

# SHOULD I LET MY TOES CROSS?

## THE JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS THROUGH CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

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I often find myself staring at my feet, particularly my third toe, which seems to be moving closer and closer to my second, looking as if one day soon the third toe will completely cross over the second. It's a peculiar sight, one that many would consider a minor deformity. This condition, medically known clinodactyly and commonly called overlapping toes (Hagedorn et al., 2013), is more than just a physical trait; it's a symbol of my heritage, a connection to my grandmother, and a reminder of my African American lineage. My grandma had this same toe overlap, and she wore it with a sense of pride, a badge of honor tied to our family's roots.

### LOST CONNECTIONS: FEELING THE WEIGHT OF CULTURAL ERASURE

My grandmother, Maddie Lou Skinner, was born in the early 1930s in Texas. She married my grandfather in the 1950s and went on to have eight children, later raising two of her grandchildren after one of her daughters passed away unexpectedly. Maddie Lou worked hard and achieved what many in her neighborhood could not—she owned a home in North Tulsa. Though it was not in the best part of town, it was her own, a testament to her perseverance and dedication. After her husband passed away in the early 1980s, my grandmother held on to her home. She managed the upkeep, paid the property taxes, and ensured that the petty neighborhood crime did not encroach on her serene haven. While Maddie Lou did not engage in the violence or gang activity surrounding her oasis, she was deeply involved in her primarily Black, low-income neighborhood. She attended church every Sunday and shopped at the Piggly Wiggly every Saturday afternoon. Fried chicken was her specialty, and she knew exactly how to affix the aluminum foil onto her TV antenna to catch her morning and early afternoon programs. If you lived near 52nd St. N, you knew Maddie Lou, her chicken, and her kids.

I was young when I first noticed my grandmother's overlapping toes. She never let them stop her from wearing sandals in the summer or slippers around the house. Those toes were a part of her, and she embraced them fully. They didn't hinder her from standing over the stove to make dinner, expertly frying chicken and baking cornbread, or walking down the aisles at church as an usher, greeting everyone with a warm smile. Maddie Lou moved with a grace that belied the quirks of her feet, her steps steady and assured. Her toes, a physical manifestation of her resilience, were always on display, a testament to her comfort in her own skin. On weekends, as we sat in the back seat of my mom's car taking grandma to run errands, my siblings and I would giggle at the sight of those toes. They seemed so entertaining to us then, a source of innocent amusement. We would whisper and laugh, pointing them out as she slipped into her shoes. But even in our childish teasing, there was an unspoken respect for our grandmother, who, despite her small physical imperfections, stood tall and proud in everything she did. Those toes became a symbol of her strength and authenticity, a reminder of the woman who wore them without a hint of self-consciousness.

Growing up, my mother worked tirelessly to shield me from the negative stereotypes and hardships often associated with our race and people who called our side of town home. She believed that, by providing me with a buffer from these harsh realities, she could offer me a better chance at success and acceptance in a world that often judged us unfairly. In her quest to protect me, she enrolled me in schools on the opposite side of town from where we lived. In those academic spaces, I was one of the few Black students. My mother's decision to send me to a school on the south side was rooted in hope that the new environment would offer more opportunities and less prejudice. She emphasized the importance of behaving in a manner that would not draw negative attention. Inadvertently, this protective strategy distanced me from many aspects of my heritage. I missed out on the rich cultural traditions, stories, and communal experiences that form the backbone of African American identity. Family gatherings and neighborhood cookouts where our culture was celebrated were few and far between, replaced by activities that would help me fit into the predominantly white spaces we occupied.

