Eerie Silence: On Negotiating Student Silence and Critical Inquiry in the Black Speculative Fictions Classroom

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> During the discussion, audience members enumerated for each other the crimes of student silence: students who do not volunteer to speak in class; students who seem uncomfortable, even resentful, when called on; students who appear unwilling to speak to partners and small groups; students who seem to strive for single-word answers whenever possible. We talked about the particular topics that seemed to provoke student silence, challenging texts, the wisdom of our professional discourse, and the imperative to get students talking.
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> – *Between Speaking and Silence*, Mary Reda[1]

1 INTRODUCTION

The excerpt quoted above, from Mary Reda's *Between Speaking and Silence*, describes the discussion that ensues in response to an experience in Reda's composition class. In this classroom experience (which she shares in a paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication), students "hide behind" the silence of in-class private writing. As Reda explains, the determination of students to not say anything (to just write) was suggestive of a passivity that demanded some investigation. However, for the teachers of composition who were present at the conference, this student behavior was all too familiar, and was clear proof of students' hostility, resistance, and lack of preparation.[2]

Throughout this study, I describe my experiences teaching Black speculative fiction courses and the strategies I employed to harness student silence in productive

ways. Specifically, I incorporated writing assignments and peer-sharing activities in the hopes of encouraging greater verbal participation from students who were initially reluctant to engage in classroom discussions. Foregrounding writing practices such as Focused Freewriting and the Dialectical Notebook in these classes allowed students to explore/process their thoughts via these iterations of high-order writing and thinking, in ways that facilitated inquiry and dialogue in the classroom.

Before I proceed, let me clarify a few important points. The study is framed as a personal narration of my experience teaching two General Education (Gen Ed) courses in the Department of English at Illinois State University: IDS 121A19 *Texts and Contexts*, and ENG 125 *Literary Narrative*. On the university's course directory website, ENG 125 is described as a course that demands "critical reading and analysis of literary narratives," whereas IDS 121A19 is an "interdisciplinary writing-intensive course focusing on significant humanities texts in relationship to their historical and cultural contexts."

In both courses, one of the foremost pedagogical imperatives is to facilitate student ability to assess knowledge or information. Both courses encourage a cognitive practice of inquiring *into* the literary text and considering the ways in which events imagined in the text may be associated with a cultural or social experience. This is the first point I would like to clarify: from the course descriptions, it is evident that these courses will be better served in a classroom dynamic that displaced the vertical, more traditional teacher-student relationship where knowledge is assumed to transfer top-to-down. Instead, a dialogic, collaborative, inquiry-based approach where both student and instructor co-construct knowledge is offered as a more viable classroom dynamic. By default, student silence seems counter-intuitive to this pedagogical goal.

Participating in the summer workshops at the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) inspired my use of writing as a pedagogical tool for inquiry and collaborative learning in my classes. Later, in the fall of 2022, I joined IWT's two-year professional fellowship, which aims to hone the skills of writing faculty in applying writing-rich teaching methods to liberal arts and sciences education. A core objective of IWT is to explore diverse ways of using writing as a tool for inquiry and student-driven, student-centered learning.

Another point I want to highlight is that I do not intend for the experiences and suggestions for student learning and teaching I explore here to be regarded as prescriptive or generalizable. In this respect, I wish to foreground the subjectivity of my teacher experience and my particular, embodied subject position of a Ghanaian (Black) man teaching in a cultural-social context of which I am not a native.

The final point I want to establish is that this personal, teacher reflection is informed by two pedagogical objectives: first, I wish to explore the nature of student

silence as it happened (or as I remember it) in the Gen Ed classes I taught, and to speculate or theorize on how/why silence occurred the way it did. Second, I want to explore how I deployed Focused Freewriting, and the Dialectical Notebook, as writing practices that inform high order thinking to enable the kind of dialogic, collaborative learning situation I intended in these classes. In reflecting on this particular point, I explain that student silence is, or can be, a valuable pedagogical resource which can be molded in ways that respond to, and is cognizant of the diversity of student learning/learners. In this reflection, I wish to foreground the analogical ethos of speculative fictions: that the texts we engaged with in these classes offered multiple opportunities for students to consider, theorize and critique, in what ways the social worlds that they know and recognize were narrated in these alternative storyworlds. Considered this way, student learning, as I hoped it would happen in my classes, was always practical, socially embedded, and connected to a real, social world. Student writing and the dialogue that ensued in class were always student-driven and oriented. In the dialogic classroom, student silence is not evidence of passivity or resistance to learning, but an invaluable moment to process thought via writing.

2 DESCRIPTION OF COURSES AND A BRIEF NOTE ON (PEDAGOGICAL) RATIONALE

In "Succeeding in the Face of Doubt," Stephanie Adams narrates her experience as the first Black faculty member in the College of Engineering and Technology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and how her embodied subjectivity as a Black person "intervened" in her experience at the school. I allude to Adams's experience for two reasons: like Adams, I was a Black educator, and like Adams, I was teaching in a midwestern school. However, more to the point of why I am citing Adams here, she makes the compelling claim that "students are more concerned about whether their professor is competent and compassionate than whether he or she looks like them."[3] For Adams, her Black "teacher-body" became visible only in relation to administrators and amongst faculty; her embodied position as a Black professor was never an issue in her classes. While I share the optimism of Adams's claim that students are more interested in a teacher's competency than how they look, I am wary or suspicious of dismissing counter-arguments that suggest that students, like teachers, are invested in embodiment. By embodiment, I consider the work of phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty who reject the mind-body dualism in Western philosophy in favor of an experience that foregrounds the body as an active, intervening category that informs our interac-

tion with the world (in real time). We make sense of our environment, of our world through and against the body. The point I intend to convey is simply this: that the teacher's body, like the student's, is an active, meaning-making category. In many ways, the (teacher's) body conditions or informs the ecology of the classroom.

