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## Centering Silence: Graduate Student Instructors Negotiating Quiet In The Writing Classroom

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CENTERING SILENCE: GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTORS NEGOTIATING QUIET  
IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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Dean of the Graduate School

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2022

CENTERING SILENCE: GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTORS NEGOTIATING QUIET  
IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

by

NATALIE ELISE TAYLOR, B.A., M.F.A.

DISSERTATION

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<sup>1</sup> These names are pseudonyms.

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## Abstract

This IRB-approved project is a feminist qualitative study in which I seek to understand graduate student instructors' past and present, student and teacher, experiences with classroom silence. This research builds on the work of Mary Reda (*Between Speaking and Silence*), who, in interviewing quiet students about their reasons for being silent, sought to disrupt the overwhelmingly negative stories about classroom silence and quiet students that circulate amongst instructors. By having conversations with graduate student instructors about their relationship to student silence and their own silences, I further Reda's disruption. I am also influenced by Cheryl Glenn's positioning of silence as a powerful feminist rhetorical tactic (*Unspoken*). I contend that understanding how such narratives about student silence circulate amongst newer instructors is important in the process of imagining how writing teachers can intervene in the default dialogical, often agonistic, writing classroom by valuing silence differently. Informed by feminist scholars Sara Ahmed (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*) and Judith Butler (*Bodies That Matter*), I find that silence is experienced as a bodily encounter. Silences leave impressions on our bodies that shape embodied, emotional orientations towards silence, but also transform silence into an uncomfortable object. I argue that resisting or disrupting negative orientations requires *centering silence*, not just as a subject of conversation, but also as part of the conversation in first-year writing classrooms, graduate student instructor training, and ongoing professional development for faculty. This project ultimately argues that in centering silence, by welcoming it instead of erasing it, classrooms can become more equitable learning environments.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction: The Political Act of Speaking about Silence

One Tuesday afternoon while teaching a first-year writing (FYW) class in the fall of 2019, I unintentionally did to Angela<sup>2</sup> what many of my own professors did to me when I was a college student—I used my silence as an authority figure against her chosen silence as a student. It was only the second week of school, and while she would later be one of my more outspoken students, that Tuesday, Angela was what most teachers would call a quiet student. We were reading and discussing a text aloud in class, still in that awkward get-to-know you phase of the semester, and as I scanned the room for volunteers, Angela made a cautious sort of eye contact with me which I read as a sign that she wanted to volunteer but was struggling to get the courage to raise her hand. “Angela, do you want to read?” I asked.

“Not really,” she said.

I wanted to respect her choice and didn’t want to push her, so I said, “Okay. That’s fine.” And then, without much pause, “I’ll just wait.”

I meant I would wait for another volunteer, but I think Angela thought I meant I’d wait for her. Or maybe she just felt the pressure of my silence as still speaking to her rather than to the whole class. Either way, a minute later, Angela said, “I mean, I’ll read, but I forgot my glasses and I might be slower than other people.” So many excuses and deflections in one sentence, but I chose to ignore them, as a sense of relief washed over me. The familiar nervous silence of an entire class waiting for me, the teacher, or a student to speak would not go on forever.

Angela read beautifully, moving between the Spanish and English in Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” with ease. But as she read, I felt I had betrayed her, had betrayed my own pedagogical stance on students’ choices about speaking and silence. At the time of this interaction with Angela, before I even began this study of silence, I was already trying to resist the implicit notion that student silence was a problem that should be erased. Drawing on my own experiences as a quiet student, as well as scholarship on silence as a powerful rhetoric (particularly

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<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym.

Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken*), I wanted to hear every silence as a choice that is having rhetorical effects in the classroom. I still have these aims in my teaching philosophy; yet, in that moment with Angela, I failed in those goals.

While I respect silence, I also fear it, particularly in situations when I am looked to as an authority or in instances when I am the one who must speak knowledgeably but extemporaneously. Because I identify as a quiet student, I have a long history with my silences being perceived by teachers as loaded, awkward, or unwelcome, and as a result, I think silences hold a different weight for me now that I'm a teacher. As Glenn points out, "unexpected silences unsettle us" (*Unspoken* 11). But in their unsettling nature, they also compel us to do something, to react. My students' silences make me uneasy, but they also challenge me to think differently about how I teach and how they might learn.

Despite my own beliefs about silence, I often fail in my aims to include silence as part of the conversation. Even as I try to listen to student silence, to talk about silence with my students, I often find myself falling into conventional, normative responses to classroom silence—finding it instead to be a problem in need of addressing. Sometimes, as I did in the opening narrative with Angela, I use my silence in response to students' silences, exerting my authority as an instructor. Wendy Wolters Hinshaw calls this act "pulling rank" (272). While Hinshaw is referring to teachers' response to student resistance more broadly, the sentiment is similar, as silence is so often perceived as resistance to teachers' visions of lively conversations. When our authority as teachers is threatened, we often react defensively, even subconsciously, to reassert our authority. With Angela, when I said, "I'll just wait," and chose not to speak, I was using my authoritative silence to intimidate *all* my students, pulling rank, and claiming my authority after Angela refused to accommodate my request for someone to read. Angela took on the burden of that silence, which eventually meant that she felt compelled to speak and break my silence. While I didn't intend for her to bear that burden, she did so all the same.

When Angela spoke, I was initially relieved because the classroom strategy I'd learned at some point in the years I've spent teaching writing and the decades I've spent in classrooms as a

student—waiting out students’ lack of participation—worked. I broke student silence with my own silence, and the movement of the class session could return to a semblance of success. That is, when Angela chose to read, the conversation could continue; the lesson progressed towards the ideal conversation that most instructors envision and rarely, if ever, achieve. In doing so, my supposedly student-centered classroom reinforced the very hierarchical power relations that my teaching philosophy aims to disrupt through collaboration and listening. I became the domineering authority and Angela my subordinate. I’m not saying this hierarchical relationship is escapable—by being an instructor, I am necessarily an authority—but I am saying that my performance of authority was determined by the unspoken rules regarding silence in the writing classroom. This interaction with Angela and noticing how my performance adhered to the dominant paradigm that constructs silence as a problem compelled me to pursue a study of silence.

In this dissertation, I place silence at the center of attention, as both a subject of study and as a lens through which to interrogate norms and expectations for how teachers and students engage with one another in the writing classroom. Kristine L. Blair and Lee Nickoson define a feminist intervention as a commitment to “disrupting dominant structural systems—to intervening in what *is* and to imagining *what could and ultimately must be*” (3). This qualitative study of graduate student instructors’ (GSIs) experiences of silence acts as a feminist intervention into what the established notions of what writing classrooms should look and sound like. That is, I, along with the participants of this study, interrogate the dialogical classroom through an examination of silence, the supposed enemy of discussion-based pedagogies. In what follows, I argue that by looking at the way GSIs experience and define silence, we can work to disrupt the common narratives we hear about silence and to intervene in the normative responses to student silence that I, myself, enact in the opening narrative with Angela. Continuing in the lineage of feminist disruption, I ask what happens if we consider and value silence in the writing classroom instead of erasing it, and I ask what a study of silence can offer us in terms of imagining more equitable learning environments for all students.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Silences, particularly those enforced onto women and marginalized peoples, are manifestations of dominant power relations. As Glenn explains, “Who can speak and who must remain silent are basic rhetorical features of dominant discourse” (*Unspoken* 27). While speaking has often indicated “masculinity, silence has long been gendered ‘feminine,’ as a lamentable essence of weakness” (Glenn and Ratcliffe 4). Glenn, in her study of silence as a rhetorical art, considers the ways speech “signal[s] power, liberation, culture, or civilization itself,” while silence “signals nothingness” (*Unspoken* 3). Meanwhile, the rhetorical tradition, curated historically in the Western masculinized world, emphasizes the superior role of speech, and that a rhetor is a “good man speaking well” (Quintilian 385). In the Enlightenment, speech was linked directly to the human ability to reason, and those who physically could not speak or were prohibited from speaking were marked as “inhuman” (Brueggemann 11). The superiority of speech over silence has continued into contemporary times; speech so often signifies success, or at least social prowess, in the business world, in many social gatherings, and, most importantly in this study, in educational settings. In places where conversation is expected, “We learn early on to fill up social space and compress silence, to use words for phatic communication, small talk, and idle conversation” (Glenn, *Unspoken* 6). Because of these rules and training, “noticeably silent people, we have been led to believe, are either psychologically inhibited or inappropriate in their deliveries of silence; they are not performing the role of conversant” (Glenn, *Unspoken* 6).

Glenn, through an interrogation of these norms and beliefs about the rules for speaking and using silence, also works to open silence. She argues that silence is its own “rhetorical art that can be as powerful as the spoken or written word” (*Unspoken* 9). She features the ways people use silence and silencing in their everyday lives to both deploy and resist power, and she makes the case for more research to be done in the rhetorical art of silence. Rhetoricians have taken up her call, using a rhetoric of silence to include women and minority groups in the rhetorical tradition, looking at the ways these suppressed groups have used, and continue to use, silence in unexpected

ways to resist those in power (e.g. Bokser; Myers; Watson). In her conclusion to *Unspoken*, Glenn also leaves space for research on the role of rhetorical silence in the classroom, calling for more studies that “demonstrate the power of classroom silence, especially when it circulates as a creative or ethical resource” (160).

The western cultural tradition of devaluing silence as a sign of weakness persists in writing classrooms that value dialogue over other forms of learning. Mary Reda, in *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students*, enters the opening Glenn leaves for silent possibilities in writing classrooms, by exploring how silence “is often constructed as the enemy of teaching, learning, and even teachers themselves” (23). Reda explains that teachers often interpret student-initiated silence in classrooms as resistance, as a sign of disengagement, unpreparedness, or even an inability to participate in expected ways. In other words, because silence is the enemy, so too is the quiet student. The quiet student, seen as violating the expectations of the classroom, is marked as resistant, disengaged, or even disempowered, and these narratives circulate amongst instructors in the form of “teacher talk,” or what I am calling “lore” in this dissertation (Bishop 217). In her study, Reda seeks to disrupt the “seemingly unassailable stories about classroom silence” (3). She exposes the ways the lore, or teacher talk, negatively affects students and their learning, and she asks quiet students how they perceive their own silences with the goal of disrupting those “unassailable stories” of silence that circulate through department hallways and are enacted in the ways teachers approach quiet students in their everyday practice.

My dissertation builds on the work of both Glenn and Reda to continue the interrogation of those “unassailable stories” about classroom silence and quiet students. Reda suggests that for quiet students to speak about silence is “in some ways, a political act, as it works, even in a very small way, as a corrective to the ways they have been named and misnamed by their teachers and the academy to which they seek membership” (12). Reda’s work itself, in speaking about silence, is valuable in disrupting conventional perceptions of student silence. In my study, I further this disruption, investing in the idea that to speak directly about silence is a political act, that to speak about silence is to expose and resist the ways in which it has been constructed as problematic.

To make my intervention, I turned to GSIs, those less experienced instructors who often find themselves listening to the insidious stories about silence in department hallways and reading them in teaching guidebooks. While Reda made salient the negative effects such discourse has on quiet students and their learning, I set out to understand what effects these narratives have on graduate student instructors' developing teaching philosophies and identities. My study operates under the assumption that the lore that circulates about silence limits how teachers might teach and how students might learn. Thus, I wanted to understand how GSIs, who are in a process of becoming scholars as well as teachers and think reflexively about their experiences, might offer ways of resisting the lore in working towards more equitable learning environments for and with their students. That is, from the beginning of this feminist project, I saw my future participants as not just data sets to analyze but as potential collaborators in a grounded theory of silence that might disrupt the stories that circulates about silence and quiet students and instead imagine new ways of interacting in the writing classroom that go beyond the dialogical default. Thus, my dissertation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How can a study of silence in the classroom help writing teachers understand practices of teacher-student interactions in ways that might promote a more equitable learning environment than the typical discussion-based classroom?
2. What might writing teachers learn about silence as a rhetorical trope from examining their own habits of assessing students' behaviors, their policies in their classrooms, and by reflecting on their own experiences as students and teachers?
3. What is the teaching lore that surrounds silence and quiet students, and how is that lore circulated? What effects does this lore have on GSIs' identities and their developing pedagogies? How do GSIs reproduce or resist those narratives in their teaching practice? How can that lore be disrupted in order to attain a more equitable learning environment that values multiple ways of teaching, learning, and being?

## A QUIET STUDENT'S JOURNEY INTO THE SILENCE

This project emerges from and engages with what I would call a lifelong personal contemplation of silence in the classroom. Before I get into the specifics of my study and my participants, I feel it is important to recount the ways in which I am positioned and implicated in the research itself as a quiet student. I recognize the ways in which my own experiences influence the way I constructed this study and how I interpreted the data and also the limitations of my perspective. For instance, the experiences of being a quiet student that I describe in this section are filtered through my embodied identity as a white, middle class, cis-female who went to a private, mostly white, liberal arts college in conservative Texas. These intersectional identities, as well as my extensive and complicated relationship with silence, influenced the questions I set out to answer, the methods I selected, and the ways in which I engaged with my participants' stories.

Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie urge composition researchers to do more than acknowledge their positionality, insisting “a politics of location must engage us in a rigorous ongoing exploration of *how* we do our research” (9). My dissertation, as a feminist qualitative study focused on understanding the ways GSIs experience silence, values the importance of the personal as a source of knowledge (Kirsch and Ritchie 7). Yet, in locating my own subject position, as well as the positions of my participants to the extent that I am able, I also maintain a critical reflexivity towards the material itself (in this case, silence) as well as the “impossibility of ever fully understanding another’s experiences” (13). Throughout this project, I sought both to step outside of my own personal relationship with silence to engage with and value others’ experiences of silence, doing as Kirsch and Ritchie suggest: “place their [researcher’s] stories and those of their research participants in dialogue with others to gain new insights into their own and others’ lives” (23).

As a quiet student, I have often found myself at odds with expectations of dialogue-driven learning environments. When I was a child, my teachers often labeled me as shy, and, from a young age, that label carried a lot of weight, shaping the way I interacted with others and

particularly with authority figures. There always seemed to be this unspoken implication in the word, shy, that meant I was somehow not living up to my potential. To be shy implies that I have always been nervous about speaking in front of others, but that has never really been the case; instead, I have been observant and cautious about voicing my ideas before establishing a rapport with my environment and community. During my second year in my doctoral program, I found my experience represented in Reda's study of quiet students, which offered me new ways of understanding how I engaged in the classroom. I identified with her students who insist that "intimacy [with their classmates] decreases the likelihood that they will choose to be silent in classes," and the students who desire instructors who "both acknowledge their authority and define themselves beyond, outside, and in addition to it" (Reda 141; 92). In sum, I have come to understand that I require time and opportunity to form relationships with those around me, particularly authority figures, before I feel ready to voice my thoughts.

Nevertheless, from childhood onward, I developed a kind of anxiety around speaking in classrooms that I now attribute to the ways in which instructors labeled my silences as problematic. In grade school, being a quiet person could be construed as a net positive—I was rewarded for this good behavior and looked to as an example for how my peers should be acting. Yet, when I started attending a small liberal arts college, I found that most of my seminar classes expected something called participation. The course syllabi included a grade for it, but I felt physically incapable of speaking in class. It wasn't that I didn't prepare. I usually had lively discussions with a few trusted peers before and after class about the course material, but my professors didn't hear these conversations and had no way of knowing how or what I was learning. As Genevieve Critel's dissertation on the rhetoric of participation highlights and interrogates, the "assumption is that to make the shift from lecture-based classrooms to student-centered classrooms, teachers must articulate and perhaps assess student participation" (2). Like Critel argues, I found through my own experience that oral participation is how many instructors measure learning. While I tried to compensate for my silences with good listening skills, thoughtfulness, and most of all, my writing

ability, more and more as I rose through higher education, my quietness seemed to be the only part of my identity that mattered to my professors.

