between what I seem to be and what I am actually becoming” (Freire, 1998, p. 87).

**JoBeth:** Jill, this is important work you are doing. You are living your critical pedagogy in ways few teachers would do. I'm afraid I would have “counseled” Anthony out of teaching – and I most certainly would have gotten him out of my class. You chose to teach him. Tell that story. It will help others, like me.

**Jill:** At JoBeth's encouragement, I packed a box of data, saved all of the student emails from that year of teacher research on my hard drive and traveled to North Georgia for a qualitative writing retreat. When I looked through the copious amounts of data—notes about my students' engagements with children's literature, dialogue journals among and between myself and students, I saw trails of interest, and was excited to see that my thinking about my teaching was reaffirmed over and over. But what kept sticking out to me was how Anthony's voice was missing. He angered me in his absence. He frustrated me in his silence. He troubled me in his silent resistance. And, he encouraged me to *listen* and then to *act*.

**JoBeth:** Yes. That's it. That's what you write about. That's what you're still thinking about.

**Jill:** Freire (1970/1993) taught me that I was a part of the learning community. Anthony taught me to listen to the challenges and the discomforts. To the silent resistance of the nonparticipant. Author D taught me to listen to myself and my carefully checked

frustrations. As I explored the learning from Anthony, I needed to dialogue with wise guidance. Freire, hooks, Greene and Shor informed my thinking and entered into dialogue with me on the page. Writing through Anthony's letter and my response to it with Freire and hooks and Greene and Shor on my shoulders helped me to understand how the integration of research about myself and my students could change teaching. I let their words lay on top of Anthony and my emailed exchange until I could hear both of our voices. This dialogue that began happening in my head and on paper helped me to realize what I knew—that research and teaching were a cyclical process. (To read this dialogue, please see Hermann-Wilmarth, 2005.)

**Paulo:** "... there is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching" (Freire, 1998, p. 35).

**Jill:** Then I started really listening to my students, not only as a teacher who wanted to see and enact praxis in action, but as a lesbian who was a teacher in a religiously conservative teacher education classroom, realizing that, just as my students needed to be taken into account as we thought about curriculum and conversation and engagement, so did I. How were my silences inhibiting my teaching and complicit in their oppression? How could my silent resistance become constructive teaching? How could silence and resistance become dialogue and growth? What could this mean for me as a teacher and a researcher? What could this mean for my preservice teachers?

**Student:** You don't talk about gay stuff with elementary school students—it isn't appropriate.

**Student:** I'm a Christian, and I don't believe that *those* issues belong in the public school.

**Student:** It isn't an issue unless you make it one.

**Jill:** As I wrote previously about this study (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008):

*Comments like these and the vocal resistance to, or silent refusal to participate in, discussions of issues such as how race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or linguistic diversity affect the teaching and learning of language arts in elementary schools led me to wonder how I could engage with students who came from opposite ideological positions to the ones I was employing in my teaching. If my students—mostly white, mostly female, mostly traditionally aged college students in the Bible belt--associate me with discussions or readings that require them to interrogate their belief systems, would they resist anything that I had to say, therefore undermining the purpose of teacher education? Would my students give me labels such as “teacher with an agenda,” “bleeding-heart liberal,” or “that lesbian educator” rather than “teacher”? And, on the other side of the coin, would I ignore the needs of my resisting students, again undermining the purpose of teacher education? Would I label my resisting students with words like “bigot” and “close-minded” and meet their ideas with an eye roll rather than with the eye of a teacher engaged with a student? I formulated the question: How do you create the space for dialogue to occur within the context of a teacher education classroom? With this question as my guide, I used class sessions in which students discussed gay and lesbian issues in elementary education because my choices of gay- and lesbian-themed literature had in the past brought student resistance. Likewise, I had begun to recognize the ways that I was engaging in the same kinds of resistance that my conservatively Christian students employed—*

**Teri:** Look! That student is using yet another Bible verse to explain her objections to this children’s book!

**JoBeth:** These students don't think! They're just relying on religion to resist talking about their privilege. I'm so frustrated.