Indeed, one of the anxieties I have had about teaching in the United States is how students would respond to me. First, how they would respond to hearing me speak, the sometimes obvious or marked non-native pronunciations of words. Second, I worried about whether and, or how my competency would be judged in relation to, or in spite of my non-Americanness. To be fair, I will say that there is some variation of this teacher anxiety regardless of where or in what social context teaching is happening. And I allude to the fact of embodiment because in the Gen Ed courses I designed and taught, I was particularly anxious about how my African American students would respond to a non-American teaching a course that contemplates experiences of African Americans, of which I was alien. Now, it's important for me to mention that I am in no way suggesting that only teachers who are of a particular racial or socio-cultural subject position should be allowed to teach particular courses. That is not within the scope of what I am invested in here. To go back to the arguments on embodiment proposed by phenomenologists and sociologists, I was conscious and wary of how the body/my non-American body would inform student response towards not only me, but the course content as well.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks offers some more insight on embodiment, and what she considers as the mediating category of the teacher's body. hooks explains that as a Black woman, she has always been acutely aware of the presence of her body "in those settings that, in fact, invite us to invest so deeply in a mind/body split so that, in a sense, you're almost always at odds with the existing structure."[4] In many ways, hooks's challenging of the separation between mind and body, and her awareness of "the existing structure" – the university as a human institution that has historically silenced, displaced or erased Black voice – is a rallying call for the foregrounding of embodied presence, for a recognition of the Black body in a system unaccustomed to its physicality.

As a midwestern school, Illinois State University's (ISU) student demographic is marked by its significant whiteness. According to the Campus Inclusion Survey Report[5] published on the website of the Office of Equity and Inclusion, of the 2,748 students that participated in the survey, 1,847 represented the majority white student demographic, accounting for 67% of the overall student population. Black/African American, Asian American, and Hispanic made up 10% (271); 4% (100); and 8% (221), respectively. The embodied nature of the student demographic is also apparent in ISU's "Diagnosed Disability" distribution. The report states that 386 (14%) of the student population have been diagnosed or have a known medical/

The Survey reports the Fall 2022 total student enrollment at 20,233.

mental health condition. These range from psychological (48%); attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (33%); learning disability (19%); autism spectrum disorder (9%), just to mention a few. These, along with students with vision, mobility, or hearing limitations account for ISU's embodied student space. My objective in highlighting some of these numbers is two-fold: first, I hope that the experience I narrate here will be considered within the context of this demographic, raising the possibility that student silence as it occurred in my class might be due to an interplay of these factors. Second, I hope that this embodied representation of the student population would provide some justification for my use of in-class writing practices of Focused Freewriting, and the Dialectical Notebook to help students process their silence in productive ways. The moments of private thinking and writing foregrounds the agency of the student writer. Writing (and sharing) is wielded as a productive moment wherein learning happens by allowing the student to explore their thoughts, who they are, *how* they think, not just *what* they think. I explore this idea further in the next section.

Reflecting on my experience teaching at the University of Ghana and comparing that with five years of teaching in the United States, specifically teaching in a midwestern university, this idea of the embodied nature of knowledge production and meaning-making (who students are vis-à-vis *how* they think) has become even more apparent to me. In Ghana, even though I was quite aware of the social (and political) factors that in some ways and sometimes mediated discussion in the classroom space, I am certain I never had to consciously consider the diversity very much evident in that space and what nexus potentially existed between class content and knowledge production as was constructed in that space. In other words, teaching in the Ghanaian classroom did not compel me to purposely consider the range of embodiments (be it racial, sexual, political orientation) that existed in that space and in what ways the content we discussed in class interacted with these diverse "bodies." However, at ISU, I have often (and perhaps always) had to consider my embodiment and positionality as a Black Ghanaian heterosexual male educator interacting in a classroom space with a range of bodies: Black, Brown, white, Latino/a, hetero, non-hetero, queer. Navigating race and sexuality (when they come up and even when they do not) has been the most unnerving experience for me in the years I have taught at ISU.

My teaching persona has been (and I would like to believe still is to some degree) premised on an attitude and ethic of non-confrontation. By this, I mean that if I do not have to engage with potentially sensitive or volatile topics in the classroom, such as ethnicity, race, sexuality, or political party arguments, I would rather steer clear of these. However, I have been reminded/cautioned by my teaching internship and dissertation advisor, Dr. Ugor, to carefully consider how this evasion

makes me complicit in the dominant ideas and discourses that inform and shape how students see the world. I am reminded that the classroom is a social space where students come to confront difficult and uncomfortable knowledge – ideas that challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions, entrenched cultural values and beliefs, and local myths that help validate a racist outlook on the world. The task of the educator is to challenge such embedded values. Black/minority educators often have to pay a serious price for that kind of work. However, as daunting as this may seem, this is important pedagogical work that needs to happen, especially if we are committed to a pedagogy of social justice and transformation.

While I do appreciate that the college classroom is perhaps inherently predisposed to these kinds of discourse, in the few instances when I have had to serve as arbiter for class discussion precariously perched on the precipice of open confrontation, I have realized quite unfortunately that I have not handled it well. In the ISU classroom, I have come to the acceptance that navigating the political is very much constitutive of the way teaching and learning happens.

My objective in this initial section of the study is to clarify the important themes and concepts around which my narration revolves. In "'Are you Here to Move the Piano?'" A Latino Reflects on Twenty Years in the Academy," James Bonilla posits a theory on why midwestern students think the way they do. Reflecting on his experience as a Latino faculty member teaching in a predominantly white institution, Bonilla explains that the experience is like "being on the fringe of a white academic culture that still sees the 'other' as a guest at best and intruder at worst."[6] Looking back on my experience teaching at ISU, I cannot say that this has been my experience – this feeling of being alien, of being an outsider that Bonilla suggests here. I guess Bonilla's point, unlike Adams's, is that his "ethnic" body determined his experience in a white institution. However, more germane to my purposes here is how Bonilla describes his experience of teaching students in the Midwest, and his speculation as to how they think. Bonilla explains:

> Unlike most of my experiences in New York, Massachusetts, and Washington states, students here are resistant to confront or do anything where they might be seen as "not nice." Rather than risk offending, they often maintain a troubling silence in the classroom. I initially interpreted this silence as resistance to learning the challenging material, or perhaps brain death. Palmer's (1998) perspective on this behavior proved enlightening: "Their silence is not born of stupidity or banality but of a desire to protect themselves and to survive... (T)he seemingly sullen students in our classrooms are not brain dead, they are full of fear."[7]