I had an English professor during college who would cold-call me most class periods. My face would turn red, and my entire body would erupt in sweat. Even after I told him I didn't know how to answer his question, he would sit there in silence, waiting. I stared at the desk, unable to think or process anything except for what felt like a public humiliation. During the first semester of my M.F.A. program, I had a professor who, frustrated with a quiet class of nervous first-year graduate students, brought in a small red ball to toss around the circle. She threw it to me first, without warning, and the ball bounced off the top of my head and rolled across the floor, a glaring red exclamation point that seemed to underscore the fact that I was the quietest person in the room. During the first year of my doctoral program, I was told in a faculty-written letter that I needed to talk more in my classes. The letter was in response to my qualifying portfolio of writing. The remark seemed to imply that while my writing was fine, if I really wanted to succeed in academia, I needed to learn to speak up.

Using Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's concept of the misfit and Elisabeth Miller's application of the concept to literate misfitting, Lauren Obermark questions "what is assumed and expected of graduate students in English" ("Misfit" 174). In a survey of graduate students, Obermark finds that students often feel a misfit with expectations of graduate school and that while students accept that the dominant in-class pedagogical practice is class discussion, they are also "simultaneously concerned about their own ability to align with it, acknowledging the dominance of discussion while sometimes expressing fatigue or frustration with it" ("Misfit" 184). She also finds that many graduate students put into use what she calls "reverse accommodations" ("Misfit" 192). Reverse accommodations are when graduate students

assume that *they* must adapt to the professor, when the mechanism of accommodations for disability indicates that circumstances outside the student should change. ...But with a reverse accommodation, nothing outside of the student changes; the onus is on them to figure it out and make it work. ("Misfit" 192)

What Obermark describes in feeling the misfit and in adapting through reverse accommodations is akin to my experiences conforming to what I believed was expected of me in graduate school.

I eventually taught myself to negotiate professors' expectations. In my doctoral coursework, I spent days preparing for each class discussion. I read every word of every article assigned to us, taking copious notes. In the hours before a class, I would review those notes and write down possible talking points I could bring up about each assigned reading. I spent inordinate amounts of time doing these activities, trying to guess what kinds of discussion questions the professor would ask and how I would hypothetically respond, even though it is physically impossible to predict a conversation with as many variables and possibilities as a graduate course holds. While I admit some of this prep work helped me learn the material, that wasn't why I was doing the labor. I was laboring in these ways so that I could find a way to speak in class and conform to professors' ideas of what my learning performance should look like.

Contemplating my own silences and my professors' responses to them is what eventually led me to this project on silence. While I found echoes of my experiences in work like Reda's, Critel's, and Obermark's, part of my impetus for pursuing silence further was that I sought answers to why these were my experiences in the first place. Reda's study exposes the overwhelmingly negative narratives that teachers tell each other about silence and forwards quiet students' stories as a counter to those narratives, but at the root of my experiences as a quiet student and feelings of not belonging in dialogical academic settings, seemed to be the way others perceived and named my silences for me. Where Reda's work disrupts the lore on silence by talking to quiet students, I set out to understand how instructors came to experience and name silence in these prescribed ways and what a study of silence could offer the field of rhetoric and writing studies in terms of disrupting those narratives.

## **SITUATING THE STUDY**

### **Why Graduate Student Instructors**

To make my intervention in the lore about silence and quiet students, I turned not to the experienced teachers who pass down the lore about classroom silence, but instead to GSIs. I sought out this population for a number of reasons. First, I believe, as Obermark argues, that it is important to “attend to the voices of graduate students, listening to and trusting their experiences and expertise about how they learn, especially when these experiences produce a misfit” (“Misfit” 174). Obermark is talking about graduate students’ knowledge about graduate education itself, but I add to this the importance of listening to their expertise about teaching as well. As Jessica Restaino points out, while graduate student instructors play a critical role in university writing programs, there are very few projects that study their experiences (18).

Secondly, GSIs offer a unique perspective on silence because, much like the first-year writing students they teach, they are in the process of becoming. They are continuously and consciously honing their identities as both instructors and scholars and are thinking reflectively and reflexively about their experiences of being in-process. They are listening to the lore about silence in department hallways, studying it in teaching guidebooks, and most importantly, closely observing their own professors’ responses to silence. At the same time, as the participants of my study suggest, GSIs often aim a critical eye at the formal and informal lessons they encounter when it comes to common teaching practices, and they are imagining alternative ways to proceed in their own classrooms when it comes to participation, quiet students, and silence.

### **The Local Context**

This study took place at an urban Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) on the US-Mexico border, which I call Border University. I chose to limit my study to the first-year writing program at Border University because it offers a unique site for a case study on the phenomenon of silence in the classroom and because, in doing feminist research, I value inquiry that is “centered in the

local and the individual while at the same time acknowledging that research has social consequences in the world” (Kirsch and Ritchie 25).

Most GSIs at Border U are M.A. or Ph.D. students in the English Department, focusing on Literature or Rhetoric and Writing Studies, while a few are M.F.A. students in Creative Writing (a program which exists outside of the English Department). Unlike GSIs at many other graduate programs in the country, GSIs at Border U take part in extensive time, training, and preparation before stepping into the classroom as a teacher. Because of a state mandate requiring graduate students to have 18 graduate credit hours in their primary subject area before becoming an instructor of record, most GSIs at Border U serve as tutors in the University Writing Center for the entirety of their first year. In the fall of their first year, GSIs take a one-semester composition pedagogy course. In the spring, most take part in a program in which they are paired with an experienced instructor, shadowing their classes and meeting regularly to talk about teaching practice and pedagogy. Under the instatement of a new Writing Program Administrator in 2019, GSIs at Border U now also take part in week-long training session in the summer, just before their first semester teaching. They are then mentored throughout their first semester by an advanced graduate student who is serving as an Assistant Director to the Writing Program.

Because some participants in this study entered their respective graduate programs at different times and with varying levels of previous teaching experience, not all GSIs who participated in this study took part in every step of this lengthy training process. Maria, for example, only worked in the University Writing Center for one semester, and Miguel only took part in the week-long session before he began teaching, as he had already completed coursework and teacher training at another university. Still, I don’t believe results of this study can be easily compared to the much more common graduate experience, in which GSIs receive just 5-10 days of fast-paced training before beginning to teach for the first time.

Another reason why I chose to focus my study on experiences of silence at Border U is that most studies of writing programs and classrooms, including Reda’s study of classroom silence, take place at predominately white institutions (PWIs) and thus are necessarily limited in

perspective. While whiteness certainly influences HSIs as higher-education institutions, a HSI, especially a border institution like Border U, is a very different place to teach and learn at than a PWI, even for someone like me, who is white. For instance, it is not uncommon for the classes I teach to be made up of almost entirely Mexican or Latinx students, and I frequently hear students speaking Spanish to each other during class, even though I do not speak Spanish myself. According to the university's "At a Glance" webpage,<sup>3</sup> 83% of students at Border University identify as Hispanic. In 2017, a newsletter put out by Border U stated that 60% of conferred graduate-level degrees were given to Hispanic students.<sup>4</sup> Many students cross the US-Mexico border each day to attend classes. Many more are working class, and according to the "At a Glance" page, 49% are first-generation college students. A vast number of undergraduate and graduate students alike, are multilingual with Spanish as their primary language.

Jay Jordan has suggested that students who are second-language English users may use silence in ways that challenge norms (280). My dissertation is not a study of multilingual writers and instructors, but all seven participants who self-selected for this study engage with Border U's Hispanic and multilingual undergraduate student population on a daily basis. Four of the seven GSIs in this study identify as multilingual themselves, three of those participants are from Mexico. One participant now lives on the U.S. side of the border but commuted across it when she was an undergraduate to attend classes at Border U, another participant is an international student who chooses to live in Mexico and crosses the border for their duties as a student and GSI. These intersectional identity formations, as well as the local border context itself, shape the way participants think about their experiences of classroom silence. Shannon Madden argues that academics and those who mentor graduate students "must recognize how certain ways of knowing are privileged in the academy over others," while the lived experiences of graduate students, particularly students of color and/or multilingual students, are often overlooked or passed over (16). If my study had attempted to survey a wider, more national population of graduate students,

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<sup>3</sup> To preserve the school's anonymity, I have not cited the exact webpage here or in the Works Cited.

<sup>4</sup> To preserve the school's anonymity, I have not cited this newsletter explicitly here or in the Works Cited.

it would have unintentionally decentered the experiences of graduate students at this HSI in favor of the prevailing whiteness that exists at PWIs. I, instead, chose to center the stories of GSIs at Border U to highlight their lived experiences and intersectional identities in relation to classroom silence.

### **Introducing the Participants**

Rather than painting a generalized picture of the graduate student instructor relationship with silence, I choose to focus on “individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (Seidman 9). Using Border University’s first-year writing listserv,<sup>5</sup> I recruited seven participants who were all graduate students at Border University teaching first-year composition. Each person chose a pseudonym for themselves and electronically signed an informed consent form. I will account for my methods of data collection in detail in Chapter 3, but all participants contributed 2 reflective writing samples and a set of self-selected teaching documents and participated in both an individual interview and a focus group interview with the other participants. While I will attend to their individual stories more deeply in Chapters 4 and 5, here, I briefly introduce you to the people who gave life to my study of silence.

#### ***Maria (she/her)***

Maria describes herself as a student who “constantly flirt[s] with the line between participation and monopolization” (Writing Sample 1). The great granddaughter of Italian immigrants, she describes her upbringing in an Italian family as “LOUD! There was never silence at the dinner table, in the house, in the car, or wherever. We are all talkers” (Writing Sample 1). At the time of this study, Maria was a second-year doctoral student in Rhetoric and Writing Studies. She entered the Ph.D. program with an M.A. in Literature and 17 years of teaching experience in all levels—from middle school through college. Having spent 12 years teaching first-

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A for recruitment email.

year writing at various types of institutions, she has the most previous teaching experience of the group of participants. She's also the mother of two children and the wife to an active service member.

***Robin (they/them)***

Robin does not identify as a quiet student saying, "I'm an outgoing person. ... One of the things I do best is connect with other people and try and connect them as well and activate what they're doing. And so, talking, for me, is like such a crucial component of collaborative kind of stuff." Robin entered the Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the same time as Maria. Before coming to Border U, they had taught English to grades K-6 in Korea for two years and worked in several higher-education settings, including academic advising. They are also a Quaker.

***Sarish (he/him)***

Sarish entered the Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Writing Studies with Robin and Maria. He links his choices of being a quiet or speaking student to knowledge: "If I do know something, I want to talk, I want to immediately jump into the discussions. And if I'm, I'm silent, I don't know about the content, right?" An international student from Nepal, Sarish came to Border U having taught for twelve years at the college level in Nepal. He taught mostly English language and linguistics courses, as well as teacher development courses. At the time of our interview, he was teaching first-year writing for the first time.

***Vincent (they/them/she/her)***

Vincent lives on the Mexico side of the U.S.-Mexico border and commuted to Border U every day before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. An international student whose primary language is Spanish, Vincent came to Border U after completing a Bachelor's in literature and teaching high school literature and creative writing for seven years in Mexico. Vincent describes

themselves as “a quiet student. I prefer to listen. I’m more of a listener.” At the time of this study, they were in their second year of a bilingual M.F.A program in poetry, and they were teaching first-year writing for the first time.

***Cindy (she/her)***

Cindy was in her second year of the M.A. program in Literature when she volunteered to participate. When I asked Cindy if she described herself as a quiet student, she laughed, saying, “Now, yeah. ...I would say I’m a little bit in the middle. I’m not very outgoing or I’m not very silent, but I really, really was [a quiet student] like...a semester and a half ago.” Cindy is from the urban area where Border U is located, and before pursuing her M.A., she completed her B.A. in Literature in the same English department at Border U. When we spoke during her interview, she was in her very first semester of teaching.

Both Cindy and Vincent entered their respective graduate programs at the same time Sarish, Robin, and Maria entered the doctoral program. All five of these participants took the required writing pedagogy course together as a cohort, and this shared experience is referenced at times throughout this dissertation.

***Miguel (he/him)***

When he volunteered for this study, Miguel was in his third year as a doctoral student in Rhetoric and Writing Studies but a first-year student at Border U. An international student from southern Mexico whose primary language is Spanish, he joined the program at Border U after completing his coursework and initial two years of teaching first-year writing at a different university. Before teaching at his previous university, he had no other teaching experience, aside from teaching English to middle school kids in Mexico, which he describes as informal. Miguel is also a musician. When I asked him if he described himself as a quiet student, he said, “I can be

quiet when I don't know. But when I know, I cannot stay quiet. ... It depends on knowledge for me.”

***Sonia (she/her)***

Sonia is the only advanced doctoral student in Rhetoric and Writing Studies who volunteered to participate in this study. Sonia attended Border U for both her Bachelor's and Master's before applying for the Ph.D. program. She even took FYW at Border U as an undergraduate. A self-described L2 student, her primary language is Spanish. She wrote in her first reflective writing sample, “Being an L2 student, I never felt confident to participate in class or to ‘break the silence’ during class if that makes sense. ... This shifted when I became a graduate, as I began to gain confidence in my language, I began participating more during class.” At the time of our interview, she had finished her coursework and comprehensive exams and was working on her dissertation, a study which focuses on using mindfulness in the writing classroom. She had been teaching FYW at Border U for 4 years and was serving as an Assistant Director to the Writing Program at the time of our interview, which meant she was mentoring newer GSIs through their first year of teaching. Sonia is also a yoga instructor.

**A Brief Note on The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Online Learning**

While I was collecting data in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021, the world was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and all instructors in the FYW program at Border U were teaching entirely online. At the time of our initial interviews, 5 of the 7 participants were teaching asynchronously, or without any scheduled class session on Zoom. These conditions were not ideal, as my research and preparation for conducting my study had not included any consideration of the online classroom in relation to silence. The literature on classroom silence and quiet students, including the foundational work of Reda, focuses on face-to-face learning environments, and most

of my own understandings of silence have relied on face-to-face classroom interactions and experiences.

Because of the constraints of the pandemic and teaching online, most participants did not have current examples of silence in the face-to-face classroom to draw upon in their initial interviews. Instead, much of what they spoke about were past teaching experiences (if they had them), experiences with meeting with small groups of their students on Zoom, their past and present experiences as students, and how they imagined they would respond to silence in a face-to-face setting as teacher. For example, Cindy, who was teaching for the very first time, was also teaching asynchronously. She did not have any face-to-face experiences to draw from in her role as an instructor; therefore, she focused primarily on her experiences of silence in her role as a student. I set out to understand how experiences of all sorts influence GSIs' thinking about silence. In relying on her student experiences, as Cindy did, she was able to expose the ways in which GSIs' past encounters with silence hold a great influence on their understandings of silence when they *are* in a face-to-face classroom setting.

Silence in an online classroom must necessarily function differently than it does in a face-to-face classroom. Because they were teaching online and under unusual circumstances, participants also unearthed expanded understandings of what counts as silence. For example, the GSIs in this study considered students' lack of communication in responding to emails or turning in assignments a form of silence. They likened silence to the black boxes on Zoom when their students or their classmates didn't turn on their cameras. Miguel, who was teaching a synchronous Zoom session, noticed how students were hindered by the lack of silence in their home spaces, as they were constantly interrupted by parents, siblings, or other background noises.

Moreover, participants' experiences of silence in Zoom environments when in the role of students varied greatly. Maria called them more "cavernous," while Cindy found them to be less intimidating and less pressure filled. These understandings of silence, while mentioned and addressed occasionally in the narrative of my research, did not become the focus of this dissertation. Instead, I chose to continue my focus on GSIs' perceptions and experiences of silence

in the face-to-face classroom, since that is where negative views of silence and quiet students most frequently persist. I left online silence as a worthy potential avenue for future exploration.

## **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

In this introductory chapter, I have introduced the impetus for my feminist qualitative study of classroom silence. I have explained how my work builds on Glenn's forwarding of feminist rhetorical silence and Reda's intervention into the lore that circulates about classroom silence and quiet students. I have acknowledged and included my own narrative of silence, and I have set forth the basic framing of my study, including the research questions that guided it, the setting, and the participants.

In Chapter 2: Tracing Dominant Narratives of Silence and Quiet Students: A Review of the Literature, I review the formal and informal constructions of silence found in composition literature and how these narratives about silence shape the roles students and teachers can play in the FYW classroom. This review of the literature reveals how the unspoken rules regarding silence in the classroom are linked to the production of dominant relations of power (Foucault). I conclude the chapter by critiquing two popular teaching guidebooks, highlighting the ways negative constructions of silence appear as codified advice, limiting the roles that students and teachers can play in the classroom.