**Rachelle:** Why should I engage with students who claim that people like me have no business in the classroom? Who choose to believe that people like me aren't even there?

**Jill:** Examining my own behaviors, I recognized the silencing resistance and anger that I was accusing my own students of. I needed to find ways to engage with my students so that we both could leave the class having learned how to engage in classrooms with people who are different than we are. Who challenge our very way of looking at the world, and indeed living in it. As always, Freire guided me.

**Paulo:** “[D]ialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” and that dialogue occurs when “we reflect together on what we know and don't know” (Shor & Freire, 1987, pp. 98–99).

**Jill:** I asked the same question of my teaching that I'd asked of my relationship with Anthony:

**JoBeth:** How can I enter into dialogue and teach others to enter into dialogue with people and texts who, at my very core, I resist?

**Jill:** Again, as I have reported (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008):

*This research question guided me to listen, to ask, to be present with my students in an honest way that I never had been before. Rather than shutting down when students used religion to shut down discussions, I learned to ask questions, state my case, and invite further discussion. I learned to see resistance—my own and my students'—as a place for dialogue. As salient data. As awkward and engaging. Jianna was a student whose Christianity was on the table from the first five minutes of our first class. Biblical scripture rolled off of her tongue in every conversation—from talk about*

books, to conversation about the weekend, to her email signature. Her initial writing about texts with GLBT characters and articles discussing the inclusion of these texts in elementary school classrooms sparked a dialogue that I previously would have avoided.

**Jianna:** Both these articles promote the inclusion of homosexual literature in classrooms and curriculum and I am not okay with that. I am a Christian and for me homosexuality is a sin not because I say it is but because my God says it is. If homosexuals do not like that then that is their choice, but I love God and cannot accept something that grieves his heart.

**Jill:** I responded, “I am a Christian and don't believe that homosexuality is a sin, and neither do many other Christians. “

**Jianna:** Is this just somebody's opinion, or can you find scripture that supports your stance?

**Jill:** Settling into the cloistered office environment for that first interview, Jianna seemed initially hesitant, worried that our previous e-mails had started her off on the wrong foot:

**Jianna:** Yeah, I mean I guess with all of that I wrote down, I wanted to tell you that I don't want you to feel, like offended, because I don't want to come across that way, but I guess it's just defending how I feel about things, but I don't want to come across. . .

**Jill:** I tried to reassure her, “Yeah, well, we're both doing the same thing. We're both defending where we're coming from.”

**Jianna:** OK.

**Jill:** And this began our first face-to-face dialogue about how we could, from our own particular religious positionings, address the needs of students for whom gay and lesbian issues are pertinent. This initial conversation set the groundwork for our future dialogue.

*We listened to each other talk about Biblical text, showing each other that we did have a common text even though we thought about that text differently. By giving each other the respect of listening to the other's positions—(a necessity of creating dialogic space) and ideas about Biblical text and reader response—even when we disagreed with them), each of us let the other know that an expression of difference was acceptable. We began with an interview exchange: one person asking questions—(me, the teacher, researcher, and traditional holder of knowledge) and one person answering them (Jianna, the student, the researched, and traditional receiver of knowledge).*

But then we disrupted the paradigm of banking education (Freire, 1970/1993) and entered a paradigm where we were both knowers, interested in sharing our understandings with each other. She and the other students in that class helped me to see how we could both fully be a part of a classroom where we felt ideologically and intellectually challenged. How our thinking about teaching and about children who look, act, believe, live differently than we do could become more inclusive even as we held tightly to the beliefs and ideas that drove our very lives. We were listening and we were acting. And, for me, it was a continuing of the teaching and research cycle. I continue to ask: How can pedagogical practice and research benefit from understanding what we want to address? In my current work, this research/teaching cycle plays in different ways. I teach MEd students, most of whom are teachers in local elementary schools. We talk in class about critical literacy, notions of diversity

and literacy, and thinking about who our students are as we work with them on a daily basis.