I think that these are rather important points by both Bonilla and Palmer. That student silence might be a symptom of a particular social behavior – a desire not to offend, and a desire to survive – offers interesting sites of inquiry for a discussion of student silence. And I say this because very often, in the Gen Ed courses I taught, I wondered whether student resistance to engage a prompt or question I posed in class had to do with a collective fear of not offending. I will say here that the discussions we had in class on the Afrofuturist texts especially had to do with issues of race/racism, and how it functioned in American society. In those moments where I had asked a question, and waited for verbal responses (moments where students had not first processed their thoughts via writing), an enveloping atmosphere of resistance would seize the class. Student silence was the default response to what I interpreted as a fear of uttering "the wrong word." In this case, the wrong word is that word which might be misconstrued as being deliberately racist and/or insensitive. For Bonilla, the midwestern student had a fear of being seen as "not nice"; student silence, for the midwestern student, was a survival tactic intended to maintain some form of social cohesion in the classroom.

Like most teachers, my default interpretation of student silence has been an uneasy mix of students' resistance and or failure to understand course content or my failure as a teacher to convey knowledge in an accessible, effective way. To put this simply, student silence can have a haunting effect. I think another aspect of student silence that gets theorized in scholarship on pedagogy is that there is often a binary framing of students who speak in class vis-à-vis students who do not, wherein verbal/oral participation is often seen as confirmation of intelligence, and silence as its logical opposite. But as I hope to argue here, there needs to be a critical, more conscious framing of how we interpret student silence and dialogue in our classrooms. Our theorizing on student silence should foreground the embodied nature of the spaces in which we teach, and the contexts in which students work, learn, and speak. Thus, both teacher response to student silence, and the pedagogical reading and framing of student silence needs to be nuanced, in sync with the social and affective spaces in which learning happens.

As I hinted at earlier, in the Gen Ed classes, my use of the writing practices, Focused Freewriting and the Dialectical Notebook, was intended to help students process their silence in productive ways. In the writing prompts we explored in class, my objective was to give students an opportunity to explore their own understandings of the fabulated world of the texts we read in relation to their social worlds. The writing prompts and the discussions that ensued were framed as analogical reflections on how the speculative worlds we engaged with, contested or mirrored social reality. In the classes I taught, this associative relationship between the imagined and a recognizable, material reality was often the premise for the

kind of thinking we did via writing. In many ways, writing served as a means of perceiving and interpreting the relationships between the world and the written text. What ensued then was a kind of analogic reasoning routed via students' ability to compare and contrast information that they already knew with (new) information that they were processing.

In the Gen Ed courses I taught, I was particularly struck by the "silent" dialogue that became apparent when students had to share some part of their written work in class. It became evident to the students and I that "systems of relationships" were emerging in the written and shared responses. In the moments of private writing punctuated by moments of verbal/oral feedback, students were engaged in a kind of high-order thinking wherein whatever speculative text we were discussing at the time, unlocked compelling sites of inquiry beyond the fabulated world of the text. Students sitting across from each other, on opposite ends of the classroom were dialoguing with each other, foregrounding their individual experiences of the social world, and comparing and contrasting how these experiences shaped how they interpreted the theory and texts we were reading as well as the social worlds these texts conjured for them.

Let me hasten to mention that the concept of analogical reasoning is not something I deliberately incorporate into my course syllabi. However, it is certainly a crucial aspect of my own pedagogy. In the courses I teach, my stated intent is to facilitate some form of relationality between course content and its practicality or relevance to student lives. One way I consciously explore this objective is through student writing. I think that the forms of writing we use in the classroom context can be used in meaningful ways to help students process (and transfer) learning and information from their experiences outside of the classroom into their reading of content we engage in the classroom. In the classes I taught, Focused Freewriting and the Dialectical Notebook facilitated exactly this kind of analogical reasoning and knowledge transfer.

The Institute of Writing and Thinking describes Focused Freewriting thus:

> Focused Freewriting is what it sounds like – freewriting with a focus. As with private writing, you want to keep your pen moving and write to a time limit (perhaps 7 minutes), resisting the urge to think and then write. Focused Freewriting always begins with some kind of directive (or focus) in the form of a text or question— you might invite students to write their first reactions to a text (or a moment, a piece of language, or an image within it), or you might offer several interconnected prompts or questions intended to help to open up a topic or text to a wider range of interpretation.

Unlike Private Freewriting where students are not provided with a prompt or question, Focused Freewriting is more mediated, allowing some room for the instructor/teacher to prompt the thought process that happens via writing. In allowing students to write with a focus in mind, the instructor offers students an opportunity to interpret the prompt however it is they understand it, and to repurpose that interpretation in ways that foreground their own agency as writers and thinkers. One of the arguments I suggest here is that as the pen moves, student silences are processed in ways that allow each student to find a voice or a way of relating to the prompt given. The alphabetic-tactile space that is created by the movement of pen on paper conjures for the silent student an audience that is relatable, an audience that may allow them to find the language and find the voice to share their written work. I want to argue that writing, the forms of in-class writing that we do, is important to help silent students find or construct the language they need to respond to questions asked by the teacher. In this way, Focused Freewriting situates the student-writer as an active learner committed to the "silent" process of creating for themselves the language that will enable them to engage.

In many ways, the Dialectical Notebook reflects this kind of generative thinking that happens when we ask students to process their silences via writing. The Institute of Writing and Thinking explains that the Dialectical Notebook is a way to get students to "interact with a difficult text and with one another through writing as a mode of critical thinking."[8] As a writing practice, the Dialectical Notebook situates collaborative learning as one of its unstated assumptions and objectives. By conversing with one another through writing, the Dialectical Notebook processes student silence by establishing relationships across and within the classroom space. Typically, in the Dialectical Notebook, students are asked to create a table in their notebooks, three columns widthwise where they respond to prompts given by the instructor. The iterative and collaborative nature of this writing practice demands that students exchange notebooks, and work jointly to fill up the columns in the notebook with their responses.