Chapter 3: Exploring Experiences of Silence through a Feminist Methodology explains the way I designed this study and how it invested with feminist principles. I conceptualize the methods I used for data collection as well as how I approached coding and analyzing the data.

Chapter 4: Defining the Quiet through Histories of Silence: Silence as a Performance is the first of two analysis chapters. In this chapter, I describe the ways participants' individualized histories with silence shape the way they engage or disengage with the quiet and how many of those interactions are shaped by dominant cultural and educational norms. In arguing that silence is a performance (Schechner; Hao), I show how participants come to name silence over time in

ways that are influenced by dominant narratives but also how those definitions are shaped by the particularities of their own personal histories. In laying these participants' narratives side by side, I reveal how each participant describes silence in ways that solidify over time, but that silence itself differs in meaning based on contexts, relationships, and personal histories.

In Chapter 5: Accounting for the Discomfort of the Quiet: Silence as an Object of Emotion, the second of my two analysis chapters, I take up the theme of embodied discomfort, which cuts across participants' definitions of silence, and theorize the way silence has come to be an object of emotion (Ahmed). I trace the ways silence acts on us through emotions and how performances (Butler) of discomfort work to circulate negative understandings of silence. I also argue for interrupting normative narratives by "unsticking" (Micciche) silence from discomfort.

Finally, in Chapter 6: Conclusion: Centering Silence, I turn to the focus group conversation I had with my participants to suggest ways in which teachers can disrupt normative narratives about silence. To do this, I forward a theory of *centering silence* as a way to intervene in dominant narratives by unsticking negative emotions from silence. Centering silence, as I am proposing it, is not one set of prescribed moves, but instead, a combination of pedagogical and reflective habits of mind that ask teachers and students to attend to silence as an object of emotion in ways that encourage seeing the meanings, purposes, and uses of silence as never static but always in-flux. It is through this ongoing process of centering silence that I suggest that we can create more equitable learning environments with and alongside our students in the FYW classroom.

## Chapter 2: Tracing Dominant Narratives of Silence and Quiet Students: A Review of the Literature

### THE RHETORICAL POWER OF SILENCE

In Glenn's study of silence as a rhetoric, she discusses the ways in which silence and silencing are used according to the rules of dominant power relations. As I discussed in Chapter 1, silence has often been viewed as a feminine characteristic, a sign of weakness and subordination. Glenn argues that "uses of silence—just like speech—are gendered, with the already-empowered using silence to maintain their power and the already-weak performing simply another iteration of the regulatory norm" (*Unspoken* 22). She goes on to explain the

dominant group in a social hierarchy renders "inarticulate" subordinate or muted groups (any of the traditionally disenfranchised) and excludes them from the formulation, validation, and circulation of meaning. Thus, the inability to speak fluently in certain social interactions can indicate mutedness, and silence itself becomes the language of the powerless. (*Unspoken* 25)

In other words, those who are in positions of power silence others, and then read those same silences as markers of weakness. Disciplinary power thus works through silence and silencing, producing a seemingly endless cycle of more silence and silencing. Michel Foucault writes,

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (*Discipline* 194)

Power "produces reality" through the ways it disciplines subjects to perform in particular ways. So, when those holding power silence others, then the others who perform silence are seemingly performing obedience. Thus, power works in a cycle to silence those in disenfranchised positions, propping up dominant hierarchies, and reifying those hierarchies by describing those who have been silenced as weak, or even as "inhuman" (Brueggemann 11).

Moreover, silence culturally perceived as the language of the disenfranchised is why Audre Lorde urges those in non-dominant positions to break imposed silences, equating silence with

death and speech with survival and action (“The Transformation”). Yet, Jacqueline Jones Royster points out that when she speaks of her own experiences as an African American scholar, her “voice...is still a muted one;” while she breaks the silence, she is not always heard or believed (36). Coming out of the silence is viewed as empowering and is a necessary means of speaking back to power. However, bodies that hold more institutional or cultural power have more license to use speaking or silence as they please.

Silencing is one technique of those in power, but silence itself can also be used by the powerful as a particularly insidious means of controlling the subordinate. Glenn writes,

When silence is a means for exerting control and managing the situation, silence originates with the dominant party, stimulating the subordinate party to explore options for breaking the silence, for rousing speech from the other. ... To maintain control of the situation, the dominant party must wield silence as a means to press the subordinate into taking on the burden of silence—or speech, whatever the case may be. (32)

In other words, when used by those instilled with power by institutions, silence can act as a means of controlling those in subordinate positions, forcing them to speak, even when they are not willing to.

We see iterations of these uses of silence in the dialogical writing classroom. When an instructor poses a question, and frustrated with students’ lack of response, holds a silence to assert their authority, they are using their silence to force students into speaking. Instead of breaking the silence themselves, the teacher will sit in silence, waiting out their students’ supposed resistance. Teachers reassert their authority when it is threatened, using silence to will our students back towards the speaking norm. We wait out students’ silence when we are expecting them to speak, pushing them towards the speaking norm of the dialogical classroom. The rules around silence in the classroom reveal the ways dominant power relations operate in these spaces. As Reda points out, “[w]hile the silences initiated by teachers are seen as productive and natural (and generally unremarked upon), those silences initiated by students are troubling, problematic, and disruptive (5).

Also visible in these examples are the ways in which power produces the dominant perspective that silence, when speech is expected of the subordinate, should be erased through the act of speaking. Again, power operates in a cycle to silence those in disenfranchised positions, propping up dominant hierarchies, and reifying those hierarchies by describing those who have been silenced as outside of the norm. The individual who is silent when they are supposed to speak becomes, in Foucault's terms, "a case" through the documentation of their ineptitudes; then, those enforced ineptitudes are compared to the speaking norm and used to maintain power (Foucault). In this way, silence becomes a marker not just of difference but of deficit, and subjects—in this case, authority figures, or those in dominant cultural positions—who can choose between speech and silence at will, can also impose meaning on others' silence without really listening to it.

Because of these negative constructions of silence that persist culturally, it is easy to place speech and silence in a dichotomy, where silence is weakness and speech is the pathway to power and liberation, particularly for the disenfranchised. However, Glenn's study pushes to break that binary and offers ways in which silence can also be used to resist power. The starting point for her study of silence doesn't begin with considering silence as a sign of subordination but rather in noticing the ways Protestant Reformer Anne Askew uses a "rhetoric of concealment," delivering silence in the face of torture "rather than the called-for, expected, self-disclosing answers" (*Unspoken 2*). That is, Glenn understands that Askew uses silence in ways that are "truly powerful and empowering" (*Unspoken 2*). Silence can protect and enforce hierarchies, but it can also be used by those in less dominant positions to resist those in power.

Since Glenn's study, others, particularly feminist rhetoricians have highlighted the ways women and other marginalized groups have used silence in powerful ways, as a feminist or proto-feminist rhetoric. These uses of silence have become particularly visible in the proto-feminist rhetorical displays of recovered women rhetors. For instance, Nancy Myers suggests that while silence was expected of women in the Middle Ages, Christine de Pizan's advice to women in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* suggests using expected silence in subversively rhetorical ways, allowing women to use their position to enact change in *kairotic* moments (Myers). Julie Bokser's

analysis of the Spanish nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, also highlights a subversive use of silence. After the bishop attempts to quiet Sor Juana, she interrupts her enforced silence to say that it should not be read as passive; she names her silence as “subversively improper” (Bokser, “Sor Juana’s” 16). Bokser also analyzes the ways Sor Juana praised the Biblical Esther’s use of deceptive silence and her position for political gain (“The Persuasion”). Kristie S. Fleckenstein shows how Catherine of Siena drew on a contemplative, silent practice—marking her own body as an example of a silent, ascetic lifestyle—to secure her right to preach when women were prohibited from doing so. And finally, in more contemporary times, Ashley Elliot Pryor highlights the group, Women in Black, who use silence as a medium for protest and peace-making. In sum, there are many historical and contemporary examples of marginalized rhetors, particularly women, using silence in strategic, deceptive, and subversive ways to resist those in power, underscoring that silence is a powerful rhetoric used by dominant and nondominant groups. As Glenn and Ratcliffe argue, silence and listening as rhetorical arts

have been conceptualized and employed in different times and places by many different people—some with power, some without—for purposes as diverse as showing reverence, gathering knowledge, planning action, buying time, and attempting to survive. (2)

In other words, silence has a diversity of purposes depending on who is using it and how it is wielded. In the rules that shape and subvert dominant power relationships, silence plays just as important of a role as speech, and silence should not be disregarded as powerless.

## **THE QUIET STUDENT CHOOSES SILENCE**

Despite the rhetorical possibilities of silence that Glenn and others have uncovered or forwarded, the bias towards speaking and the corresponding negative assumptions about those who use silence often persist in the discussion-based and collaborative writing classroom. In the classroom, silence “is often constructed as the enemy of teaching, learning, and even teachers themselves” (Reda 23). Reda explores how teachers often interpret student-initiated silence in classrooms as resistance, as a sign of disengagement, unpreparedness, or an inability to participate

in expected ways. In other words, the quiet student is seen as violating the expectations of the classroom and is marked as resistant, disengaged, or even disempowered.

Stephanie Kerschbaum calls this hyper-focus on student silence a form of “difference fixation,” in which we fixate on a marker of difference, aiming to learn about that difference while assuming it’s fully knowable (57). To interpret a student’s silence for them is not only to link it to a particular identity—a shy student, a disengaged student, a quiet but diligent student—but also to try to repair that identity to make it fit into the ideal dialogical and collaborative classroom. Thus, instructors often fixate on silence as difference, diagnose it, assume to understand it, and then attempt to fix it (Kerschbaum). To use Foucault’s terms, the quiet student becomes a case, who is documented and compared to their speaking peers, as a means of pushing those students towards the norm. As discussed in the previous section, such normative views of silence have a multitude of negative consequences for those who use it in unsanctioned ways, particularly those who are in less dominant cultural and institutional positions, including students in dialogical writing classrooms.

In *Unspoken*, Glenn subverts the hierarchical relationship of speech over silence by arguing that “it is silence that reveals speech at the same time that it enacts its own sometimes complementary rhetoric” (3). While Western society and the Western rhetorical tradition may continue to favor speaking over silence, that doesn’t mean that silence automatically equals absence or powerlessness. After all, “silencing...is not the same as erasing” (Glenn, *Unspoken* 4). To return to Foucault’s understanding producing reality, silencing may produce silence, but that silence need not necessarily always lead to more silencing. The chain of production can be interrupted. Glenn argues that “Like speech, the meaning of silence depends on a power differential that exists in every rhetorical situation: who can speak, who must remain silent, who listens, and what those listeners do” (*Unspoken* 9). These power differentials shape classrooms and, in turn, shape who can use silence in those spaces and how it is used.

While Glenn does invite applications of silence as a rhetoric in writing classrooms, she does not lend much attention to the functions of silence in the writing classroom. Still, I draw on

her arguments to understand the ways speech and silence can and do operate in such spaces, propping up the very power relationships that most instructors are trying to resist by centering dialogical learning. Most writing instructors rely on some form of dialogue in their teaching practice. While some of the reasons for implementing conversation in classrooms stem from pedagogical theories, I believe some of this over-reliance on dialogue comes from the cultural belief that conversation, “has always been a medium for establishing oneself as an intellectual, social, or financial player. ...Conversation continues to imply equality among participants: no one interrupts, no one remains silent, everyone takes turns” (Glenn, *Unspoken* 6). In other words, being able to participate in conversations with ease is a highly valued skill in most social and professional situations. There is also a perceived equality in the conversation, something many instructors put stock in when implementing it in their classrooms. However, that equality does not necessarily exist between participants of the conversation. These beliefs about conversation permeate our writing classrooms, even going so far to presume the equality of participants, despite the obvious and inescapable hierarchy that exists between teacher and students (Reda 89). In the day-to-day life of our classrooms, a lot of emphasis is placed on full class or small group discussion, and as Reda points out, the ideal image of a writing instructor is a skilled discussion leader (4). Often, those students who can be conversationalists with ease are labeled “good students,” while those who do not participate, or those who choose to participate through silence, are considered resistant to the norms of the dialogical classroom.

In her classroom study, Reda asks quiet students about their silences and finds students often perceive their own silences to mean something very different from the mostly negative assumptions that teachers make about them. That is, while teachers often automatically assume that student silence is problematic, students don’t necessarily see it that way. She explains that “[students] do not generally see their silences in terms of unsuccessful attempts or thwarted desires to speak. Rather, this conflict is often framed in terms of failing to meet *teachers’* expectations” (153). In other words, students only see their silences as a problem because they believe their teachers see them that way. In her conversations with quiet students, Reda reveals that students

choose silence for a variety of reasons, including a “perceived lack of authority” (90), a fear of their response being dismissed by the instructor (97), and a sense of self-preservation in front of their peers (130). Moreover, many students understand their silences as positive and productive—they are expressions of their identity (156), evidence of work being done (169), and signs of an internal conversation happening (160).

Timothy San Pedro, in his study of Native American high school students’ silences, explains that Native American students often choose silence as a tool of resistance and resilience when faced with micro- and macroaggressions against Native histories and peoples (“Shield”). Challenging stereotypes of Native Americans’ supposed cultural silence, San Pedro illustrates how silence is often a prescribed response to repeated settler colonial microaggressions in classrooms (“Shield 134). Teachers and non-Native students effectively force Native students to choose silence, which in turn creates and reinscribes the dominant narrative about Native Americans’ cultural silence (San Pedro, “Shield” 141). San Pedro interrupts this narrative to argue that Native American students use silence as agentive action to shield their knowledges, identities, and cultural truths from dominant paradigms (San Pedro, “Shield”).

In another study of student silence, Stacey Waite discusses her experience with a particular quiet student named Andy using Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, which argues that failures, in being outside of conventional understandings of success, “have the potential to expose the contradictions or hypocrisies embedded in normative systems of value” (Waite 67). Waite’s student Andy ongoing persistent silences in the classroom, alongside his own written theorizations about his silences, challenge Waite’s assumptions about extroverted behavior being a symbol of success. That is, Waite understands Andy’s silences as failures to participate in the norms of the classroom, but in doing so, his silences actually reveal the normative assumption that an active student is an extroverted one. Waite contends that because it reveals and disrupts normative values, Andy’s silence is queering the writing classroom. In other words, Andy’s silences and his written interpretations of those silences reveal the way extroversion is enforced through the ways writing classrooms forward discussion and oral participation as primary modes of learning.

Through her experience with Andy, Waite questions her own assumptions about silence and how students in classrooms learn, saying, “I am not suggesting that suddenly I find talking to be of no, or little, value. I am suggesting that this is a time for me to come face to face with my fears about silence and what it means” (69). Waite models coming face to face with those fears throughout her article, laying her experience with Andy alongside her own experiences growing up queer and extroverted. The side-by-side juxtaposition and theorization of these experiences reveal, for Waite, how she came to see silence as a sign of failure and disengagement and how those inherent beliefs influence her teaching practice. Waite reflects on her automatic negative reactions to student silence in the face of a teacher-posed discussion questions saying, “The questions I am asking them are difficult ones, perhaps even unanswerable. The questions I am asking them may require silence—or that silence may even be the answer to the question” (69). In the end, Waite calls for more queering of pedagogy, or for examining the norms that continue to shape classrooms despite the critical pedagogies that instructors aim to practice. She calls for writing instructors to continually ask ourselves “how is my classroom just one more normative set of hoops through which students must jump?” (72).

Waite’s discussion of Andy’s silences helps me understand how student silence is powerful in that it can disrupt the dominant hierarchies within the classroom and the university. Waite’s argument also allows me to recognize the importance of fully interrogating teachers’ own experiences with silence and speaking—one of the things my study seeks to do by talking to graduate student instructors. Waite’s queer view of classroom silence is not common in composition theory, but her argument is important in recognizing the possibility that silence in the classroom could be respected rather than erased, that silence could indeed *be* participation, that silence can be disruptive of dominant hierarchies shaped by disciplinary power, and that teachers’ own experiences with silence matter in helping us understand the ways negative views of silence emerge and persist.