**Teacher:** But, I'm stuck in this scripted program.

**Teacher:** I don't have time to "do" critical stuff with my students. I have to meet all of these benchmarks.

**Teacher:** These case studies we're reading take place in schools that are nothing like mine. I can't do this. My kids aren't ready.

**Teacher:** This is really great, and I'd like to bring this lens to my classroom, but I just don't know how.

**Jill:** As I listened to my students I became frustrated for them and by them. And they seemed frustrated by the expectation that they could transform a restricted curriculum with timelines and objectives that were put into place long before their students entered their classrooms into one where student and teacher choices and lives were central to the curriculum. In short, I saw my own experiences as a classroom teacher reflected in my students. They were either silent with me about the chasm between what they said in class about critical literacy and what they were willing to do, or they were silent in their classrooms about critical literacy—they wanted to take it on, but had no idea how to start. One semester long course didn't seem long enough to help those who wanted to break the cycle of believing in a pedagogy—critical literacy—that couldn't seem to find a home in their classrooms. It was those latter silences that I began listening to.

This listening led me to start a teacher study group with five former students who were interested in bringing the lens of critical literacy to their work with children.

These teachers want their students to think beyond the classroom walls, engage in dialogue with texts in new ways, trouble the ideas that either privilege or marginalize them. This, of course, looks different in each classroom. I went to visit Heather's third grade class recently. Driving through the depressed landscape to this school in the middle of shuttered businesses on a cold Midwestern morning does not offer much hope. I entered the classroom of 23 students, three of whom are Latino, 18 are African American, and two are white, as she was closing writer's workshop. As students move haphazardly to the gathering space on the rug, Heather looks at me and says, "I want them to know what I'm doing." *Critical Literacy*. She just writes it on the blank piece of chart paper that she's sitting next to.

**Heather:** (To her students): What do those words mean? I've been studying them with Jill, and I want to learn about them with you."

**Jill:** I watch in amazement as she listens to her students explore the words and tie them to experiences that they've had. When they seem unclear about what the two words mean when put next to each other, she listens again.

**Heather:** Hmm. You and you stand up.

**Jill:** She's pointed to one white student and one black student. She holds up a copy of a Junie B. Jones book.

**Heather:** Which one of these girls looks like they belong in this book?

**Jill:** Heather is showing me, and in turn the other teachers in our study group, how listening and acting and engaging with her students where they are and where she is can look. She shares her thinking and her learning with her students as she teaches them to think and learn. As I begin to write through this data, I begin to understand that dialogue

wears many faces. Heather's dialogue with her students has pushed them into a dialogue with books that helps them think about who is and who is not present in their classroom (and to challenge Heather to bring those who are missing in!). Our dialogue with the other teachers in our study group has pushed other teachers to just ask, "What is critical literacy?" with their 7, 8, and 9-year old students. And writing through Anthony's letter helped me learn that the central tenet of my analysis is that I have to listen to my own writing. The writing process, its influences—students, theorists, colleagues help me constantly revisit and rethink my understanding of data. I am writing through this data, wondering what it means. What I know is that it has informed my teaching of undergraduates, my conversations with other teachers and professors, and has helped me learn to be vulnerable with my own students in new ways.

And, as I listen to and with my students and their students, I am listening—always—to Teri and Rachelle. I see Rachelle's knowing eyebrow when I remember how my white privilege has shaped how I hear what I hear. "Whose stories are filtered in what ways?" that eyebrow asks. And, once the story is on paper, Teri stirs it up. Breaks it down. Reminds me to rewrite it. And again. Opening my thinking wide on the paper through a meandering writing process-based analysis of data has leaked into my teaching again. It has also brought me full circle. And, that circle is bigger and wider and more complex.

*Act III: Teri Holbrook--Becoming an ability traitor*

**Teri:** I am a writer; I love words. There was a time when I couldn't get enough of them. I immersed myself in them, wallowed in them, loved the sound, the way they felt on my tongue. Growing up, I drew pictures of what my dream house would look like. Mine had no walls—only books. What I didn't understand at the time was how what I framed as my "love of words" was part of a power relation that privileged me at the expense of others. I didn't understand how my "writerness" was used to differentiate, to rank, to sort.