Comment	*Response*	*Reply*
1	1	1
2	2	2
3	3	3

Dialectical Notebook structure

The "dialectical" premise of the Dialectical Notebook invites a kind of tension; a form of probative, speculative thinking where students aren't being asked to find

or state some form of definitive answer or response. Like Focused Freewriting that asks students to conjure for themselves a silent audience/listener, the Dialectical Notebook, not only acknowledges the agency of the student-writer, but wields it in a way that liberates the silent student from the asphyxiating fear of failing to provide the "right answer." In the Dialectical Notebook, there are no right answers. Rather, the focus is on the conversations that ensue on the pages of the notebook, on the rich nature of student voices that become manifest on the page through writing. In the section that follows, I narrate and reflect on my experience using these writing practices in the courses I taught on Black speculative fictions.

3 USING WRITING AS A TOOL OF INQUIRY IN THE SILENT CLASSROOM

The speculative fiction classes I taught at ISU were revised versions of the course I had designed for my teaching internship, which involved instructing one section of IDS 121A19: *Texts and Contexts: Literary Studies*, in the Fall of 2021. IDS 121A19 falls under the category of Language in the Humanities of the General Education (GE) requirements. Titled "Postcolonial Science Fictions," we were specifically interested in exploring how the aesthetic and thematic dimensions of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism allowed for an appreciation of Black literary cultural experience while interrogating (and subverting) particularly white, Euro-western depictions and erasure of Black people in the corpus of science fiction (SF) and speculative texts in general.

In the original proposal to this internship class, I note that the course is designed to explore the politics of (re) storying Black culture and history via SF, premised on the notion that representation is always participative, never neutral, and that in class we will work to:

- Isolate, historicize, characterize, and theorize the non-neutrality of representations within the subgenre of postcolonial SF.
- Consider each text as already involved in representational discourse about Blackness.
- Examine how Blackness is constructed (represented) via gender and identity politics, globalization and modernity, modern science and technology, Blackness and the diaspora experience.
- Work to de-center whiteness and its disempowering structures and logics.
- Unlearn, re-think and re-present Black (SF) culture from a determinedly non-European epistemology.

Thus, the major premise of the course was to work towards de-centering whiteness as a category; contemplating the many ways whiteness operates discursively (and materially) to construct Blackness as its antithetical Other via a critical appreciation of Black SF and speculative texts. But perhaps more to the objective, the course intended to re-focus preoccupation with white SF and historiography with its attendant "silencing" of Black bodies and voices. For this class, the central issue that for the most part guided our exploration of texts and theories was in what ways race functioned as a thematic. Besides the interrogation of the general scientific laws and sci-fi tropes that we explored in class, we were almost always concerned with how race was imaged/depicted; how it was *represented*; how it operated as a discursive category, and in what ways we could discuss these extra-textually, beyond and against the material text – how we could reconcile the narrativizations of race/racial discourse in these SF texts to our lived socio-cultural realia. In this way, my pedagogy was very much informed by the praxis of cultural studies (and analogical reasoning) as we were not only interested in aesthetic considerations of the text, but just as well committed to its real-world implications, i.e., its imbrication in power dynamics.

As an instructor who is always keen on self-assessing my pedagogy, and evaluating how I might re-frame a teaching practice or course content, I was particularly struck by how much discomfort I could sense students felt when we had to discuss race or some form of racial tension in the text. It's important to mention that in this class, I did not use Focused Freewriting and Dialectical Notebook as a form of thought-processing practice the way I did in the subsequent iterations of the course. I remember one of the first Afrofuturist short stories we read in that class. It was W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Comet". The story generally tells of a Comet's tail passing through New York city and leaving in its wake deadly gases that kills hundreds of people. For much of the story, the only humans left alive are a lowly, black messenger (Jim) and a rich, white woman (Julia). Amongst other things, the story appears to interrogate racial relations/tensions in American society, with Du Bois seemingly exploring how the threat of an apocalypse might impact race relations. I remember asking students about a particular event in the story, where Julia's family relations suddenly show up on the scene and accost Jim threateningly. I asked how they might read that event within the general backdrop of an American racial/racist reality and the speculative event of a post-apocalypse.

However much I tried to reformulate or rephrase the question, it seemed students were unwilling to respond to this particular prompt that demanded some consideration of how race functioned. Before this, I had asked at least two students to relay/provide a synopsis of Du Bois's story, and they all gave quite similar summaries of the story, very conveniently leaving out the question of race, which is

quite apparent in this story. Thinking back on this, I wonder how much this sense of overwhelming student silence had to do with Bonilla's proposition that mid-western students are resistant to confront or do anything where they might be seen as "not nice." And that this eerie, troubling silence in the classroom was so that students would not say something, or use language that might be misconstrued as being deliberately antagonistic/insensitive. Even though my experience in this internship class is certainly relevant to the narration that ensues, my focus in this study is particularly on the later versions of this class where I used Focused Free-writing and the Dialectical Notebook as thought-processing strategies.

In the Spring semester of 2023, I taught two sections of ENG 125 (Literary Narrative). I designed the course to attend specifically to an analysis of Black speculative film. In the course description, I explain that assignments will:

> combine individualized writing assignments – discussion posts and short (2-3 page) reading responses for films assigned – with collaborative projects where students will conduct textual analysis in groups and peer reviews of each other's work. These assignments will prepare you for a final research paper project where each student will generate and explore an argument/tension based on one (or more) of the course texts/films.

I highlight this to say that writing was a crucial aspect of how I envisaged we will be reflecting on and discussing these films. Writing was an important aspect of the process and course objective. In the spirit of full disclosure, I had foregrounded writing as one of the pedagogical goals in order to test how it might facilitate the kind of participatory and collaborative class I had intended the class to be – so, in some way, this class was a pilot project on how writing might transform or disrupt student silence.