My formal education, too, seemed designed to assimilate rather than celebrate diversity. The curriculum rarely included the contributions and histories of people who looked like me. Instead, it promoted a narrative that glorified a singular, often exclusionary perspective. This educational approach stripped away layers of my cultural identity, replacing them with a sense of otherness and a constant reminder that I needed to conform to succeed. Classrooms and textbooks lacked the representation and affirmation of Black excellence and resilience. Teachers, though well-meaning, often glossed over or entirely omitted the significance of Black history beyond slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. This erasure left me with a fragmented understanding of my heritage, one that was pieced together from the occasional family story or the few books I found on my own that celebrated Black culture. As a result, I grew up with a sense of disconnect, feeling neither fully accepted by the mainstream culture I was immersed in nor fully connected to my own. This disconnect left me yearning for a deeper understanding of and connection to my roots, a desire to reclaim the parts of my identity that had been suppressed in the name of protection and assimilation.

## RECONNECTING: IMAGINING INCLUSIVE AND CULTURALLY SUSTAINING CLASSROOMS

As an educator, I grapple daily with the weight of the impact my teaching can have on students' identities and cultural expressions. The thought of inadvertently contributing to the erasure of a student's cultural identity troubles me deeply and stirs a profound sense of personal unease. My role at a higher education institution comes with the immense responsibility of not merely advocating for inclusion, acceptance, and authenticity but actively weaving these values into the very fabric of the educational experience.

For me, creating such an environment goes far beyond adding diverse content to the syllabus. It means embracing culturally sustaining teaching methods that honor and build upon each student's unique background and experiences. This approach involves more than just recognizing cultural differences; it's about actively engaging with and celebrating these differences in a way that enriches the learning experience for everyone (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). One of the ways I hope to achieve this is by incorporating students' cultural experiences into the curriculum. This might involve integrating texts, examples, and perspectives that reflect their backgrounds or encouraging students to share their own stories as



part of our learning process. By doing so, I aim to make the classroom a space where diverse voices are not only heard but also valued and integrated into our collective understanding.

Another key aspect is fostering a classroom environment where students see their cultural identities as assets rather than barriers. This means using pedagogical strategies that are responsive to diverse learning styles and needs and providing support that helps students bridge any gaps between their cultural contexts and academic expectations. It also involves being mindful of the power dynamics in the classroom, ensuring that every student feels respected and empowered to contribute their perspectives. Specifically, leaning on the work of Paris (2021), I am to let go of many white-centered ideologies, ways of thinking, and related educational policies and practices, to embrace new ones that are shaped by unique relationships, affiliations, identities, and personal experiences.

In striving towards these goals, I recognize that creating a truly inclusive environment is an ongoing and often challenging endeavor. Crafting such a space requires me to continuously reflect on my teaching practices, confront any biases that may arise, and adapt my methods to better support all students. Yet, as I work to help others find and embrace their authentic selves, I find that this journey also contributes to my own sense of wholeness. By guiding students in their quest for authenticity and self-expression, I too am able to gain greater insight into my own identity and purpose (hooks, 1994). This mutual journey toward understanding and empowerment strengthens our connection and reinforces the belief that our personal and collective growth are deeply intertwined. Although achieving a perfectly inclusive environment remains a challenging and sometimes elusive goal, I am committed to this journey with the hope that my efforts will not only help each student feel valued and empowered but also contribute to my own sense of fulfillment and wholeness.

## RECONCILING: ANALYZING THE COMPLEXITIES OF INCLUSION AND AUTHENTICITY

As an adult, I now recognize my mom's pure intentions in shielding me from negative stereotypes and hardships. However, I also see how these actions distanced me from my cultural roots. I appreciate how difficult her decisions must have been, especially as I prepare to start my own family. Reflecting on my experiences, I realize that, once you separate from your culture, it's hard to reconnect. This has made me think critically about my choices and the values behind them. To firmly root myself back into my culture, I believe I must actively participate in efforts that uplift and celebrate it. The question of whether to "fix" my toes is not just about aesthetics or comfort. It's about identity, heritage, and the internal struggle of reconciling these with the pressures of modern society. On one hand, I worry that leaving them as they are might eventually affect my gait, a practical concern that cannot be ignored. On the other, altering them feels like erasing one of the last remnants of my cultural inheritance.