**Brenda:** Hey, Teri!

**Teri:** That's my friend Brenda. We're in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Brenda:** I have a funny idea. Let's play a joke on Ms. Briar.

**Teri:** Ms. Briar was our 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher. She took writing very seriously. She loved me. I wrote the best papers for her, full of complex sentences and rare vocabulary. I always got As in her class. Brenda always got Bs. So we had the brilliant idea to swap papers and to put each other's name on them. Two guesses what happened: I got a B; Brenda got an A. We both got into trouble.

**Ms. Jensen:** Teri, can I see you a minute?

**Teri:** That's my 10<sup>th</sup> grade History teacher, Ms. Jensen. She's very smart and scares me a bit.

**Ms. Jensen:** Teri, I've been talking with the other teachers, and we're very impressed with your writing abilities. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I've decided that schools don't always know the best way to teach students like you. So I've decided that instead of the regular objective test the rest of the class will take this Friday, I'm going to give you an essay test. I'll also let you develop your own questions. I really want to see what you know.

**Teri:** And then there was Ms. Johnson. She wasn't even my teacher. But I once heard her talking to my parents after a PTA meeting.

**Ms. Johnson:** I just wanted to let you know how impressed we all are with Teri's writing. I think she has the potential to become a writer. But it's important that you help her cultivate her ability. Give her lots of experiences. Take her places; challenge her to think. Expose her to the world. She could be an author someday.

**Teri:** My parents did, and so I became an author. But being an author brought another kind of privilege, an authority that came with the aura of being someone who could put words on paper in an effective way. You have to understand that this was all very cozy for me. It was comfortable being complicit. I don't know why other people go through their own personal paradigm shifts, but for me it was because writing—or rather the socio-cultural use of writing to elevate, discriminate, differentiate, divide, sort, rank, promote, silence—hit home when, as a mother, I found our family labeled a family with learning disabilities. Writing could no longer be comfortable for me; it could no longer be convenient or cozy or a source of contentment. One of my professors said that people come to poststructural thought at a time of crisis, and for me, that labeling was a time of crisis. All kinds of constructs I had previously believed in died. The author was dead, the psychologist was dead, the scientist was dead, the artist was dead. All of these authorities that had at one time been Truths with a capital "T" (Cahnmann, 2003) for me became conditions that made certain actions possible. They made the labeling of ability and disability, normality and abnormality, acceptable and unacceptable possible. To grapple with this transformation in my thinking, I did what

I had always done--I immersed myself into readings, specifically post structural readings.

**JoBeth:** (In response to a frustrated teacher's story of a difficult day during a graduate class) I don't believe any child should be thrown away. As teachers, we have responsibility for every child.

**Teri:** That's JoBeth, my major professor in graduate school. She respected the thinking I was doing using post structural theory, but whenever we would meet, she had this persistent question in her eye.

**JoBeth:** Teri, you are really good at thinking and talking and writing. But what are you going to *do*? What *action* are you going to take on behalf of students and their families?

**Teri:** What action was I going to take? I could read! But I had a child who was in crisis, too. I couldn't say, so, you have a teacher who doesn't want you in her class? I know, why don't we read some Derrida? I had to take my newly developing poststructuralist thinking and put it into critical action.

**Michel:** "It is in fact because I thought I recognized something cracked, dully jarring, or dysfunctional in things I saw, in the institutions with which I dealt, in my relations with others, that I undertook a particular piece of work. . . ." (Foucault, qtd. in Rajchman, 1985, p. 36 ).

**Teri:** I had to face the discourses that had privileged me as a writer.

**George:** "In the Western tradition of philosophy there is a long-standing presumption... that a well-ordered mind produces well-ordered prose, and that disordered prose signifies a disordered mind . . . (Pullman, 1999, p. 24).