The other course I consider in this study was not very much different from my scholarly and pedagogical investments in this ENG 125 course. In the IDS 121A19 *Texts and Contexts* class, themed "Inquiry into Black Speculative Texts," which I taught in the Spring of 2022, we considered the "socio-cultural, thematic, and aesthetic representations in African American and African speculative texts." In a sense, in both courses, my objective was to get students to read these speculative texts as always already embedded in a historical and social context. One of our core learning tasks in the classroom was to identify, reflect on, and theorize about what ways the fabulated world of the text becomes apparent in their/our "real" social worlds.

I want to mention one final point about the kind of social learning space I intended to build in these classes. Having taught that internship class, I had become

quite aware/concerned about student silence and what kind of class dynamic might heighten this tension. So, in the syllabus for the Spring 2022 IDS 121A19, I talk about the idea of "a techno-utopic classroom" – a classroom ecology that recognizes the embodied nature of this space and intends to respect and acknowledge "student voice." And so, I had made it quite clear in the syllabus that I wanted students to speak in class, and be assured that their opinion/voice would be respected in my class. In the syllabus, I explain that "I subscribe to a mode of teaching that privileges the dialogic nature of learning. So, we will:

- co-construct knowledge in a manner that is deliberately affirming of all individuals within our techno-utopic space. To realize this utopic imperative, to create a safer, affirming space for all, I ask that we
- create a safer, affirming space for all by demonstrating a sense of respect and recognition in class. This means being courteous to each other (and the instructor), and respecting other people's opinions, especially when they diverge from your own. Our techno-utopic space is one that is decidedly anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-ableist, and anti-sexist. Thus, discriminatory or disrespectful language in whatever guise will not be tolerated in my class: you will be asked to leave, and it will be marked as a full absence.

In seeking to create a participatory, and collaborative classroom, I anticipated that multiple student voices would be heard, and while I encouraged this form of engagement, I wanted students to be conscious of the other embodied voices/opinions that existed within the classroom. Indeed, in my ENG 125 class, this ethic of encouraging student voice while respecting the embodied nature of the class, was articulated in my own recognition of how potentially uncomfortable some students might feel in engaging some of the content we discussed. So, in the syllabus, I include a "content warning" where I explain that some of the material we would cover in the course might contain scenes and language that may be triggering and the nature of our discussions may delve into sensitive topics including but not limited to "race and racial discrimination, slurs and bigoted language, sexuality, and physical violence." For the kind of dialogic learning that I had hoped would happen through writing, I thought that it was important to be transparent with students, and to establish that while I was well aware of the power that the teacher assumes in relation to students, my objective was to create a community of learners equally conscious of one another's experiences and values. So, I shared in my syllabus that:

> Before covering each text, I will be up front in disclosing what sort of problematic content may be covered in the novel. I also have an open-door

> policy regarding contacting me regarding any upcoming content you may find problematic in reading or discussing. Although I believe the themes explored in these texts are conducive towards having a better understanding of our future, there are potential issues or biases these stories may reveal to modern audiences. During our discussions, we will open with opportunities to express how these stories have emotionally impacted us before moving into the critical work of analysis. After all, we aren't just robots or disembodied brains floating in a social vacuum; we are all human beings shaped in unique ways by the experiences we've had, the social environments we've endured, and our own prior understandings of stories.

In class, our discussions usually began with a brief moment of reflection on the assigned text or film. I ask students to consider a moment in the reading or an event in the film or story that stuck with them for some reason. Then, I ask them to write to explore or reflect on the event or moment in the film they connected with. Usually, I would do this on the first day of class before we began discussion on a new text or film. And I made it clear to students whether this writing would be shared with others in the class or not. In those moments where I asked students to share their written reflections, I indicated that they are free to share all or parts of what they wrote. For me, this form of a preliminary writing task helped me to assess how and in what ways students connected to a particular text. It was an opportunity for me to notice and acknowledge what parts/aspects of the text they had chosen to be "silent" about, and what parts they emphasized. I think that this also helped students to collaboratively create some form of affective and thematic rubric with which we could begin discussing the text. In other words, as students shared their written work, students were consciously parsing the text in ways that (unconsciously) revealed what parts of the text they were still trying to figure out and what parts they had found the language to describe. Of course, not everyone shared their written work, and very often I had similar voices being heard. But, as I have explained, what was particularly important to me in this writing task was to get as many voices in the room as possible, and to get students to process their thoughts through writing.

Indeed, as I have explained, one of the things I remember clearly about my ENG 125 and IDS 121A19 classes was how student silence functioned before and during moments of writing or student speaking. In hindsight, I think there's an argument to be made for the kind of productive silence that happens during moments of student writing or student speaking. In *Between Speaking and Silence*, Reda makes a compelling claim that student silence, when initiated by the student, may sometimes be read as antagonistic/antagonizing, and that student silence initiated by

the teacher, whether it be during moments of active listening or quiet, in-class journaling, offers better prospects for how we might harness silence.[9]

While I agree that student-initiated silence might not be ideal for a participatory class dynamic, I think there's pedagogical merit to investigating how/why student silences emerge in particular class contexts. For the classes I taught, I proceeded with the hypothesis that students in this particular midwestern school context were unwilling to engage the subject matter of race. Of course, in proceeding with this hypothesis, I was also convinced that there were other factors that potentially informed this hesitation to engage in the classroom. And so, in deploying writing in the classroom, I hoped students would process their thoughts and find the language with which to engage or participate verbally in class. My objective was not to somehow miraculously transform the classes I taught into one where everyone "broke free" of their silence. Rather, I imagined that by providing students an opportunity to think/process their thoughts, they will have created for themselves a written record of how they might engage a topic discussed in class.