By recognizing the power of student silence to expose dominant power relations, we can start to see silence, not as the enemy of the classroom conversation, but as a valid choice and/or

way of being on the part of the student. Those teachers who value a student-centered, dialogical, critical, or even queer pedagogy-driven writing classroom may have self-proclaimed disruptive goals in mind when they place such a high value on conversation. However, normative and automatic reactions to student silence don't necessarily reflect those same critical goals. Waite's experience with Andy and the general lore that continues to circulate about quiet students prove this lack of alignment between teaching philosophy and practice. In sum, like those silences in feminist rhetorics, students' silences can be doing important work to expose power relations within a classroom, even a classroom that claims to be radically disruptive of such power relations through its pedagogical aims.

### **THE QUIET STUDENT AND THE GENRE OF THE PARTICIPATION POLICY**

In a writing classroom that highly values conversation as a productive and empowering mode of learning, a silent student is an obstacle to the imagined ideal conversation. As I have addressed in the previous two sections, Western society has been disciplined to respond to silence as a marker of difference and deficit. Thus, it is not surprising that instructors often fixate on silence and try to fix, or erase, it (Kerschbaum). One common response to student silence—or rather, a preemptive reaction to the imagined possibility of student silence—is the participation policy statement present in many FYW course syllabi. For dialogical writing classrooms to function as imagined, students must actively participate, and if they don't participate in the expected, speaking ways, then instructors must respond with some sort of enforcement of the norm. The written, spoken, or unspoken participation policy, as a genre, then has a great deal of power over how classroom interactions are carried out.

Anis Bawarshi explores how the syllabus acts as a “coercive genre” (110). The syllabus and the policies within it play a crucial role in “establishing the ideological and discursive environment of the course, generating *and* enforcing the subsequent relations, subject positions, and practices teacher and students will perform during the course” (Bawarshi 110). Thus,

participation policies have a way of shaping and determining what role silence can or cannot play in the classroom. Such policies also determine what role the quiet student can fill, how learning can or cannot take place, and how the teacher responds to quiet students.

Reda points out that while dialogical and collaborative learning practices seem valuable and necessary to those of us who understand how these pedagogical beliefs are deeply entwined with composition studies and writing as a social process, the demand for participation may seem more like “a means of surveillance, testing, and subtle control” for students (87). To put this concept of surveillance into Foucault’s terms, the participation policy operates as a means of examining the individual: “The examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (Foucault 189). Thus, the ritualized expectation and enforcement of oral participation through the act of assessment, serves as a means of making the case of the silent student. Through practices of assessing participation, the student is “described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained, corrected classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” (Foucault 191). In other words, the participation policy judges the quiet student, describing and comparing them to their speaking peers, as a means of pushing them back towards the speaking norm.

In her dissertation on the rhetoric of participation, the late Genevieve Critel observes that participation, while almost always expected in the writing classroom, is rarely clearly or overtly defined and even more rarely interrogated in composition scholarship; yet, the primary emphasis is nearly always placed on the need for students to speak extemporaneously in class (49). In her study of participation policies, Critel discovers that the reasons for why participation is so highly valued vary across the different waves of composition theory, depending on the popular pedagogies of the time. For instance, during the social process movement of the 1980s, Critel argues that the rise of peer review as a classroom practice reconfigured the writing classroom and such reconfigurations valued the role of participation in student learning (40). In the 1990s and with the rise of postmodernism, the emphasis on participation turned towards the outside world,

as instructors began to view oral conversation as an important part of civic education, one of the touted values of FYW (Critel 42).

Accordingly, Critel finds that participation policies often serve as an “empty container which teachers fill with their own value systems” (28). These value systems, not always stated outright in syllabus statements for students to see, tend to find their roots in popular composition theories and pedagogies. Critel shows that by invoking a desired classroom community and enforcing that community through participation grades, teachers believe they are asking students to engage in a transferrable skill, that of civic engagement in a democratic society (134). Teachers hope that by building a strong community in their classrooms, that students will learn to be active and confident citizens (Critel 137). However, she argues that justifying participation policies as a means of enforcing a writing community in the classroom or a civic community outside of the classroom also constrains what kinds of actions count as participation. I would add to this that argument that such arguments place limitations on what silence can do for students and their teachers alike, as they cast silent students as unwilling or resistant to the supposed advantages and empowering nature of a classroom community. Moreover, as Critel points out, grading students’ participation undermines the organically curated community so many instructors are striving for (138); or as Reda posits, “It seems contradictory that we ask our students to see themselves as critical thinkers, yet we do not see them as capable of deciding when to speak” (102). In sum, these arguments for assessing participation seem inherently flawed in their logic.

Community-oriented justifications for participation grades or policies also call upon the instructor to respond in particular ways to silence. If the classroom community is silent, then something must not be functioning correctly; if there are members of the community who seem to resist being part of the community through their silence, then something must be done to bring those students into the community. In other words, the demand for and enforcement of participation policies disciplines the student to act accordingly but also disciplines the instructor to behave in particular ways, to strive for bringing about participation through an intentional or unintentional assertion of authority and control over silence.

Social constructivist, Kenneth Bruffee argues in “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” that collaborative learning is a means of gaining access to the normal discourse of a knowledge community—that by conversing with one another, students can become fluent in that discourse. Of course, implied in such beliefs is that students must speak in the expected ways of the classroom. These norms often require a student to perform “good student” in ways that align with white, middle class, Western, and often, corporate ideas about participation (Critel 4). There are many bodies, identities, communicative modes, and learning styles that are left out of the normal discourse.

Therefore, when it comes to silence in the classroom, participation policies only value certain types of silences, on the part of the instructor and the student. For students, those silences might include ones that indicate active listening, teacher-directed meditative silence (as seen in the rise of contemplative pedagogies), and obedient silence. For teachers, those silences might include discussion-leading (a version of listening) silences and authoritative silences. Teachers’ and students’ assumptions of when silence is productive, when it is an indication of learning, and when it is indicative of disengagement or resistance are reinforced by the participation policy, and that policy is validated by the teacher’s and/or the writing program’s pedagogical philosophy. By calling upon students to practice normal discourse, teachers are perpetuating and supporting a discourse that values speech over silence and names quiet students as outside the norm.

The limits placed on silence also limit the roles teachers and students can play in the classroom, consequently regulating the ways in which learning can take place. While Critel comes to similar conclusions about participation policies, I am saying that the way *silence* is limited by such policies is important for the maintenance of hierarchical power structures. Critel ultimately argues that

participation needs to be rethought not simply on the level of individual instructors in individual classrooms but as a part of a system that maintains hierarchical power structures, even when teachers are intending to resist those structures through action in their teaching and scholarship. (156)

In other words, Critel is asking when teachers invoke participation policies to support a particular pedagogy, what institutional values are that participation policy representing, and who is ignored or erased by those values? I add to this line of questioning to ask: When silence is limited by participation policies, how are hierarchical relationships reinforced, and how is learning also limited?

Classroom participation policies, framed through institutional values that overemphasize speech and ignore particular bodies, identities, communicative modes, and learning styles can be damaging for students, as Reda, San Pedro, Hao, and Waite's studies show. For many of the students in Reda's study, silence is much safer than speaking, so much so that, in enforcing verbal participation through particular classroom practices, we may actually be "subtly, but emphatically, silencing our students" (Reda 100). Because class discussion can often feel like an evaluation for students, despite teachers' intentions, to speak is to risk being judged for the quality of their answers and often even the quality of their identities (Reda 130). Silence becomes a form of protection of the self while "Speaking in class requires the active negotiation of what one feels 'safe' revealing" (Reda 130). San Pedro advances something similar about silence but with a focus on the way microaggressions can lead Native American students to choosing to use silence as a shield to protect their identities and culture from critique and assimilation ("Shield" 146, 148).

Yet, when a student is cast into the category of too quiet, a host of other, again, mostly negative, imposed identities are placed on their heads, as instructors make assumptions about the meaning of a student's silence. The student must be shy, disengaged, unprepared, resistant, or confused. None of these assumptions leaves room for silence as part of a student's identity in a positive way. Nor does it leave room for the idea that a student could choose silence for some other reason. Such assumptions also don't allow for the inclusion of those with mental disabilities that may manifest in the classroom as silence (Price). Margaret Price accounts for how the classroom discussion acts as a "kairotic space," which pairs "spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact" (61). She proposes that while a classroom that relies on activities like collaboration may present itself as a safe space, it may actually exclude the presence of a

mentally disabled student (63). In sum, if participation policies are shaped by Western values about speaking and other conventional participatory behaviors, then there are a number of student identities and communicative modes that are left out of classrooms.

Critel's conclusions try to remedy this problem by calling upon instructors to make participation policies more transparent, to explain to students the specific actions that will be assessed and how they will be assessed. She also calls for instructors to practice Universal Design and to include students in deciding what counts as participation. Such arguments are important as we seek more critically-oriented classrooms, and scholars have started to interrogate the rhetoric of participation and its implications more thoroughly in the edited collection, *The Rhetoric of Participation: Interrogating Commonplaces in and Beyond the Classroom*, which draws heavily on Critel's dissertation. However, when it comes to the ways silence is limited by the spoken and unspoken rules of the classroom, I do not think it's enough to be more transparent about our participation policies. When silence is limited, so too are the ways in which both student and teacher can perform their identities in the classroom. When silence is heavily regulated through expectations of participation, I contend that modes of interaction and learning are also restricted by such policies.

With studies like Reda's, Waite's, and Price's, composition scholars have started to think about silence and quiet students with more understanding and compassion. Through Critel's critique of participation policies and those who have taken up her work, we can explore the ramifications of participation policies on the students who fill our classrooms. Other work has been done at the intersection of silence and listening, particularly in Glenn and Ratcliffe's *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, which argues for more sustained attention to silence and listening as rhetorics both in and outside of the classroom. However, very little scholarship has investigated the intersections of rhetorical silence with the rhetoric of participation. Looking at this intersection of scholarship can reveal the limits of what actions are allowed or disallowed in the classroom for instructors and students alike. Also, within this intersection, there is more room to consider classroom silence as its own rhetorical art and not just a sign or marker of difference and/or deficit.

Some scholars try to separate the study of participation from the study of silence. Critel includes Reda in her literature review, but she doesn't go further to explore the relationship between silence and participation policies other than to highlight that oral communication is what is most highly valued. In "A Curation of Student Voices on Participation in the Writing Classroom" Obermark takes up some of Critel's concluding questions about including students in the discussion about participation. In doing so, she looks closer at participation policies from students' perspective but makes a point of saying that while Reda's work on silence is influential to hers, their aims are not the same. I see what Obermark is saying—asking for students' views on participation *is* different from Reda asking students about their interpretations of their own silences. Such questions yield significantly different, though perhaps related, answers from students. Obermark's students point to the way grades and policies do not necessarily encourage them to speak in class, while Reda's students point to the ways their silences are almost always misinterpreted by teachers. In the intersection of these two studies, we can understand that most teachers' assumptions about their students' choices surrounding speaking and silence are wrong. Not all students will be motivated to speak by a participation grade, and not all students who are quiet are resistant or disengaged or have a disability. Yet, such assumptions help maintain dominant power relations, and therefore, understanding where those assumptions come from is important if we are to imagine new, more equitable ways for learning to take place.

If we look closer at the effects of participation, I believe the limits placed on silence by participation policies play a critical role in the maintenance of the hierarchical power relations that shape interactions and practices in the writing classroom, including what student and teacher actions are allowed, which actions or inactions are punished or silenced, and how learning and instructing can take place. Thus, participatory expectations (and the pedagogies that support these expectations) limit who can use silence and how it can be used in our classrooms. The limits on silence also limit the ways teachers and students can perform their roles as good teachers and good students. Finally, I argue that when performances of good student and good teacher are limited by

the rules of engagement, then dominant behaviors, practices, and institutional values are maintained rather than disrupted.

### **SILENCE, PARTICIPATION POLICIES, AND THE GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTOR**

While Waite, Reda, and Critel investigate the effects participation policies and the overvaluing of speech have on students in first year writing classrooms, writing studies scholarship has not looked closely at the ways GSIs experience silence and how normative constructions of silence affect GSIs' developing pedagogies and identities. Scholarship that discusses graduate students typically focuses on the teaching practicum that GSIs must take as part of their training (e.g., Dobrin; Ebest; Grutsch-McKinney and Chiseri-Strater; Welch). Other scholars focus on graduate students' experiences as graduate students or writers (Obermark, "Misfit"; Madden, et al.). While very few studies engage with actual graduate student experiences teaching in the writing classroom (Napoleone), and none, to my knowledge, look to GSIs to help theorize a phenomenon such as classroom silence.

One of the few volumes that look deeply at GSIs' experiences is Jessica Restaino's *First Semester: Graduate Students Teaching Writing and the Challenge of the Middle Ground*. Restaino, attending to graduate students' first semester as students and teachers through Hannah Arendt's theory of labor, notes that first-time GSIs are in a constant state of laboring for survival as they balance their rigorous coursework with the equally rigorous work of being a new teacher of writing. Restaino argues that these first-semester GSIs have "little room for thinking critically about existing scholarship and little time and space for thoughtful, pedagogical decision-making" (26). She is saying that while these new instructors may be enrolled in a pedagogy course, due to their constant laboring, they may not have the time or mental space to fully interrogate the scholarship that frames and influences the classroom they teach in. This may or may not be the case with all graduate student instructors. When I was a new GSI, I know I thought constantly about pedagogy, though not always in terms common to composition theory.

Critel acknowledges that she's not surprised to find semi-consistent language in her survey participants' participation statements given that graduate student instructors are often asked to use standardized syllabi or rely on statements borrowed from more experienced teachers (128). While borrowing from peers and more experienced instructors is certainly an important resource for newer instructors, we must not forget the power of the syllabus as a genre, as Bawarshi has argued. If policies are determined *for* the newer instructor by the university Writing Program or are adopted from somewhere/someone else, then it's possible that newer instructors learn to fear or to devalue silence before they even set foot in a classroom for the first time. At the very least, inherited participation statements begin to determine, for the instructor, how they should perform in the classroom, how they should expect or assume their students will perform, and how they should react when students don't act in anticipated ways.

Reda has investigated students' perceptions of their own silences and asked teachers to reconsider their teaching practices and perceptions about quiet students. The stakes are high for students who perform the role of student in unsanctioned ways; their grades and often their dignity and sense of self are at risk. I argue that the stakes are just as high for relatively inexperienced teachers who are negotiating their authority and identity in the classroom all while trying to find their pedagogical footing at the same time. Just as the students in first-year writing classrooms are figuring out how to perform good student in a new environment, so too, are graduate student instructors figuring out how to perform the roles of good teacher *and* good student. The GSIs who participated in this study are proof that GSIs are conscientiously thinking about how they perform in front of the classroom; while they may or may not be critically thinking about composition theory, they *are* thinking about practice, about the actual work they are doing in the classroom, and the way teachers and students use and respond to silence is part of that classroom practice.

Price, through the lens of disability studies and with a focus on mental disabilities, acknowledges that "the problems facing students required to 'actively participate' in classes...haunt professors as well. Students' and professors' participation may take place in different domains, but the rules of conduct in such domains are similarly narrowly prescribed"

(105). While here, Price is referencing the professional spaces faculty find themselves in, rather than teaching spaces, she also points out that the expectations we hold instructors and students to in the classroom are unreasonable and ableist in their privileging of rationalist behavior (73-4). For instance, she critiques Lloyd J. Feldmann's call for civility in the classroom and his advice to instructors to omit their emotions from the equation when dealing with incivility. Price calls Feldmann's advice here "rather silly," recognizing that incivility is already emotional, and points out that the expectation that students and teachers alike must abide by rationalist rules of conduct is ableist (75). Those who do not embody dominant cultural positions or do not perform in the expected ways—speaking rationally in the kairotic moments of extemporaneous discussion being one of those expectations—are vulnerable in the classroom space. While Price primarily focuses on the exclusion of students with mental disabilities in the classroom, I would add that faculty members, particularly graduate student instructors, who already fill a more vulnerable position within the university in comparison to, say, their faculty mentors, are just as vulnerable as their students when they perform teacher in unsanctioned ways. This vulnerability is why my questions about how graduate student instructors experience silence are important. Just as a FYW student's vulnerability can determine how they use silence in the face of a teacher's authority, GSIs' actual and actual and perceived vulnerability may sometimes influence their emerging pedagogies and may affect the way they use silence and interpret their students' silence.