**Teri:** I had to push back against the discourses that were objectifying my family.

**Michel:** “The practice of placing individuals under ‘observation’ is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures. . . . Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 227-228)

**Teri:** I had to read and learn from people who were pushing back against the discourses that were harming my family.

**Nirmala:** “The disabled student embodies the ‘unruly’ subject whose physiological excesses are seen as disrupting the disciplined control of schooling” (Erevelles, 2000, p. 34).

**Teri:** I had to find another way of thinking. I had to find another way of being. I had to give up the comfort, the coziness, the compliance, the confederacy that had privileged me—all with the best intentions—since childhood. In short, I had to betray myself.

**Sandra:** “We feminists (women and men) must engage in [the] same struggles as whites against racism, as heterosexuals against heterosexism, as economically overprivileged people against class oppression, as Westerners against imperialism. . . . Let us develop traitorous agendas on behalf of these other projects so that we may learn better how to be ‘disloyal to civilization’ in all the ways it so richly deserves” (Harding, 1991, p. 292).

**Teri:** The one category missing from Harding’s list, written 17 years ago, is ability. I realized that I had to struggle against ableism. I had to be disloyal to, and develop a traitorous agenda against a normative agenda that used print literacy as a mechanism for sorting, ranking, and erasing students with learning disabilities. I became an ability traitor (Holbrook, forthcoming). I built on the concept of the race traitor to define the kind of action I wanted to take.

**Alison:** Race traitors are “privilege-cognizant whites who refuse to animate the scripts whites are expected to perform, and who are unfaithful to worldviews whites are expected to hold” (Bailey, 2000, p. 284).

**Teri:** So as an ability traitor, what scripts should I refuse to animate, what worldviews should I be unfaithful to? I became unfaithful to writing. In order to deprivilege writing, it is important to me to loosen the constraints in higher ed that promote writing as the best way of sense-making, research and scholarship (Holbrook & Zoss, 2009). I do this in two primary ways. The first is to push back against academic genres that define certain types of writing as the only acceptable way to present research. The second is to employ image-making as a way of knowing, as fertile and vital as writing to get at what I think.

**Jill:** But you’re not “employing image-making here”....

**Teri:** There are strong institutional reasons why image-making is infrequently used in academic journals beyond a limited place for tables, charts and, occasionally, photographs. But what I am getting at is the role of image-making in thinking, specifically in my thinking as a writer. Images have always played a crucial role in my thinking, writing, research and scholarship. Jill speaks of the writing –process based analysis that she does. For me, writing, of course, is part of my analysis process, but so, too, is image-making. In my development as a writer, I have consistently squashed the role of image in my work. My training as a researcher also asks me to downplay and even negate how I use image to think. But by participating in that negating, I am participating in a systematic oppression embedded in academia that rests on the privileging of writing. To push back against that privileging, to betray my self-as-

writer, I have to make visible the role of the image in my thinking. I am doing this through a series of collage notebooks, sculptures and photographs that do not just capture my thinking but *are* my thinking. Furthermore, it is my stance that I could not reach the same conclusions in my research outside of betraying the power and role of writing.

**Rachelle:** In speaking of arts and education, Eisner (2002) writes, “Getting smart in any domain requires at the very least learning to think within a medium. What are the varieties of media we help children get smart about? What do we neglect?”

**Teri:** Yes. I am working hard to get smart because for too long I have been ignorant of how my privilege acts within social structures that are employed to define normality. But it’s not enough to ask what media we neglect in academia. We need to also ask what children/students/persons we neglect/stigmatize in education because of how academia’s privileging of print literacy.

**Jill:** And not just because of the privileging of print literacy. All types of stigmatizing occur in education. Your mother voice, my mother voice—we have to join them to challenge the stigmatizing of children.

**Teri:** Yes, the development of my mother voice is one of the ways that Jill nourishes my thinking. Together we have drawn on our own experiences as mothers to understand the currents in education that affect families who have been placed in marginalizing categories, including families with disabilities, and gay and lesbian families.