In the section that follows I describe how I used Focused Freewriting to create these opportunities to process thought via writing. My use of Focused Freewriting adapts Nicole Wallack's six categories of Focused Freewriting loops, itself an adaptation of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's model in *A Community of Writers*. Modeling her six-category Focused Freewriting loop, Wallack frames her prompts/questions around Martin Luther King Jr.'s epistolary essay, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Wallack suggests six overarching categories of Focused Freewriting prompts:

Category 1: *approaching first readings*
Category 2: *confronting ambiguity*
Category 3: *framing a specific inquiry*
Category 4: *returning to the text*
Category 5: *exploring contexts*
Category 6: *pursuing connections*[10]

In my Gen Ed classes, I reformulated this six-category loop into a five-category Focused Freewriting process. I want to clarify here that while there is a logical sequencing to Wallack's model and how it works, my adaptation of the model in my class did not follow an exact organization. And there were a number of reasons for this, limited class time being the most constraining factor. While Wallack suggests allotting anywhere between five to fifteen minutes of class time for each prompt/category, in an ideal situation, I did not have that luxury of time. Typically, for each prompt/category, I gave students anywhere between five to six minutes. And even though I kept the logic of the model's sequencing, I did not follow it an exact for-

mat. For instance, in a particular session, we might do some combination of categories one and three, or categories three and five. To provide some evidence of how this typically looked in my class, I share here the model as I used it in our discussion of Du Bois's "The Comet."

Category 1
Approaching first readings

- Describe your thoughts about Du Bois's short story, "The Comet"
- Locate a passage that's important to you, and a passage that's important for Du Bois. For each passage, identify what led you to choose it as specifically as you can.
- Du Bois describes Jim and Julia's first/initial encounter thus: "They **stared** a moment in silence. She had not **noticed** before that he was a Negro. He hadn't **thought** of her as white. **Yesterday**, he thought with bitterness, she would scarcely have looked at him twice. He would have been dirt beneath her silken feet. She **stared** at him." What does this "staring contest" reveal about this meeting? Describe what this event of staring reveals to you about Jim and Julia.

The objective of this opening round of Focused Freewriting prompts is to gather as many voices as I can on the reading I assigned. Often, when I did this, I noticed that students were unconsciously building a vocabulary or finding the language to begin to inquire into the text a bit more. Instead of just simply asking "what do you think about this text?" this initial round of prompts gets students to acknowledge their active role as learners and constructors of knowledge. It centers them, how they read, and what their particular interpretations are of the text. I try to make this as student-directed as possible by emphasizing the pronouns "you" and "your" in the framing of the question.

Category 2:
Confronting ambiguity in Du Bois's "The Comet"

- Much of the story revolves around Jim's desperation and (mis) treatment as an outsider; what other thematic concerns or emotions does the story invoke?
- Think about/consider how many times the story represents ideas of seeing, being noticed, and not being seen or not being recognized. How would you describe Du Bois's use of this tension between being seen vis-à-vis not being seen; being noticed vis-à-vis not being noticed?

This round of questioning builds on the initial prompt and responses by asking students to uncover patterns in the text. In class, my intent was to get students to begin actively thinking about the kinds of thematic investments the course was designed to explore. And so, without prompting or directly mentioning some of the course's themes, such as race/racism, sexuality, and identity, students, in their shared responses, explicitly engaged some of these issues.

Category 3:
Framing a specific inquiry into Du Bois's "The Comet"

- Trace a term or figure through the text and describe how it connects/might connect with the story's overarching argument. (e.g., the pervasive sense of silence, spectacles/images of death strewn everywhere, Fred, Julia's fiancé)
- Find a repetition or formal pattern in the story (e.g., a phrase, sentence, image, rhetorical strategy). What are the effects of this pattern for Du Bois's argument as a whole?

In class, I often used this third category when I wanted students to focus on a stylistic, aesthetic, or formal concern in the text. As I have explained, what usually happened during moments of shared responses was that students invariably began to talk to each other across the classroom space. A conversation emerged where students were either noticing the same things or commenting on a peculiarity they observed.

Category 4:
Returning to Du Bois's "The Comet"

- Go to a passage/event you find especially striking in the text; how would you compare or contrast it with what Du Bois does at other moments in the text?
- How do you think Julia's family relations showing up out of nowhere at the end of the story affects the story? Why does Du Bois reserve this moment until the end?

I think that there is pedagogical merit in asking students to "return" to the primary text. Often, this return is intended to get them to re-evaluate/assess whether and how their initial reactions or responses to a text might have changed on the basis of some new insight from class discussion. In ENG 125, the Black Speculative Film class, I would often replay a scene from a film we were discussing, pause momentarily at points, and then ask students to try to re-examine their reading of a particular character or event. In hindsight, I see how I enjoyed these moments of return because student insights on the films always prompted some re-considering of the text. The dialogic classroom facilitates this kind of shared learning. Student writing always signaled some interesting site of inquiry, or an alternative way of engaging the text. For instance, in the IDS 121A19 class we were discussing Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and a student shared how Dana's severed left arm in some ways accounts for the temporal gaps in the novel's timeline and reinforced loss of time in the narrative. This was an argument I hadn't considered, but with the return to the text, this became more and more apparent. Wallack explains that "students need to be taught why readers might return to a text, and to experience for themselves what such a return might yield for their own thinking."[11] I want to say that I agree with Wallack's justification for a return. When I ask students to write to explore any set

of prompts or ideas, I am interested in the thinking that emerges, their process of filtering, and finding the language that communicates some representative version of what they'd like to say.

Category 5:
Making connections to and from Du Bois's "The Comet"

- Tell the story of another character/person who experienced the kind of outsider (alien) experience Jim does in this story. This person can be someone you know, a character from a text you have read, or another well-known historical figure. What forms of racially-induced alienation did this person experience? How did their story end?
- What resonance does this story have for racial relations in the United States in the twenty-first century?

I like this particular category of prompts because it is explicit in its demand for students to consider in what ways the social world that exists outside of the text is mirrored by and informs the fabulated worlds in the text. In class, I intended that these prompts get students to foreground their own experiences, values, and knowledge about the world around them, and in what ways that helps them contemplate what happens in the narrative worlds we explore in class. Regardless of what category of Focused Freewriting prompts we were exploring in class, as the instructor, I wanted those moments of silent student writing and shared feedback to create opportunities for student-directed learning. I wanted students to harness silence as a moment to listen, to reflect on their own thinking, and to use writing in productive, active ways. Wallack explains that "shaping a class plan around Focused Freewriting ensures that at some point during the session all students will have the opportunity to make knowledge, not only the few who wish to participate in talk."[12] While "student talk/speech" was important to me in these classes, it was not the only modality by which I hoped students would engage.