E. Shelley Reid, Heidi Estrem, and Marcia Belcheir found that "TAs were influenced more strongly by prior personal experiences and beliefs...than by their formal pedagogy education" (33-34). Drawing on this premise, Meaghan Brewer's recent study looks at the beliefs GSIs hold about literacy and how their beliefs and past experiences of literacy instruction shape their developing pedagogies. Brewer states that "graduate student instructors' attitudes toward and beliefs about language and literacy...are an important source they draw on as they conceptualize what it means to teach composition in their first year" (4). In the introduction to the second edition of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper Taggart, Kurt Schick, and H. Brooke Hessler contemplate the meaning of pedagogy. Most teachers, they say, "come to understand the term

*pedagogy* inductively. We remember the teaching that impressed us as students and use those memories to visualize the theories and methods discussed by peers and scholars” (2). In sum, pedagogies don’t appear suddenly just because we enter a classroom for the first time. Instead, pedagogies emerge from a combination of our past experiences as students alongside the theories and practical advice we accumulate, apply, and hopefully interrogate over time.

These curated pedagogies come with a certain set of assumptions about how teachers do and should perform in the classroom, as well as beliefs about how their students should perform. Brewer argues that GSIs, in making choices about how to teach writing are “influenced by the kinds of texts...they read, as well as familial and cultural literacy practices, current and prior experiences in school, and cultural commonplaces about literacy (16). In this dissertation, I argue that past experiences of silence influence the ways in which GSIs think of and respond to silence as teachers. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the participants in my study who attended school in Western environments largely encountered a dismissal of silence and quiet students in their educational experiences. Even if they weren’t quiet students themselves, most participants inherently noticed that speaking, particularly speaking well and when asked to do so, was valued and rewarded.

Interestingly, Critel notices that the more ethos, experience, and authority instructors have, the less likely they are to even assess participation at all (157). Thus, while participation statements may be enforcing a particular pedagogical value system, the teacher’s performance of ethos plays a role as well. Participation policies may be enforcing a teacher’s value system or, in the case of new GSIs, a writing program’s value system. Yet, these policies may also be serving as a support or crutch to a teacher’s sense of authority. A newer instructor, particularly a graduate student instructor who occupies a relatively vulnerable place within the university, may not necessarily feel they have much institutional authority, even as their position at the front of the classroom suggests otherwise to their students. We see this contradiction often in Restaino’s study of her participants’ experiences. One of her participants reacts to students’ supposed passivity and lack of preparation—which I assume manifested itself in some form of silence—by using grades to

punish or reward her students (Restaino 39). This GSI reasserts her authority when she feels it is being threatened, “pulling rank,” as I have discussed elsewhere (Hinshaw). Another of Restaino’s participants, feeling uneasy and unknowledgeable about the curriculum she is obligated to enforce, decides to forego her authority in favor of playing up her student status in the classroom, overtly identifying with her students (Restaino 75). We see that newer GSIs all handle their authority differently, some reasserting it by committing to grading policies, some refusing it to resist a curriculum and perhaps even the classroom policies that are set for them.

At the same time, GSIs often reproduce learning environments with which they are familiar without necessarily critiquing the dynamics of those environments. Newer instructors’ syllabus policies—whether inherited, mandated, or self-created—may be more authoritative and may call upon them to act more authoritatively, merely because that is what they are familiar with. That is not to say that every GSI is an unwilling authority figure. The participants of my study all have a complex relationship with the idea of authority as students and as teachers, and that manifests itself in different ways through their teaching practices and beliefs about silence, as well as how they think about participation policies.

## **NORMALIZED CONSTRUCTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF SILENCE IN THE PARTICIPATORY CLASSROOM: A CRITIQUE OF TEACHING GUIDEBOOKS**

While past experiences as students shape many of the choices they make when teaching for the first time (Reid, Estrem, and Belchair; Brewer), GSIs are still often hungry for hands-on advice for the practical everyday work of the classroom (Restaino). As Tate et al. point out, while pedagogy comes to us inductively, “that inductive learning takes significant time that busy writing teachers may not afford and that newcomers may find frustrating” (2). One type of resource GSIs use are teaching guidebooks, which offer hands-on practical advice for new teachers on things like how to lead a class discussion, organize peer review sessions, and craft good assignments. These guidebooks are often required reading for the teaching practicum GSIs take as part of their training.

While certainly based in the authors' pedagogical commitments stemming from long careers as teachers and researchers, these guidebooks are rarely based on formal qualitative research, though they do include bibliographies of composition research. Professors who teach these books also often assign them alongside composition theory. However, the primary aim of guidebooks is for experienced teachers to offer practical advice to newer instructors of writing, and such advice becomes codified into the pages of a textbook, representing many of the common beliefs of the field.

The problem I have with some of the codified advice offered in these textbooks is that the authors' understandings of silence are often limited and normative. Most guidebooks do not explicitly address the role of silence in the classroom. Nevertheless, assumptions about silence emerge, both in obvious places, such as addressing the silences that unfold during in-class discussion and their related participation policies, but also in less-obvious places like suggestions for using silence as a means for dealing with students who challenge the teacher's authority in the classroom. I argue that these guidebooks codify many of the negative perceptions and constructions of silence that I have discussed thus far in the literature review, and I suggest that because the roles silence can play in the classroom are limited by this advice, the roles teachers and students can fill in the classroom are also limited.

In what remains of this literature review, I analyze two popular teaching guidebooks to point out the ways silence is limited and how, in return, roles for both teachers and students are also limited. The two guidebooks I selected are *First-Time Up: An Insider's Guide for New Composition Instructors* by Brock Dethier and the seventh edition of *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* by Cheryl Glenn and Melissa A. Goldthwaite. I selected these two specific guidebooks because both have been used in recent years in the required pedagogy course at Border University. In particular, most of the participants studied Glenn and Goldthwaite's book, in their pedagogy course.

By looking at the way guidebooks construct and limit silence, we can come to a better understanding of the ways in which beliefs about silence appear in insidious ways and how those

beliefs place limits on how teachers can teach and students can learn. I don't suggest that all GSIs will read and automatically take up these pieces of advice. In fact, most of the GSIs who participated in my study did not directly reference these guidebooks as influences on the choices they made in their classrooms. However, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, many participants *did* express views about silence and quiet students that I read as echoes of normative understandings of silence that are codified in these textbooks. What this analysis of guidebooks offers is a summary of how the perceptions and expectations surrounding silence, which I have discussed in the first four sections of this literature review, have created a limited model for how teaching and learning are enacted in the writing classroom. That is, through these constructed and codified beliefs about silence, the roles in which students and teachers can play in the classroom are limited.

### **Students as “Terminally Shy”: Teacher as Savior**

In *First-Time Up: An Insider's Guide for New Composition Instructors*, Dethier highlights the complexity of what teachers think about when deciding whether to grade different activities, such as attendance, participation, rough drafts, etc. He lists bullet-point reasons both for and against each grading policy and then offers—very briefly—where he falls in the debate. At first, I thought these dialogues might be a promising way to show how teachers consider these important grading issues and the spectrum of points of view that emerge based on various teaching philosophies, but the reasons Dethier offers for and against each issue are often placed into a constrictive binary and come with conventional, normative assumptions about students and how teachers should respond to those students. I believe these assumptions limit interactive possibilities and opportunities for learning.

For example, when making the case *for* grading class participation, Dethier offers, among other reasons, that “A relatively small composition class may provide the best chance that normally shy students will ever have to change their image; if they leave college still timid about speaking in public, they may find themselves too often sitting silently in corners” (73). I think the underlying

argument here is that learning to participate in a classroom is good practice for participating in the world outside of the classroom, which is something, as Critel notes, many teachers put stock in when assigning a participation grade. However, within this belief is also an assumption that quiet students' shyness or timidity is an identity marker that must be overcome to be successful both in the classroom and outside of it. Such constructions of students don't acknowledge that students have various modes of communicating in different contexts and that silence may signify something other and beyond shyness or timidity. In Dethier's explanation (which could easily stand in for many teachers' views on participation and silence, as Critel's work reveals) the quiet student is constructed as always-shy and at risk of spending their life trembling with fear on the outside of situations rather than engaging with those on the inside who are performing in the expected ways. Consequently, teachers in this scenario are cast into the role of a savior, the ones who must rescue students from their shyness. The teacher as savior must draw shy students out of their shells, instill in them the importance of performing extroverted behavior, and enforce the speaking norm to the point of punishing those students who don't fit into it by lowering their grade.

These views of silence and the related roles for student and teacher become even more clear in Dethier's reasons for *not* grading participation. He suggests that "Some terminally shy students would be so stressed by a participation requirement that they might drop the class" (73). The negative and fixed portrayal of the quiet student persists in reasons both for and against grading participation. Not only are these quiet students defined as shy, but they are also "terminally shy." To be terminally shy is to be either hopelessly forever shy—meaning they *cannot* be rescued—or their quietness is being equated with an incurable illness that could potentially lead to unsuccessful futures in a world that values speaking over silence. Again, the roles constructed for students in this model for teaching are limited and so are the roles constructed for teachers. If quiet students are hopelessly shy, that leaves room for teachers to reject the savior-role, but if they reject that savior role, that means they are acquiescing to students living with an illness forever. Framed in this way, not to grade participation would be a failure on the teacher's part, as they would be letting the silent student remain quiet forever.

What's missing in Dethier's dialogue about participation is the complexity of teacher and student identities in relation to silence. As Reda has addressed extensively, not all students who use or embody silence are shy, and it's dangerous to assume that's the case. Students who are quiet in the classroom may be outgoing in other situations, or even in other classrooms. They may simply learn better by listening, or they may have an invisible mental disability or a stammer they don't want to reveal to their peers. They may be a multilingual speaker who is not comfortable speaking in English. They may be protecting themselves and/or their cultural knowledge, as the Native American students are in San Pedro's work. In sum, the possible reasons for a student being silent are endless, and none is automatically a sign of weakness or inability to excel in or outside of the writing classroom.

At the same time, teachers' identities may not align with the role of savior. Teachers can be shy too. They, too, can have invisible mental disabilities or other identifications that would prevent them from stepping into such an authoritative role. While the teacher may not be able to escape being an authority figure in the context of their classroom, a teacher's intersectional identity will influence how they perform that role. Considering themselves savior is a dangerous role for any teacher to step into as it maintains a colonizing and hierarchical relationship with their students, one that presumes that students cannot think, act, or choose for themselves. As Reda has pointed out, if teachers want students to be critical thinkers, then "it seems contradictory" that "we do not see them as capable of deciding when to speak" (102).

It's interesting that Dethier, who identifies as a strong expressivist and practitioner of process pedagogy, is so dismissive of the quiet student's own sense of self; perhaps it is because discussion is so engrained in the process pedagogy. I don't think that Dethier is deliberately framing students in a negative light; he spends a great deal of time elsewhere advising teachers to build relationships with their students and warns against casting students into the role of "disruptive student" (54). I think it is Dethier's normative assumptions about silence, inherited through other lore and through culturally dominate narratives, that shape his advice about quiet students and participation. Nevertheless, he perpetuates these assumptions about the role silence

can play in the classroom, and by extension, he supports the role of savior that teachers must fill in order to break such students' silences and save them from an anti-social future.

### **The Ideal Conversation: Teacher as Discussion-Leader**

Teaching guidebooks are not always so extreme as to portray the teacher as a savior, but the role of great discussion leader does emerge in dominant composition pedagogies and other teaching guidebooks. Reda points out early in her study, a “great teacher” is often equated with “the discussion leader who is able to inspire each student’s passion, intellect, self-reflection, personal growth, and political awareness” (4). She goes on to suggest that the quiet student’s silence is often interpreted as a sign of failure on the teacher’s part to be a great discussion leader.

At times in teaching guidebooks, the “great discussion leader,” is constructed as another instantiation of the teacher as savior role. Rather than overt salvation from incurable shyness, the instructor fills the role of savior-as-pedagogue. For instance, in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing*, authors Cheryl Glenn and Melissa A. Goldthwaite offer advice on the common daily activity of full-class discussion. They set up discussion-leading in opposition to lecture-giving, saying that writing is best taught not through amazing lectures but through “actually writing and performing writing-based activities” (61). They understand class discussion as playing an important role in those writing-based activities as either a prewriting activity or as a means of analyzing the features of good writing and exploring options students have for their own writing projects. Thus, Glenn and Goldthwaite directly link the writing process to the socially collaborative classroom which relies on extemporaneous conversations. They argue that for productive writing to happen in the classroom, students must first speak to one another, and the teacher must be the one to make that oral participation happen.

Glenn and Goldthwaite’s descriptions of the teaching practices they present to new teachers are pre-established by composition research—to be a good writing teacher, you must be a good discussion leader. The writing teacher as discussion leader is a guide or facilitator, one skilled in

the art of question-asking, making on-the-spot connections, and interpreting the class's social dynamics. Glenn and Goldthwaite explain that "In the ideal discussion, every student participates" (63). The authors do recognize that "though teachers seldom achieve that ideal, they always try to approach it" (63). In other words, the ideal conversation is set up as the goal for every class session, even if it is recognized as not necessarily an achievable goal. Crucial to the students' development as writers is their ability to converse about writing with one another. The emphasis in this ideal conversation, of course, is on oral participation.

If discussion-based classrooms are set up as the ideal all teachers should strive for, then I am left searching for what role silence can play in such a classroom. In a discussion, the only silences that are acceptable are those that serve the discussion: active listening. For students, silence that indicates active listening would then eventually move toward the ideal conversation. That is, while they may listen to the conversation, they are expected to eventually enter it. We see this construction of the unending conversation in Burke's parlor metaphor as well (110), which is used so often in FYW students' textbooks as a lesson and model for argument-driven writing (e.g., Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst; Lunsford, et al.; Miller and Jurecic). This presumption begs the question, can the party-goer be present and listening without speaking? Is that attendee a wallflower, excluded from everything, or are they, too, part of the conversation in some way? Meanwhile, teachers in a discussion-oriented classroom must strive to rarely, if ever, speak. Their role in an ideal conversation is to primarily listen in silence and to nudge the conversation along. In Burke's metaphor, the teacher might be considered the host of the party, the one who tries to ensure everyone is included and peeling the wallflowers from the edges into the middle of the room.

Glenn and Goldthwaite acknowledge that students may be "understandably nervous about speaking on the spot," but they also suggest that it is the responsibility of the good discussion leader to "start others from passivity or silence, and draw still others out" (63). Like Dethier, Glenn and Goldthwaite believe that students' silence is a sign of passivity; only speaking can be a sign of active learning in this type of classroom. Re-enforcing the link between writing and learning,

Glenn and Goldthwaite forward writing activities as a means of getting quiet students to speak (64). In these cases, they assume that quiet students are not speaking because they simply need more time to think, and they urge teachers to engage their class in reflective silence to urge students into the discussion as an ideal oral participant. They, again, suppose that every quiet student's experience in the classroom will be the same, that simply giving them more time and space via reflective writing time will produce the desired results of the speaking student.

While Glenn and Goldthwaite make concessions for those students who may not feel comfortable in an oral-centric environment, there are very few pedagogical options offered in these guidebooks for the delivery of a class that would account for a multitude of teacher identities or teaching styles. If being a good discussion leader is the only route to being a good teacher, then what does that mean for a teacher who strives to embody good teacher in different ways? Glenn and Goldthwaite offer a set of teaching practices that have worked for them and likely many others who teach FYW—and I'm certainly not discounting those practices. Reflective writing time before discussion is not a bad or unproductive teaching practice, but Glenn and Goldthwaite don't address the reality that these strategies will not necessarily produce the same results for every teacher. When a teacher must be good at discussion leading and coaxing students into an ideal conversation, there is little room to imagine a classroom in which silence can be valued not just for its contemplative and listening possibilities but for its other rhetorical functions as well. Thus, it becomes difficult to consider other teaching roles beyond a discussion leader or to imagine a classroom that doesn't have extemporaneous conversation at the center of every lesson.

For instance, could a productive writing class take place when relying entirely on facial expression, body language, and bodily gesture? Could a teacher initiate a discussion that takes place entirely online in a chatroom, while still sitting in the same room together? Could that chatroom rely on memes, gifs, and emojis, and not just text? Would there be space in that chatroom for the silent observer? Is it possible for teachers to allow for student-initiated silence to permeate the classroom without the teacher's own silence coming across as authoritative? Is it possible for students to talk about their own and their teacher's silences in the same way they analyze and talk

about their spoken and written words? In other words, is there a way to imagine the teaching space in new ways that would account for silence and move away from seamless oral discussion as the only ideal?