**Jill:** But I repeat: How are you acting as an ability traitor here? You’re not image-making now.

**Teri:** Are we not? What image creation are we asking readers to do when we sculpt an academic paper as a script, when we put on multiple faces, move in and out of each other’s

stories? What are readers seeing in their minds when we script our ancestors—both the scholars from whose work we have drawn and the people who act as participants in our research? Are we not creating the conditions for a kind of image-making that transgresses the norms of academic writing? We are all engaged in betrayal here. I am the first to admit that this betrayal work is risky business—not everyone is going to see my work as data, data analysis and data representation. But it is a risk I am willing to take—with precautions. For example, I divide my work into two categories: those projects that fall within a conventional framework and show that I can do the work as the academy requires and those that probe for newer paths.

**JoBeth:** But Teri, as your major professor, I encouraged you to consider the hazards and suggested ways to traverse them. How do you talk to your graduate students about the risks of betrayal? What are you carrying forward?

**Teri:** You're right. When I work with graduate students I have to both encourage and caution. I have to be explicit about the risks as I see them. Be thoughtful and wary, I tell them. More to the point, be smart. How do you do work that is critical to you, that pushes you in the ways you crave, while gaining a place within academia? This is a troubling question, and one with which I continually wrestle. Some academics have argued that betrayal work should not be done by non-tenured, tenure track faculty, that that is what tenure is for. But what do you do when you perceive betrayal as ethical work, when you cannot conceive of your *self* outside of betrayal? In talking again about the race traitor, Bailey (2000) wrote, "At present, white identity is constituted by and benefits from injustice. Transformative work demands that whites explore how to rearticulate our identities in ways that do not depend on the subordination of people

of color” (p. 284). As an ability traitor, I must take up parallel work. I must disrupt unexamined practices that allow me to benefit from injustice. Drawing on Sankofa, I must disrupt in order to carry forward.

### *Discussion*

The concept of Sankofa calls upon us to examine the past for what is nourishing and beneficial with the aim of carrying it into the future. In our work as teacher-scholars, we find ourselves in constant acts of Sankofa as we explore the works of academics, listen to the voices of preservice and in-service teachers, and think how best to encourage the development of graduate students in their own growth as scholars, teachers and researchers. In this article, we analyzed three studies to show how our enactment of Sankofa—the reaching back to bring forward—influences our development as teacher-scholars.

In weaving our voices together, we are reminded once again how we nourish each other, drawing on the collegial environment we began cultivating in our early years in academia. We recognize in one another strengths that both complement and supplement our own. To become stronger scholars, we realized, we benefit from our communion; we saw something in each other individually that strengthened us all.

But we want to caution that Sankofa is not a simple act of building on the past. Sankofa forces us to examine both the productive and destructive. In all our work, we are responding to something in the past that disturbs us—the absence of Black women’s and girls’ stories, our own resistance to student resistance, the socio-cultural construction of labels within education. This examination of the destructive /productive makes for a creative tension that compels us to engage in intense reflective work. What, as Foucault described, are those “dully jarring”—or, frequently, sharply jangling—events and constructions of the past that need to be dislodged and possibly re-

purposed for a better future? In this sense, we avoid the dichotomies of negative/positive, nourishing/depriving, or healthy/unhealthy. Past elements—both the jarring and the pleasing—can provide fodder for a more hopeful future.

We are also aware of the risk-taking that is inherent in the practice of Sankofa. Examinations of the past always point to problems of the present, and as academics, we participate in present structures that continue to support marginalizing actions. The heart of our work, we believe, is to confront and disrupt the aspects of those structures that delimit individuals in ways that mark, stigmatize, and silence.

In another popular framing that is frequently used on web-based discussions of the term, Sankofa has an added dimension of “to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge” (Wikipedia, 2009). One of the charges we give ourselves is the benevolent use of the knowledge that we help construct through our scholarship and teaching. When we do the destructive work of dislodging elements of the past to nourish the present, we constantly trouble the implications—what are the implications for doing betrayal work, for asking students to engage with their own biases, for conducting research that calls upon others to give us their stories? What are our own responsibilities in the quest to use knowledge benevolently in the aid of positive change?

These are among the mulling questions we have fetched from the past to carry into the future. We carry them with the hope that they enrich.

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