I created forum discussions on ReggieNet/Canvas using these same Focused Freewriting prompts to allow students who for some reason couldn't participate orally in class discussions to engage on these LMS platforms outside of class. I found that some students who would usually not participate in class, were quite active on these platforms. I believe that this in some ways challenges my hypothesis that students in this midwestern school were hesitant to discuss topics that border on race. However, it is also quite possible that perhaps these students who engaged on these LMS platforms, outside of the classroom context, felt less hesitant to address these issues because an online learning space guaranteed some sense of anonymity. For some reason, the fact that their physical bodies weren't present offered some relief that allowed them to engage. In any case, as I have explained, what was important to me was that I could see, and they could see as well, how their thinking emerged and transformed through writing.

The Learning Management Software (LMS) tool at Illinois State University.

In using the Dialectical Notebook, my intent was to trace or track precisely this kind of evolution of the thinking process that occurred when students had to use writing as a tool for inquiry in the sort of recursive, dialogical structure of this writing practice. As I have explained, the Dialectical Notebook works by having students create columns in their notebooks (usually three, but could be more depending on the kind of writing situation), responding to Focused Freewriting prompts, and exchanging notebooks among peers, to collaboratively respond and fill in spaces in the columns. Let me say here that of the two writing practices I used in class, the Dialectical Notebook was probably the one I enjoyed using a bit more. And in some ways, perhaps, it had to do with the sort of inquiry and tension that is integral to this writing practice. The Dialectical Notebook lends itself quite naturally to the kind of probative, speculative thinking that teachers of literary and cultural studies encourage in their classes.

In her article, "Dialectical Notebooks," Margaret Ranny Bledsoe rightly notes that the Dialectical Notebook is probably one of the most difficult practices to use well because of its more structured nature.[13] Typically, the Dialectical Notebook invites students to directly engage the presuppositions, unstated (hidden) assumptions, and warrants of a text or argument they are reading. And so, it requires and trains students' reading faculties to "listen" to the silent voices in the text they are reading. Its dialogic and recursive nature ensures that students come to appreciate their voice, their agency as writers and thinkers, and that knowledge is not something that exists in some ethereal space. Knowledge is enacted/created within the discourse that happens when students respond to one another's thoughts on the written page.

I remember the first time I used this writing practice in my class. For some reason which I cannot readily remember, I did not explain to students what the

Dialectical Notebook was, or why I was asking them to take out their notebooks, and create three columns. But the hesitation and reluctance was quite apparent to me in the classroom: students stealing glances at one another, and murmuring to themselves, "why are we being asked to do this?" Perhaps I thought that by working backwards, that is, having them actually practice how the Dialectical Notebook worked, before explaining to them what it was, it would help them appreciate it a bit more. And I want to think that it did because even though "take one" of this practice worked as well as I had hoped, subsequent uses of the writing practice worked better, and it seemed students relished/invited the opportunity to pass their notebooks on to a peer.

I used versions of the same writing prompts I would have used in a Focused Freewriting situation. As I have explained, in terms of structure, the Dialectical Notebook combines Focused Freewriting and process writing as tools of inquiry. Indeed, one of the things I noticed the first couple of times I used this, was just how much of a struggle it was for the student (reader) responder to write in response to their peer's writing in a way that was generative, and offered an opportunity for further thinking. So, on a few occasions, it happened that some students either did not write anything when the notebook was passed to them, or they offered very little insight in their written response. Upon further discussion in class, it became evident to me that the reason for student silence on the written page was that most of them had not read the text before coming to class. Because the Dialectical Notebook works well with texts that have been assigned in a course, it is imperative that students engage the texts prior. However, in class, one of the ways I addressed this issue was to have them turn to a particular page in the reading, give them some time to read in class, and have them annotate or bracket off a section of the reading they would like to write in response to. Bledsoe rightly observes that "the role of responder in a Dialectical Notebook is often difficult for young people because it asks them to take a few steps away from their own opinions in order to reflect on what other people think."[14] I think that in many ways, this was what may have accounted for those moments of student silence when I was first introducing this writing practice to them, and most of them were still struggling to figure out how it worked.

I think that there is something particularly liberating about the kind of student dialoguing that happens via writing. In those moments where I anticipated some student resistance to engaging potentially triggering issues such as physical violence, or racism, I used the Dialectical Notebook as a strategy to get students to process their thoughts and feelings, and to introduce into our classroom space the kind of language we needed to discuss these topics. I remember when we had to discuss Jordan Peele's film, *Get Out*, and its overt representation of racially motivat-

ed violence, I had students dialogue about the text via writing. In the first column of the notebook, labelled "Observations/Questions,", I had them cite or describe 3 different events from the film, and write to explore how they interpreted that scene or a question they had about that event/scene. After filling out that first column, they had to pass their notebook on to a peer who had to read each observation/question, and in the column labeled "Responses from peer," respond to these observations/questions in ways that not only acknowledged the voice of the original author but reflected their own readings of the film as well. In the last column labelled "Reflections," the original student author re-read their initial observations/questions, considered the reader responses they had received, and reflected, via a synthesis and process write, what their takeaways were from ensuing conversation on the written page as well as the class discussion.

Observations/Questions

Focused Freewriting prompt for Column labelled "Observations/Questions": Go back (return) to Peele's Get Out, and cite/describe 3 different events you found striking, confusing, or compelling in some way. What do you think is the relevance of these observations/scenes to the story's overarching argument?

Response from Peer

Focused Freewriting prompt for Column labeled "Reader response": Read the text in the Column labelled "Observations/questions," and write to respond to each observation. How do these observations/questions reflect and/or challenge your own interpretation of the film?

Reflections after Class Discussion

Process Writing/Synthesis for Column labelled "Reflections": Consider carefully your initial observations, and the responses you have received, in light of the discussion we've had in class. Write about what you observe. In what ways does the reader's response build on the initial observation?