Of course, the conversations Glenn and Goldthwaite are striving for are attractive—I won't pretend that I don't desire such lively and thought-provoking discussions. However, I'm also uncomfortable with the concept of an ideal conversation, for in a discussion in which everyone must speak, there is no room to consider what role silence and the silent student can play in that discussion. It also makes me uneasy because the ideal conversation places the instructor in a position in which there is only one pathway to good teaching, and if that's so, then, that means the possibilities for student learning are also stunted. Glenn and Goldthwaite don't imagine a possible reality for new teachers in which silence can be powerful and productive when forwarded by students; instead, student silence is automatically set up as the enemy to class discussion, one that can and should be eliminated through writing and teacher-directed reflective silence. My dissertation sought out ways to value modes of interaction in which teachers must not always be fabulous discussion leaders and quiet students need not always be reluctant conversationalists.

### **Crack and Wither: Teacher as Authority**

The silence Glenn and Goldthwaite do acknowledge as productive and powerful is the silence teachers can control after they pose a question to the class. They argue that teachers should “learn to cultivate [their] own silence” in these moments, to wait a few seconds before posing the question differently or taking students to a section of the assigned text (64). I can imagine the oppressive, uncomfortable silence they are asking their audience of new teachers to use. It's the silence professors used on me and my classmates when I was a quiet undergraduate, and the silence I used on my class in the opening narrative of Chapter 1. It's the kind of silence that waits for students to “crack” under the pressure (Glenn and Goldthwaite 64). Dethier also frames silence in this authoritative manner saying that when a class is “dead,” it is often good to “Wait. When you're

on the spot, every second of silence tortures” (143). It *tortures*. The teacher’s silence in this situation works as a silencing mechanism, disciplining students to perform in the expected, normative ways. Glenn in *Unspoken*, using Foucault’s understanding of torture, writes, “the silent treatment can be a technique of torture, producing a certain degree of pain, forming part of a ritual, and creating a spectacle, seen by all almost as its [torture’s] triumph” (33). Thus, to use silence in these ways is yet another form of disciplining silent students back towards the speaking norm, under the guise of it being for their own good.

I know that for teachers, particularly inexperienced teachers, silence can be extremely uncomfortable (and I unpack that discomfort in detail through my participants’ words in Chapter 5). It can feel like you are failing when you ask a question, and nobody responds. I also support Glenn and Goldthwaite’s advice about cultivating silence; teachers should learn to wait before jumping to answer their own questions. However, the way this advice is framed maintains silence as a punishing tool to be wielded by authority figures. Silence can’t be a student’s response to a question, but it can be a teacher’s response to students’ presumed lack of response. The instructor must control her silence in response to the quiet class, not to listen to the students’ silences but to try and break them. In making this move, teachers are just shifting the discomfort they feel during silent moments back onto their students, forcing them to speak. As Glenn, herself, has pointed out in *Unspoken*, “To maintain control of the situation, the dominant party must wield silence as a means to press the subordinate into taking on the burden of silence—or speech, whatever the case may be” (32). Thus, rather than decentering the classroom, which is often one of the aims of having class discussion in the first place, teachers are re-centering the classroom on their own authority and casting students into the role of passive subject. If “I can stay silent longer than you can” is the reason teachers curate their own silence, then that limits the ways students can interact and engage with course material, with each other, and with their instructor. This practice also limits the ways teachers can use their authority to grapple with silence in alternative, more collaborative ways.

Dethier also forwards silence as a strategy for dealing with students who challenge teacher authority. He advises his readers to “Stare silently. Students who are being disruptive often wither under almost any kind of attention except the sly high school laughs they trained for. Silence can be very effective” (138). Here, silence is again used as a punitive tool, controlled by the authority figure. Dethier offers other strategies for handling disruptive students, but the fact that silence is offered as a possible solution while elsewhere students’ silences are discarded as an identity flaw, reveals the limited ways in which silence is allowed to operate in the FYW classroom. It’s either a punitive tool for maintaining teacher’s authority, used to silence students further or push them out of their shell, or silence is a student’s problem that must be erased.

#### **DISRUPTING NORMATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF SILENCE**

Don’t misunderstand me: Much of the advice offered by both guidebooks is advice I follow and abide by in my own classroom. I do think teachers should learn to be open, responsive, and understanding in silent moments rather than uncomfortable or frustrated. I think teachers should allow students space to think, breathe, and reflect in silence before they are called upon to speak. I don’t think that productive full-class discussion should be discarded in favor of some other ideal. What I do have a problem with are the attitudes such well-meaning advice takes toward students and toward new teachers through their framing of silence. I worry about how these guidebooks advise newer instructors to take on this same attitude toward students. Whether intentionally or not, both Glenn and Goldthwaite’s and Delthier’s books frame teacher silence as a tool to break students’ silence. Both books frame student silence as an enemy. In other words, the authors of these guidebooks don’t imagine, as Waite begins to do in her study of Andy’s silences, that silence could indeed be part of the conversation.

If we, as teachers, must always wait for our students to crack under the pressure of our silence, if we are always interpreting silence as torture for both us and our students, then we will always be caught in an us-them logic, which limits the possibility for teachers to fill the role of

guide or facilitator, as I believe we intend in our imaginings of ideal class discussions. Instead, when silence is constructed in these ways, teachers, must be placed into the role of an investigator or detective, waiting for the guilty silent student to give in to the pressure, or in the role of savior, rescuing our students from the illness of silence. We, as teachers, presume over and over again that silence tortures teachers and students alike, that the discomfort silence brings must always be erased by breaking the silence. We enforce that silence is only powerful when it is in the hands of authority. It follows then that we aren't really decentering the classroom away from authority. We're just using our authority differently.

While less experienced graduate student instructors may be hungry for the advice teaching guidebooks have to offer, their past and present experiences of being a student also play a major role in the actual choices they make as teachers of writing. In this dissertation, I argue that by studying the ways newer graduate student instructors think about, perceive, and use silence in the classroom, we can better understand how GSIs, as new teachers, are implicated by these normative constructions of silence, but I also argue that GSIs' experiences offer teachers of writing ways for disrupting these narratives, opening silence to other possibilities in the FYW classroom.

## Chapter 3: Exploring Experiences of Silence through a Feminist Methodology

### WHY A FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

In this dissertation, I place silence at the center of attention, as both a subject of study and as a lens through which to interrogate norms and expectations for how teachers and students engage with one another in the writing classroom. Kristine L. Blair and Lee Nickoson define a feminist intervention as a commitment to “disrupting dominant structural systems—to intervening in what *is* and to imagining *what could and ultimately must be*” (3). My qualitative study of graduate student instructors’ experiences of silence acts as a feminist intervention into what the established notions of what writing classrooms should look and sound like. To make this intervention into the dominant paradigms about classroom silence, I enacted an explicitly feminist research methodology guided by feminist ethics.

Feminist methodologies, while not tied to any explicit methods, are “committed to understanding how research practice works to create knowledge” (Powell and Takayoshi 2). That is, in approaching inquiry, feminist practice understands the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed, and researchers take steps to enact a particular set of values, based in “humility, respect, and care” (Royster and Kirsch 21). Enacting feminist tenets in research involves appreciating lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge; collaborating with research participants on constructing meanings; understanding how power shapes researcher-participant relationships; acknowledging and contending with the ways researcher positionality affects the collection and interpretation of data; and considering the ethical responsibility of representing others’ experiences in writing (Kirsch, *Ethical* 4-5). In sum, feminist research methodologies affect what questions we ask, who we study, and how we go about the act of research in ethically responsible ways.

As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, silences, particularly those enforced onto women and marginalized peoples, are the manifestations of dominant power relations. Silence is also forwarded, by Glenn, as one of the alternative delivery systems of rhetorical feminism (*Rhetorical*

4). Scholars have studied the role of silence as feminist action in rhetorical history and contemporary activism (Bokser, “Sor Juana,” “The Persuasion”; Myers; Glenn, *Unspoken*), and the disruptive possibilities of queer silence in the classroom (Waite). In sum, silence is a feminist enterprise, in both recognizing the ways women and marginalized peoples have been silenced but also in noticing and forwarding how those same peoples use silence in strategic ways for their own purposes and to challenge those in power. In Chapter 2, I focused on the ways silence is defined and constructed in primarily negative ways and how those narratives of silence appear in writing classrooms, even in pedagogies that seem to support student-centered and emancipatory learning. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber insists that “[t]o engage in feminist theory and praxis means to challenge knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include” (3). My project seeks to challenge the paradigm of dialogical pedagogies that seem to include students through a decentered classroom but can end up excluding other possible modes for learning and teaching writing.

## **NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

At the heart of my research project is the ways teachers live and story classroom silence. That is, I sought to understand how GSIs experience silence but also to comprehend the ways in which common stories of silence affect teaching and learning in the writing classroom. Narrative researchers “embrace the assumption that the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar and Daynes 4). According to D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, “narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience” (19). By its very nature, narrative inquiry is temporal, understanding that the research is attempting to “write about people, places, and things as becoming rather than *being*” (Clandinin and Connelly 145). Turning to narrative inquiry as a methodology allowed me to value the particularities of my participants’ experiences, to consider the ways in which they are in a process of becoming, even during the study itself as I asked them to contemplate silence in new and disorienting ways. Narrative inquiry

also allowed me to recognize the multiple ways of knowing and experiencing silence that exist through participants' individual stories.

Because a narrative methodology is so focused on understanding research participants' experiences through story, it is easy to invest feminist values into this methodology. A central tenet of feminist research is that it privileges lived experience as a form of knowledge and meaning making (Kirsch, *Ethical*). Moreover, narrative inquiry is feminist in its orientation when its intent is to speak back to and disrupt institutional power relations by forwarding the voices and experiences and knowledges of those bodies who are not normally heard (Hesse-Biber 3). As Restaino points out, while graduate student instructors play a critical role in university writing programs, there are very few projects that center their experiences (18). My project is deeply concerned with the personal experiences of GSIs, forwarding those experiences as knowledge to form a grounded theory of silence. By listening deeply to GSIs' stories of silence in ethically responsible ways shaped by feminist values, I work to how participants are affected by the dominant paradigms that shape classroom interactions but also how their experiences offer possible pathways for disrupting those paradigms.

### **CRITICAL IMAGINATION AND STRATEGIC CONTEMPLATION AS FEMINIST ANALYTICAL TOOLS**

To listen to graduate student instructors' narratives, I also relied on an inquiry framework informed by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. Royster and Kirsch write that the objective of feminist practice, "is to embrace a set of values and perspectives...that honors the particular traditions of the subjects of study...and creating the potential...for a more dialectical and reciprocal intellectual engagement" (14). Moreover, they insist that a feminist practice is about embracing an ethical self, acknowledging the politics of our location, and reaching beyond that to embrace inquiry strategies that "engender an ethos of humility, respect, and care" (21). To drive my own feminist research practice, I used the analytical tools of critical imagination and strategic contemplation as Royster and Kirsch theorize them.

Critical imagination, as a tool for inquiry, involves “seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead” (Royster and Kirsch 20). In practicing critical imagination,

the idea is to account for what we “know” by gathering whatever evidence can be gathered and ordering it in a configuration that is reasonable and justifiable in accord with basic scholarly methodologies. The next step is to think between, above, around, and beyond this evidence to speculate methodically about probabilities, that is, what might likely be true based on what we have in hand. (71).

Put differently, using critical imagination is acknowledging what we know but also looking beyond to consider other meaning and possibilities. This practice resists universal, capital-T Truths and instead embraces a multitude of possibilities (71). Because I value the particularity of my participants’ experiences, as well as the limitations of my own viewpoints, I used critical imagination to “acknowledge the limits of knowledge” while also seeing the multiple possible ways in which people encounter and engage with silence (Royster 84). Critical imagination, in resisting one single truth, is “particularly careful about ‘claims’ to truth, by clarifying the contexts and conditions of our interpretations and by making sure that we do not overreach the bounds of either reason or possibility (Royster 84).

As Glenn and others have argued, silence is often a practice that has gone unnoticed because of its, well, silent nature, but also because of the marginalized groups that have been silenced and use silence as an alternative delivery system. To think and talk about silence requires critical imagination because it is nearly impossible to decipher an exact meaning for silence. My participants, in trying to explain an experience of something that is nonverbal, speculated beyond what they knew, considering the entire context of their experiences to describe the silence. While analyzing participants’ stories of silence, I used critical imagination to articulate participants’ experiences as they recounted them while also remaining aware of what might be present in the silences of their stories themselves.

To engage in critical imagination ethically also involved reflexivity, staying in tune with both our biases and our “blind spots” (Royster and Kirsch 76). To do this, I practiced rhetorical

listening when attending to my participants' stories, choosing to take a "stance of openness" in order to "cultivate conscious identification in ways that promote productive communication" (Ratcliffe 25). Through critical imagination and rhetorical listening, I attempted to "listen deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly" to silence and to the experiences of GSIs, and I worked to continuously interevent in my own "assumptions regularly through reflective and reflexive questions" in order to "take notice of different features of the landscape" (Royster and Kirsch 21).

Strategic contemplation often works alongside critical imagination as a meditative and critical tool that allows researchers to deliberately think "about, through, and around our work" (Royster and Kirsch 21). Strategic contemplation sees the intrinsic value and "rich rewards" that come with slowing down during the research process, as it

asks us to take as much into account as possible but to withhold judgement for a time and resist coming to closure too soon in order to make the time to invite creativity, wonder, and inspiration into the research process. (85)

Strategic contemplation as a feminist practice encourages the researcher to linger within the moment, to recursively contemplate our own research practices and the relationships we have with the subject of research (86). It is both an outward journey that asks researchers to attend to the physical act of collecting research data, as well as an inward journey in which researchers notice

how they process, imagine, and work with materials; how creativity and imagination come into play; how a vicarious experience that results from critical imagination, meditation, introspection, and/or reflection get mapped, perhaps simultaneously, as both an analytical one and a visceral one. (85)

As such, I used strategic contemplation as a means of acknowledging my relationship to the data and checking any ideas that sprung from critical imagination but also as an approach to analyzing the data itself. Strategic contemplation encourages creating space for considering the embodied experiences of both the researcher and the research participants as valuable sources of knowledge, to "deliberately seek to attend to the places...where our embodied experience, intuition, and quiet minds can begin to notice the unnoticed" (22). Using strategic contemplation in my study allowed me to attend to my own and my research participants' embodied understandings of silence and to

linger in those embodied, often emotional understandings of silence, which ultimately led to theorizing silence as an object of emotion (see Chapter 5).

Using strategic contemplation also looked like reflexive journaling in order to remain aware of my own presence in the study and how my lived experiences shaped the process of collecting and interpreting data. In Chapter 1, I included an abbreviated history of my experiences as a quiet student. To remain conscious of this subject position, I enacted strategic contemplation to linger in my participants' stories and to resist coming to conclusions too soon. When I constructed an analysis of the data, I tried to be honest about the ways my own experience shapes my interpretation of that data. At times, it was difficult to parse my own understanding of silence from my participants' beliefs and perceptions. For example, in Chapter 5, I discuss my participant Cindy's relationship to silence. Because I identified so strongly with some of Cindy's experiences, I found it difficult to set aside the way I, as a quiet student would have responded in the stories she was recounting. When this occurred, I practiced strategic contemplation, reflecting on my own positionality to distinguish my own interpretation of the data from Cindy's.

Finally, in a practical sense, using both critical imagination and strategic contemplation as an inquiry framework looked like choosing methods that allowed me to approach silence and the lived experiences of GSIs multisensibly. Finding several avenues into exploring their lived experiences was important to being able to attend to the multiple possibilities and theories of silence. This is why I chose four methods of data collection that asked participants to engage with silence in different ways: reflective writing samples, collecting teaching documents, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. These methods allowed for participants to think about classroom silence through different mediums: one-on-one conversation (via the interview), collaboration and reflection (via the focus group), practice (via shared teaching documents), and writing and reflection (via the reflective writing samples).