This internal conflict draws me closer to the work of one of my favorite Black Feminist theorists, Patricia Hill Collins. Collins articulates the concept of the "outsider within" status that many Black women experience, a notion that resonates deeply with my situation. As an individual who is both part of and apart from my culture, I navigate the complex space between embracing my heritage and conforming to societal expectations (Collins, 1986). Black Feminist Theory (BFT) emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, acknowledging that my identity is shaped by multiple, overlapping social factors, including race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Collins (1990) asserts that Black women's experiences cannot be understood through a single lens



but must be examined through the intersecting systems of oppression that impact their lives. My overlapping toes, though seemingly minor, symbolize a broader struggle for acceptance and self-definition within a society that often marginalizes Black women. These toes are not merely a physical characteristic; they are an integral part of my story, my history, and my identity as a Black woman. Collins' work underscores the importance of embracing our full selves, including the parts that society may deem undesirable or inconvenient (Collins, 2000). My overlapping toes are a manifestation of this idea, representing the tension between societal norms and personal authenticity. They serve as a constant reminder that my identity is multifaceted, and that true empowerment comes from acknowledging and valuing all aspects of myself, even those that deviate from conventional standards of beauty and propriety.

This concept of embracing the full self is crucial in understanding the broader implications of BFT. As Collins (1998) discusses, the power dynamics within society often force Black women to compartmentalize their identities, presenting only the parts deemed acceptable by mainstream culture. However, the act of embracing and integrating all aspects of one's identity, including those parts considered unconventional, is a form of resistance against these oppressive structures. My overlapping toes challenge societal expectations and norms, compelling me to confront the dissonance between who I am and who society expects me to be. In doing so, they push me towards a deeper understanding of myself and my place within the cultural and social landscape. They remind me that the journey towards self-acceptance and empowerment is inherently tied to the broader struggle for social justice and equality. By fully embracing all aspects of my identity, I practice a form of resistance that aligns with the core principles of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000). This approach advocates for a holistic and intersectional understanding of identity and empowerment. As I apply these principles and work for the benefit of the entire Black community, I reconnect with my cultural roots and find my place within it.

## **FUSION: INTEGRATING IDENTITY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS**

I have talked to a surgeon. There is a simple procedure to get my toes fixed. It's an outpatient procedure that only takes about 45 minutes. The procedure involves taking the knuckle out of my third toe and fusing the bones back together in a straight form. The recovery involves one week on crutches and three weeks in a walking boot. Though all surgery has risks, this one seems pretty minor. However, solidifying the connection to my roots in a way that uplifts my community while allowing me to embrace the pieces of myself I have picked up along my journey carries many risks and a long recovery. This fusion of identity is more complex than a surgical procedure; it requires an ongoing commitment to integrating my cultural heritage with the diverse experiences that have shaped me.

I recognize the oddity in feeling compelled to keep a minor deformity as one of the only ways to stay true to myself. Nevertheless, this small physical characteristic serves as a poignant reminder of my heritage and the strength of my lineage. It is a tangible link to my grandmother and the resilience she embodied. Embracing this aspect of my identity, however unconventional, is a form of reclaiming and honoring my cultural roots. Moreover, the danger of embracing my heritage as a Black woman in academia is ever-present. Academia is not always welcoming to those who challenge the status quo, especially when it comes to issues of race and identity. The call to help others find themselves, to encourage authenticity and cultural pride, may not be universally embraced. This path involves navigating spaces where my efforts to uplift and



empower others might be met with resistance or even hostility. Nevertheless, I realize that this is a risk I must take.

The true fusion lies in this intricate balance—honoring where I come from while confidently stepping into my future. By choosing to retain my overlapping toes, I am embracing a tangible reminder of my heritage, acknowledging the strength and resilience embedded in my lineage. This decision is a step toward healing the cultural disconnection I have felt, forging a path that respects both my ancestral roots and the person I am becoming. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the broader narrative of cultural preservation and empowerment, knowing that the journey toward authenticity, while fraught with challenges, is essential for both personal and communal growth. For now, I have decided to keep my toes as they are. While I may choose to have the surgery in the future, for the time being, I will use my overlapping toes as a foundation to embrace and lean into this work of cultural reclamation and personal authenticity.

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