Observations/ Questions	*Response from Peer*	*Reflections after Class Discussion*
Observation 1	Reader response 1	Reflection/Synthesis
Observation 2	Reader response 2	Reflection/Synthesis
Observation 3	Reader response 3	Reflection/Synthesis

As will already be evident, these writing prompts require significant time investment. And so, when I used them in class, most times, we rarely got to the point where students filled up all the columns, and had a debrief session that was representative of a completed Dialectical Notebook. One of the ways I tried to manage this issue of time constraints was to assign the first part of the notebook process as a homework assignment. I had each student complete (at home) the first column, "Observations/questions." Then, when they came to class, all they had to do was turn over their notebooks to a peer and have them fill in the "Response from Peer" section. I think that assigning part of the notebook practice as homework assignment afforded students a bit more time to revisit the text and to compose their thoughts in a more coherent fashion. Of course, I should mention that I was also wary that students might resort to using AI tools such as ChatGPT in ways that defeated the purpose of the kind of personal, reflective inquiry I was looking for in this writing practice. So, I must confess that in those rare occasions when I had to consider assigning part of the notebook practice as homework assignment, I struggled with the decision. I think that these informal writing practices – Focused Freewriting and the Dialectical Notebook – are better served when they happen in real time, within the context of class time.

While using these writing practices in class may require a considerable investment of time and planning, I think that there's a lot of good work that happens in those moments of purposeful student silence when students are thinking through writing. Again, I want to argue that these moments of silence are both teacher and student initiated. I say this because as the semester wore on, and as students became more and more comfortable with our pedagogical ritual of reflection/inquiry through writing, our discussions became more participatory. I structured student writing and feedback sessions such that every student in the class had more than a few opportunities to make their voice heard within the classroom.

Now, I should mention that even though these writing practices helped create a more participatory class, I will be self-critical, and say that I could have formulated the writing prompts in a way that conveyed in more explicit fashion some of the thematic objectives I would have wanted to engage. When I look at my prompts, I sense the hesitation of a non-American, Black instructor who is either unsure or wary of confronting topics often considered volatile. Perhaps, I am not too different from the midwestern student who is afraid of being seen as "not nice." Perhaps I can be more intentional in wielding my teacher body in a way that asserts my control of the classroom space and fearlessness, and preparedness to engage these potentially uncomfortable topics. I think that there's room for that kind of pedagogical work in the classes that we teach. I think that I could have been more intentional in using the analogical imperative of these classes to invite students to question/

critique more freely the social worlds imagined in the texts we discussed. The Dialectical Notebook allows for this kind of thinking. As students participate in the recursive process of observation, formulation of thought and response, a dialogue ensues that allows students to reflect on their present social circumstances, in order to envisage alternative social configurations. Of course, I recognize how my framing of this may seem lofty or unrealistic. I think the point I am getting at here is that when we think through writing, or we use writing as a tool of inquiry, even the determinately abstract finds some concrete resonance on the written page for students. When I ask them to write about the hyperreal violence of the 19th century Southern plantation as imagined in Butler's *Kindred*, or to consider what social ramifications alien presence in Nigeria's already diverse demographic might bring in Okorafor's *Lagoon*, I am asking them to find the language to make concrete what these worlds may mean for them, as social beings, as people. The writing prompts are my way of communicating to them that their voice matters.

I want to end this narrative reflection on my experience using these writing practices to address student silence by sharing how I attended to the question of assessment. On a few occasions, when I started using writing in my classes, I had a few students walk up to me after class, or send an email, inquiring whether the writing we did in class will be graded: "Mr. Ankomah, is this graded work?" In a utopian world, perhaps, we could do away with the system of numbered evaluations, and scoring. Alas, institutional demands require that there be some kind of evaluation system that exists. In my class, I did not grade these informal writing practices. For me, the more compelling pedagogical objective was offering students an opportunity to process their thoughts. I wanted to have a portfolio of all the writing tasks we completed in class, so that I could trace or track how/whether their writing and thinking had evolved through these writing practices. I explained to them that the portfolio, the written record of all the writing tasks they had completed, was also going to serve as invaluable reference material when they had to come up with a thesis/central argument for their final research papers. Student writing expressed through Focused Freewriting prompts and the Dialectical Notebook allowed for a more student-oriented/student-directed teaching. Before getting to know these writing practices, student silence was always something I was quite anxious about.

Ordinarily, whenever I taught a literature class, my default practice in trying to elicit student voice/participation was to ask, "So, what do you think of X character?" or "What do you think about this or that theme in the story?" Often it would be met with silence. Or, there would be the same voices that dominated class discussion. I think that offering students an opportunity to reflect, think, process their thoughts on the written page has real pedagogical merit. Especially in classes where teachers are dealing with sensitive or potentially volatile themes, offering students a

space/moment to write increases the probability for student engagement. I want to emphasize that rather than indicating a lull in activity, those moments of student silence when writing is being used as a tool for learning and inquiry, fostering a dialogic learning environment where both teacher and student construct knowledge in a manner that is affirming of voice and embodiment.

4 CONCLUSION

For many students and teachers, an ideal classroom dynamic is one that is affirming of multiple learners and the embodied nature of the way learning happens. Writing-to-learn and writing-to-inquire practices such as the Dialectical Notebook and Focused Freewriting provide opportunities for students to lean into their "silences" in productive ways. Student learning and growth can still happen in a silent classroom. As writing instructors, when we recognize what invaluable opportunities a silent classroom potentially affords, we can be more intentional about how we teach. Ultimately, effective pedagogical practice is one that is not only in sync with the social and cultural contexts of the classroom space but is also invested in how teaching might be tailored to the learner's experience.

NOTES

1 Reda 2009, 2
2 Ibid.
3 Adams 2006, 32
4 hooks 1994, 135
5 https://illinoisstate.edu/downloads/CampusInclusionSurveyReport2023.pdf
6 Bonilla 2006, 69
7 Bonilla 2006, 44-45
8 Connolly and Institute for Writing and Thinking 2012, 1
9 Reda 2009, 24
10 Wallack 2009, 37
11 Wallack 2009, 41
12 Wallack 2009, 44
13 Bledsoe 2009, 96
14 Bledsoe 2009, 105

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