## **METHODS**

With this feminist narrative methodology and inquiry framework in mind, I selected the following methods for data collection.

### **Teaching Documents**

Before conducting interviews, I asked participants to send me a set of self-selected teaching documents that they were willing to share. I suggested they submit syllabi, syllabus policies, participation policies, teaching journals, lesson plans, and/or peer review assignments, but what they chose to send was up to them. My original purpose in collecting teaching documents was to see how participants might construct silence in their policies and assignments, perhaps without realizing it. However, because of the sheer amount of data I collected, as well as the inconsistency of materials that participants submitted without clearer instruction from me, these documents did not play a major role in my analysis. I primarily used the documents to prepare possible follow-up questions in participants' individual interviews. For example, if participants had a participation policy in their syllabus, I found an opportune moment in the interview to ask what kinds of activities were included in that participation policy while they conducted assessment.

### **Reflective Writing Samples**

Twice during the study, I asked participants to write informally for 10-20 minutes in response to a reflective writing prompt. These prompts asked participants to share any specific experiences that came to mind of classroom silence. They did this exercise on their own time, and not in my presence. The first writing sample was collected prior to the interview as a gauge for what participants' preconceptions about classroom silence were at the beginning of the study. The second writing sample was collected after the completion of the focus group. See Appendix B for these writing prompts.

The purpose of these reflective writing samples was two-fold. First, drawing on the feminist practices of critical imagination and strategic contemplation, the act of reflective writing allows participants the opportunity to think about classroom silence multisensibly (Royster and Kirsch). I believed it was important to allow participants the opportunity to contemplate classroom silence through both writing and speech. I also considered that if one of the common assumptions about classroom silence was that students needed time to write before speaking (Glenn and Goldthwaite), then it was important to allow participants, particularly those who were quiet themselves, the same opportunity to write about their perceptions of silence before being asked to speak about them in an interview.

The first writing sample, which asked participants to write about a time they noticed silence in the classroom, served as a starting point for the interview conversation about silence. When possible, I drew on these writing samples to ask participants to elaborate on their answers to interview questions, when similar subject matter emerged. Often, participants would also bring up what they had written in these responses, wanting to continue a train of thought they had only begun to consider in their writing.

The second writing sample, which asked participants to consider any new experiences they may have had with classroom silence, served as a post-study reflection that helped me better understand how participating in my study shaped any change in their thinking about classroom silence. Because they submitted these responses very quickly after the focus group ended, the second writing samples often repeated some of what participants said during the focus group. By comparing the pre- and post-study writing samples, I saw how some participants' perspectives of silence changed through the course of the study.

## **Individual Interviews**

Irving Seidman argues that “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience”

(9). I met with each of my seven participants individually for a 60-90 minute interview on Zoom. The aim of these interviews was to understand each GSI's experiences with classroom silence as a student and as an instructor, their preconceptions about silence and quiet students, and how their understandings of silence shape their developing pedagogies and classroom practices.

I structured the interviews by loosely following Seidman's principles for phenomenological interviewing, attending to participants' "experiences in the context of their lives" (21). While Seidman's interview method consists of three separate interviews, due to time constraints and the wish to keep my data set manageable, I conducted a single interview with each participant, organizing my line of questioning to move from general questions about participants' experiences as students and teachers before asking them to consider their understandings of silence within the contexts of their lives. See Appendix C for the complete interview script.

### **Focus Group**

After conducting and transcribing all individual interviews, I convened all seven participants for a 90-minute focus group session on Zoom. One of the goals of this focus group was to engage in a check on my forming analysis, enlisting my participants as collaborators in the analytical process. Thus, I held the focus group to enact the feminist value of collaboration in the act of research and theory-making. As Kirsch points out, while researchers may inevitably appropriate participants' stories, feminist researchers can work to decenter the power of the researcher by involving participants in the analysis of data (*Ethical Dilemmas* 49, 18). I hoped the focus group would serve as a continuation of the individual conversations I had with my participants, while I worked to decenter my power over their words through offering them a small chance to help interpret some of the data. Jennie Munday explains that feminist researchers "see focus groups as social contexts in themselves through which partial and multiple versions of social reality are constructed, thus rejecting any idea of there being one, ultimate, objective truth of social reality" (237-8). With this feminist standpoint in mind, I approached the focus group not simply

as a means of collecting information from my participants but rather as an interactive process in which participants could “negotiate and construct their own meanings” of silence together (Munday 237). That is, I saw the focus group as an imperative component for developing a grounded theory of silence, as well as a way forward in imagining more equitable learning environments in the writing classroom.

I crafted the questions for the focus group from the data I had already collected in the individual interview phase of my project. These questions shared parts of my forming analysis, usually by quoting from participants’ individual interviews. See Appendix D for a complete list of the focus group questions. I spoke very little during the meeting; instead, after posing a question, I opened the virtual floor for participants to take the conversation wherever they wanted to. I then asked for them to share their thoughts, not only to place a check on my analysis, but also to move towards answering my research questions through a collaborative and socially constructed process.

#### **MEMO-WRITING AND DESCRIPTIVE CODING**

In the analysis of the data, it was important that to me to maintain the feminist framework, to keep myself open to possibilities through critical imagination and strategic contemplation (Royster and Kirsch). I wanted to keep the analysis process organic, and to develop a theory from participants’ experiences of silence. Grounded theory is “rooted in the original data themselves” (Saldaña 72). Enacting my narrative methodology informed by feminist ethics, I stayed close to participants’ stories as I answered my research questions. I sought to develop “a theory (‘a vision’) that is grounded to that ‘somewhere particular’” (Garkas and Haas 81). Kathy Charmaz states that grounded theory “begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps you interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis” (ch. 1). However, while I used grounded theory methods and strategies to approach collecting and coding my data in ways that would support an emergent analysis reliant on participants’ words, my use of grounded theory as a methodology stopped there.

To continue investing in the feminist inquiry framework of critical imagination and strategic contemplation, my primary method of analysis took place through analytical memos. Memo writing is “*the* fundamental process of research/data engagement that results in a ‘grounded’ theory” (Lempert 2). Charmaz explains that “Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue” (ch. 7). Memos help the research engage in simultaneous and iterative data collection and analysis, all while keeping you close to the data itself (Charmaz ch. 7). Analytical memos also helped me practice strategic contemplation, as they encouraged me to take my time thinking about my relationship to the subject matter and to the data.

Before each interview, I wrote reflective notes to myself about teaching documents participants had sent me as well as their initial reflective writing responses. These reflective notes served as a way for me to think through my relationship to the participant, as well as the emergent things I was noticing in participants’ narratives of silence. Then, after each individual interview, while transcribing audio recordings, I wrote formal memos to my dissertation director, about any initial codes and emergent analysis of each participant’s narrative relationship with classroom silence. These initial memos served as starting points for developing codes from the data. Throughout my process of coding, I continued to write new memos, while also expanding and rewriting my initial memos.

While writing memos, I also began coding the data. In grounded theory, the research constructs codes from the data itself (Charmaz ch. 5). In my initial coding phase, which I did by hand, I used a combination of In Vivo Coding and Process Coding. In Vivo Coding uses participants’ actual words as codes in order “to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself (Charmaz ch. 5). Process coding, or “action coding” attends to the actions found in the data, using gerunds to highlight observable activities and other, more conceptual actions (Saldaña 143). From these codes, I was able to discern common themes that revealed the ways in which participants define and experience silence.

After my initial coding phase, I found that emotions played a crucial role in participants' experiences of silence and that discomfort was a code that seemed to cut across many of the other themes. Because of this discovery, in my third round of coding, I used emotion coding, which "labels the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant" (Saldaña 160). Saldaña explains that coding for emotions "provides insight into the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions" (160). Moreover, "careful scrutiny of a person's emotions reveals not just the inner workings of an individual, but possibly the underlying mood or tone of a society" (Saldaña 160). In this round of coding, I read the data again, paying attention to the stated or underlying emotions recounted through participants' narratives of silence.

Finally, when coding the focus group, in addition to these other coding systems, I focused on interactions between participants. Munday argues, in the "The Practice of Feminist Focus Groups," when analyzing a focus group, "participant interactions are particularly important to focus group data and should be analyzed if the full potential of the focus group method is to be realized" (257). To account for interactions, I coded the data by highlighting the ways in which participants engaged directly with one another, noticing patterns of how the conversation proceeded.

From this memo writing and coding process, I allowed the data to take me where it wanted to go, and I was able to develop a grounded theory of silence through participants' recounted narratives. In chapter 4, I discuss how participants define silence through their personal histories as teachers and students. In chapter 5, I explore the ways in which silence acts on participants through the emotion of discomfort, helping to circulate normative narratives of silence. Finally, in chapter 6, I forward a theory of centering silence, which works to disrupt the circulation of silence as an uncomfortable object.

## Chapter 4: Defining the Quiet through Histories of Silence: Silence as a Performance

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the GSIs in this study construct silence through their own personal histories as students and as teachers. Given the normative narratives about classroom silence that I set forth in chapters 1 and 2, I was not surprised when several participants described silence as a sign of something going wrong in the classroom. In what follows, I account for these normative understandings of silence, especially in the first three sections of this chapter. However, as I attended to the particularities of participants' stories, I noticed that participants' individual narratives of silence differed greatly from one another even as common themes suggested that participants were influenced by dominant paradigms. That is, while silence seemed to emerge in stories in similar ways based on the dominant paradigm, the relationships participants had with silence depended on their specific interactions with it.

Richard Schechner writes in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* that to think of something “‘as’ a performance” is to “investigate what the object does, how it interacts with other objects or beings, and how it relates to other objects or beings” (30). He explains that “[p]erformances exist as actions, interactions, and relationships” (Schechner 30). To understand silence as a performance is to study what it does and how it interacts with and relates with others. Every time the object—or, in this case, silence—participates in an event, the event is different. So, even if the original action, or silence remains the same—and even if the dominant narrative about silence persists—each event the silence participates in is different because of the changing interactions and relationships with other objects and beings. In this chapter, I read silence as a performance, interacting with participants in different ways depending on their histories and contexts.

Alexander, Anderson, and Gallegos, who bring performance theory to education, claim that “[t]eaching is a *performance event*, as well as a *performative event*” (4). As they understand it, teaching is the “doing,” or the *performance event* and also “the repetitive act of doing that manifests as existential and practical presence,” or the *performative event* (4). That is, each

instance of teaching is a singular, unique performance that has a particular set of actions, interactions, and relationships in that moment, but collectively the repetitive acts of teaching over time make up what teaching is and what its function is. Through the performance of teaching, teaching as performance is constructed. To make this case for the performative nature of teaching, Alexander, Anderson and Gallegos draw heavily on Judith Butler's understanding of the performative as a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 519). Butler's argument, of course, is referring to gender as a performative, saying that the set of actions and repeated actions "not only constitute[e] the identity of the actor, but [also] constitut[e] that identity as a compelling illusion, and object of belief" ("Performative Acts" 520). In other words, the performative actions that constitute someone's identity are never completely situated; they continue to resist concretization. Alexander, Anderson, and Gallegos explain that for their purposes, "performativity helps to locate and describe repetitive actions plotted within grids of power relationships and social norms within the context of education and schooling" (2). That is, they are using the performance paradigm to show how teaching as performance is both dynamic and also socially and discursively constructed over time.

Communications scholar, Richie Hao brings this performance paradigm to a reading of classroom silence. To apply the performance paradigm to silence, Hao builds on Alexander, Anderson, and Gallegos's argument that teaching is both a performance event and a performative event. He says that "performativity helps us understand how classroom performances are ritualized" ("Rethinking" 271). For example, he explains how the act of discouraging silence in the classroom has normalized the performance of oral participation in western classroom settings while at the same time, set up consequences for those students who perform silence. He argues that "silence has been constructed in western education and critical pedagogy literature as not capable of contributing to democratic education" ("Rethinking 276). Part of his argument is linked to his own personal experience as a Chinese Filipino man being told he needs to speak up more in class. He links this experience to the ways in which western cultures construct agency, which values voicing one's experience. Using the performance paradigm, Hao argues that agency is

actually “relational,” that speaking up does not “automatically translate to having agency, especially when their bodies and histories have been historically silenced” (“Rethinking” 278). Hao challenges the western assumption that the orally participatory student is a good student while the quiet student is assumed to be not engaging in the independent thinking that is required to be agents of their own learning (“Rethinking” 268). He, instead, insists that “silence is a culturally saturated performative act that complements verbal and nonverbal codes to express and restrict ideas intentionally or unintentionally in different contexts” (“Rethinking” 270). He brings the performance paradigm to silence to challenge the monolithic narrative about student silence.

To understand silence as a performance is to acknowledge its multiplicity—the multiple ways in which it can be performed in the classroom—as well as the multiple types of bodies and ideologies who may perform that silence. By understanding that the ritualized expectation of speaking as ideological, we can also comprehend the performances of speaking *and* silence as ideological (Hao, “Silence” 291). By thinking of silence as a performance, we can see the ways in which silence is constructed differently each time it emerges, based on my participants’ embodied identities, their ideologies, the roles they are situated in within the narrative, and especially their past histories with silence. Even as the discourse around silence tries to pin a name to what silence means, the way participants experience silence suggests that the meanings of it in any given context are multiple. That is, silence is socially dynamic, performing differently in each context, while at the same time, being constructed and solidified over time.

In the remainder of this chapter, I use each section to highlight 1-2 participants’ individual narratives to show how participants come to name silence over time in ways that are influenced by dominant narratives but also how those definitions are shaped by the particularities of their own personal histories. In laying these participants’ narratives side by side, I reveal how each participant describes silence in ways that solidify over time, but that silence itself differs in meaning based on contexts, relationships, and personal histories.

## **“FRICTION WITH A TEACHER’S PLANS”: SILENCE AS A SIGN OF (NOT) PERFORMING TO THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE DIALOGICAL CLASSROOM**

Given the dominant narratives about classroom silence that I set forth in chapters 1 and 2, I was not surprised when several participants experienced and described silence as a sign of something gone wrong in the classroom. Maria, who has the most teaching experience in the group of participants, explained that, in her early years of teaching, she “took [student] silence as unpreparedness.” (She claims to regret this line of thinking now.) Meanwhile, Cindy, the least experienced teacher of the group, commented on the silence that emerges when students don’t read for class, speculating how “discouraging” that must feel as the teacher, when silence seems to be an indicator that nobody did the homework.

Stories about students not performing to expectations is a common thread that Reda dissects extensively. However, I noticed another related theme emerged in a few participants’ stories: students’ silence as an indicator of poor performance on the part of the teacher. In the literature review, I discussed the ways in which the teacher as discussion leader sets teachers up to believe that students’ silence is a sign of teachers’ failures to perform as a good discussion leader. Some participants leaned into this understanding of silence, imposing high standards on themselves that limited the ways in which they felt they could proceed as teachers of writing in discussion-oriented classrooms.

For example, Vincent tends to see silence as a reflection on their own performance. When students are not speaking, Vincent presumes it is because they, the teacher, is not performing to the norms of the classroom either. In their first writing responses, they write that when working as a high school teacher in Mexico, “silence would feel uncomfortable as I imagined that to them it would mean that my class was not well-designed or interesting at all” (Writing Sample 1). In silence, Vincent worried that their high school students would perceive them as a bad teacher. Now that they are teaching first-year writing at the college level, Vincent still has this worry about their own performance, even when faced with students’ seeming lack of preparedness or engagement.

In their individual interview, they described a Zoom session during their office hours, when they met with a small group of students. Since Vincent was teaching asynchronously, they were, at first, excited for the opportunity to be speaking directly to their students, but their enthusiasm dissipated when silence emerged:

I felt like they weren't understanding me, or they weren't engaged with what I was saying. Because I ask questions like "Oh, how do you feel about this?" or "What do you think about this?" and like 10 seconds of silence. Like, I could hear their clicking and their keyboards, like they were moving around, but they weren't answering. So, I always reform, like try to ask the question from another angle, and that's when I got a response. But in that moment, I really felt like silence was very unwelcome because I gave a 3-minute explanation of what they were asking about, but they were not engaged with my answer at all. Like, at all.

This interaction shows Vincent reading their students' silence as a sign of their disengagement. However, in this moment, it's less about their students' lack of engagement as it is about Vincent's concerns that they are not interesting enough to keep their students' attention. Vincent takes the burden of the silence upon himself, as a sign of their own inability to perform to the standards they believe their students are expecting.

Robin also describes silence as a sign of something gone wrong in the classroom. Their narrative about silence reveals a struggle between their experiences in educational settings and their own awareness of how classrooms and speaking and silence have been controlled by teachers' expectations. Robin is a second-year doctoral student, who came to Border University with a Master's in Higher Education Studies. They have worked in other student-centered higher-education settings but never as a teacher in the first-year writing classroom before coming to Border U. Robin identifies as an "outgoing person," and they feel "one of the things I do best is connect with other people and try and connect them as well and activate what they're doing. And so, talking, for me, is such a crucial component of collaborative kind of stuff." In the first reflective writing sample completed before their interview, Robin specifically defines silence as something working incongruently with what a teacher has planned for a class. They wrote:

Silence has often felt uncomfortable in a classroom setting. I can think of many times where it seems to indicate some sort of friction with a teacher's plans (including my own)

or a point of disengagement with an ongoing discussion due to fatigue or unpreparedness. I'm sure I'll discuss more in my interview how I don't find this to be always true of silence (and I think silence can be intentional and generative in a classroom setting), but it remains the case that silence seems to indicate that something has 'gone wrong' with a lesson. (Writing Sample 1)

Robin reads silence as a sign that something isn't right; it is a disruption in the teacher's plans for the lesson. However, Robin doesn't see this as the student's problem. Not unlike Vincent's reading of silence as a reflection on their performance, while Robin may read silence as a sign of disengagement, the responsibility for that student engagement is placed squarely on the teacher's shoulders. Robin's perception of silence as an indicator of something gone wrong also shows how even if they are not using that definition of silence to assess their students, they *are* using it to assess the success or failure of their own teaching.

In their interview, they made it clear that:

where silence is an indicator of something larger going wrong, silence in-and-of itself is never the thing that has gone poorly. It's very much more like students did not engage well with this text or something, and silence is the indicator of that. We're not in one-on-one conversations where there's this expectation that you have to keep lobbing the ball back and forth. There's a whole room of people. Silence is an indicator that something else is not working well.

For Robin, silence is a symptom of an underlying problem rather than the problem itself. When filling the role of teacher, they turn to strategizing ways in which to alleviate whatever that underlying problem is. Throughout their interview, they describe different ways they might respond to the problem: They might ask themselves if they are asking good questions, consider ways for making conversation visible and tangible (through passing around a ball of yarn to reveal the missing links in conversation), and to send students the questions they will be asked in a one-on-one conference ahead of time in order to avoid students' silence in a context that is supposed to be for their benefit. All these teaching strategies show that Robin is thinking deliberately about their practice. However, I was struck by how Robin doesn't often consider that silence, when not shaped or introduced in structured and intentional ways, can be something other than a sign of something gone wrong in a class.

In our conversation, Robin continuously tried to imagine alternative experiences of classroom silence from their own. However, because of their strong identifications with speaking and collaboration, Robin also struggled to grapple with those alternative experiences and why others might not be able to or not want to participate in a classroom in the same ways they do. For example, in their pre-interview writing sample, Robin explains,

Discussion was encouraged throughout my undergraduate studies, even in more lecture-oriented settings, and so me speaking up showed that I was engaged. Silence, in my mind, was a form of disengagement. I have heard many anecdotes of different people's strategies for approaching undergraduate seminars and how they could find ways to 'check off' their participation for the day. Many embraced trying to "get a point in quickly" so that they could initiate a conversation without revealing that their shallow engagement with the week's readings. Or others waited to pose questions in response to other students' points with a similar evasive aim. My dad likes to say that "bullshitting is an important academic skill" and my family has certainly talked about these discussion tactics in relation to this. I do acknowledge though that other reasons for silence are common, and these are ones that I try to trust other people's need for more and more.  
(Writing Sample 1)

Here, we can see how Robin's accounting of silence as a sign of disengagement is shaped by their own experiences, including their family conversations about academic "bullshit," but more importantly, the way they have been disciplined to see silence and speaking in particular ways in school settings. In this response, as well as in their interview, Robin also tries to attend to their own experience of easily participating in class in relation to peers' experiences of being at odds with the expectations of class discussions. When Robin makes these comparisons, it tells me they are trying to understand others' perspectives of silence that may differ from their own. Turning to others' approaches of participating, Robin seems to liken these strategies to a form of "bullshitting," but they don't go so far to question (at least not in this piece of writing) why these strategies are a necessary academic skill in the first place. Robin sees at least some of these strategies as "evasive" or as a means of hiding a "shallow engagement with the week's readings."

Even as they strive to understand others' strategies for speaking in the classroom, Robin struggles to see silence as productive in the classroom. While they know there are reasons for people choosing silence, those reasons are very distant from their own experience. While they do

try to remain aware of others' relationships with silence, they write: "it's been difficult to bridge these developing understandings of people's wide-ranging relationships with silence and how I have seen silence expected to manifest in academic settings." That is, because of their own experiences in education, they struggle to see how silence can be a productive part of what school looks like. At one point in their interview, Robin tried to describe and acknowledge other people's strategies for making sure they speak in class and linked those strategies to "fear of appearing stupid, fear of appearing unprepared, or fear of being punished in some way for not being productive." It's clear that Robin doesn't associate themselves with that fear, but they do try to acknowledge and understand it. Robin also links students' reasons for being silent to self-esteem and confidence issues, saying

I think that [being silent] is much more to do with self-esteem than anybody actually not having something worthwhile to contribute. But that's where they're at, and that's not what... I'm not grading whether or not somebody is confident.

Robin doesn't want to assess participation for these very reasons, as well as because they understand participation grades to be ambiguous. They were also critical of pedagogies that over-value conversation and dialogue. Still, Robin rarely has a positive reason for a student not to be speaking in class when dialogue is expected, even if they do not fault the student for that lack of oral participation.

Finally, Robin's perceptions of silence as a sign of friction with the teacher's plans comes up against their own experience of performing as an engaged student. They write in their first writing sample: "I learned early in my history of depressive episodes that other people were mainly concerned if you started speaking less than you normally did, so measuring my engagement became a way to pass as neurotypical when I was otherwise struggling" (Writing Sample 1). Robin has learned to perform neurotypicality by measuring how much they speak in educational settings. To perform silence would be to reveal that something was wrong. This relationship of speaking to the performance of engagement reveals Robin's understanding of the normative expectations of the classroom and the ways in which they must perform to fulfill those expectations. While they

don't necessarily presume that others, particularly their own students, need to play the same engagement expectations game, I believe they are constantly viewing silence through their ability to play that game well, which limits their ability to consider other reasons for performing silence in the school environment.

**“OH SHIT, I HAVE TO SOUND A CERTAIN WAY BECAUSE I CAN GET DEPORTED”: SILENCE AS PRESSURE TO PERFORM TO EXPECTATIONS**

I will return to Robin's story later in this chapter, but for now, I want to take this consideration of silence as sign of not performing to normative expectations and consider the ways silence can also be experienced as a pressure *to* perform to those same expectations. As graduate students—and sometimes as newer teachers—some study participants experience silence as a high-stakes pressure to perform in particular ways. Both Cindy and Vincent, whose stories I will consider in detail in Chapter 5, feel an intense pressure in silence to perform the role of good student or good teacher. Cindy, when reflecting on her first semester as a graduate student, recalls feeling a palpable pressure to perform the role of the speaking intellectual graduate student when she encountered silence. Vincent, wanting to perform the role of an interesting and informed high school teacher, prepared for the possibility of silence by ensuring there were no gaps in their lesson plans. Silence, for these participants, is filled with a perceived need to perform in particular ways in the classroom, regardless of what role they are in. So, while silence can be read as a sign that teachers, or their students, are not performing up to expectations, it can also hold the pressure *to* perform to a set of ingrained norms. In this section, I focus on Sonia, who experiences silence as a pressure to perform as a good student, good teacher, and a good American English speaker.

Sonia, an advanced doctoral student currently working on her dissertation, has attended Border University for all stages of her post-secondary education. Sonia describes silence as incredibly uncomfortable, and she is very vocal about that discomfort. Even in our interview, if there was a pause after a question, Sonia would get noticeably anxious about the quiet, marking it

off with jokes: “Is this silence, are you gonna be like we had a 3 minute silence? I’m just kidding. [laughing] See how uncomfortable I get with silence?”

Sonia also self-identifies as an L2 English speaker, with Spanish as her primary language. Throughout our conversation, she linked silence with the pressure to perform in English, particularly as an undergraduate student attending Border U:

When it was very quiet, I would feel, I would pray, “Please, please someone participate because I don’t want to participate.” I would always avoid eye contact. I would always be like, “No, don’t call me. Like, I don’t want to participate.” [brief pause] But it was weird because, now that I think about it, I took a class, political science class in Spanish at [Border U]. And for that class it was at this huge auditorium, we were like 300 students, and I will, I always participated. I would be raising my hand all the time. And I wonder if it’s because it was in Spanish. I think it was, but yeah. So, I think that had, that had a lot do, like my, my language barrier, or whatever.

For college-aged Sonia, a quiet English-speaking classroom came with an anxiety about orally participating, but not because she was a particularly quiet person who didn’t like to speak in front of others. Rather, her anxiety was linked to the ways she felt she needed to perform as an English-speaking student with an American accent. In a Spanish-speaking classroom, even a large one like the one she describes in the passage above, she found herself participating with ease. However, in an English-speaking classroom, when silence permeated the room, she found herself anxious, avoiding eye contact, and praying that someone else would speak so she wouldn’t have to.

In her pre-interview writing response, she wrote about her identity as an L2 speaker in relation to silence, and in her interview, I asked Sonia to elaborate on this experience. She responded with the following extended narrative:

Because I was an L2 student, I felt very — I was embarrassed on my accent. I did not feel comfortable talking out loud because I didn't like my accent. And it wasn't until I went to study abroad in Paris where — So, I was at this international school, and there were students from all over the world. And I remember Europeans don't give a shit about accents. They're like, if you have an accent, that's my accent, and I'm not going to fake it. And I remember I would, I would be giving presentations on marketing or whatever the class was, and one of my, some of my French friends would tell me, “[Sonia], why do you want to sound American?” And I was like, “What?” And they were like, “Yes, you, you change your accent to sound American when you talk. Why? You should not be embarrassed of your accent.” And from that moment on I was like, oh, yeah, you know, you know what, you're right. But that wasn't until like my last year of undergrad that I

was like, you know what? I'm gonna embrace my accent and really don't give a— Like I, I don't care what you think about my accent. But at the beginning, like the first years as an undergrad, I always felt embarrassed, and I would always feel uncomfortable. My hands would get sweaty. I have all this anxiety. But then I think it comes back to everything, like it was like being an L2 student at [Border U]. Because I would spend 4 hours at the bridge, come to [Border U], run to my class. Be at my class, sweating. I already had this traumatic experience at the bridge, with a border agent interrogating me, and then I would be like, Oh shit, I have to sound a certain way because I can get deported. You know, I have all this conflicted things in my head that obviously influence my, my mindset, that they pushed me to be more anxious.

Sonia relates a pressure to perform in Standard English with an American accent, which renders her silent in the English-only classroom in the U.S, just on the other side of the Mexican border. It's in Paris, far away from the U.S-Mexico border and Border U, that someone points out this performance of American English, and it's through this experience that she claims she gained confidence in her authentic ways of speaking.

However, in the U.S., before she finds this confidence, the performance of an American accent came with incredibly high stakes. Performing in English was directly related to her status as a student who crossed the US-Mexico border to attend classes. As she states in the narrative above, “it comes back to everything.” It wasn't just about performing in English with the correct accent, it was about performing a particular identity to avoid being deported. The idea of participating in American English in proper ways—an expectation that Sonia links to the presence of silence in an English-speaking classroom—was anxiety-ridden for Sonia. It was an embodied “uncomfortable” experience for her, as evidenced by her hands sweating. This anxiety around performing in English was about avoiding acting in such a way that would mark her as Other, as not belonging in the U.S. The experience at the border crossing each day directly impacts her understanding of silence because of the inherent pressure to perform. That is, Sonia constructs silence as a pressure to perform over time and across contexts

Sonia now lives on the U.S. side of the border, but while attending Border U as an undergraduate during 2004-2009, she lived on the Mexican side. On school days, her friend would pick her up at 4AM, and they would sit for four or five hours in a long line of cars, waiting to cross the bridge into the United States. Upon arriving at the border crossing, she would be interviewed

by border agents. She described what this experience was like and how it impacted her life as a student:

When they're [Border Patrol agents] interviewing you, it was always very uncomf— I, I would always be scared, like, what if I say the wrong thing? Or, what if—? You know, like, you always have these, I don't know, like these thoughts in your head where like, I can say something and then I will be denied the entrance. So, I was always very polite. Like, "Hi, good morning, sir. Yes." Like, very very stressed. And there was a couple of times— I remember there was this time where I was carrying— So, my older brother was studying microbiology, and in my backpack I was a carrying a chemistry book. And they search. It was one of those days when they were searching the entire car, and they looked at the chemistry book, and they were— They, they passed me to the offices, interrogated me for like 4 hours, and told me like, "Are you planning to make drugs or a bomb?" Or, "Why do you have a chemistry book?" And I'm like, "Dude, we take microbiology and chemistry at [Border U]. Like, it's not. I'm not." You know, so it was like those, things like that...I have countless, countless memories and experiences like that. So, the moment you get to the classroom and you sit down, you already have experienced all this shit, you know, that the average student will never, ever experience. So, you're sitting there, already like— You have been up for six hours. You've been sitting at the car for five. You've already been interrogated by this horrible, racist person. Now, let me learn. You know, it's just like, you have these extra layers that come into factor when you're trying to learn something. So, it was just very stressful.

At first glance, silence seems to be at the periphery of these experiences, but in fact, it's at the center. As Sonia describes these traumatic experiences of crossing the border, it comes back to feeling anxious in the classroom under the silent pressure to orally participate in expected ways. The need to perform a particular identity is constant, transferring from one context to another. At the end of this narrative, Sonia lists all the experiences she brought to the classroom with her, counting them off on her fingers, and when she says, "Now, let me learn," she slapped her hand on the table, exasperated.

Sonia's story challenges teachers, most of whom will have no frame of reference to fully understand the traumas and anxieties that Sonia describes, to question what it is we're asking students to do when we compel them to break a silence in class by orally participating. As teachers, we claim we are creating safe spaces and communities in our classrooms, but when learning is so often equated with oral participation and a distinct avoidance of silence—as it so often is in the dialogical writing classroom—then it's important to recognize that what we are asking students to

do isn't as simple as making them feel comfortable with their peers. For college-aged Sonia, silence was pressure to speak in particular ways, to perform a particular identity that came with much higher stakes than just a participation grade. At the same time, silence itself carried the weight of these experiences that Sonia brought with her before she ever sat down at her desk in first-year writing. Silence in the classroom contained a pressure to participate in ways that went beyond performing engagement with course material.

Sonia, now a teacher in the same university that she attended as an undergraduate, carries these experiences of silence with her. Now that she teaches first-year writing at Border U, her classes are filled with students with similar experiences to hers. Many of them are varying degrees of multilingual, with Spanish as their primary language. Many of them likely cross the border every day to attend her class, just as she did as an undergraduate. In her first writing response, Sonia describes these identifications with her students:

As an instructor, I enjoy silence in the classroom but I also fear it. Let me tell you why: I teach mostly freshmen students, some of them are L2 learners, which remind me of the days that I was just like them. When we have silence in the classroom, I fear for those students who might be nervous to participate in class discussions and who might feel the need to break the silence but are too shy to do so. So, it's always kind of weird when I have those moments. I enjoy having silence when I know students are reflecting and actually doing something productive for the class. However, if there is too much silence, I usually say something or use humor as a way to make students laugh and create a more comfortable environment. I guess by stating that it may mean that I associate silence with awkwardness and uncomfortable spaces. (Writing Sample 1)

When silence emerges in her classroom, she feels fearful *for* those students who may be feeling similar anxieties about speaking and performing in English. To try and alleviate these fears, she tries to make her students feel comfortable by turning to humor. At first, I read Sonia's propensity to crack jokes when there is a silence in her classroom as merely a sign of her discomfort in silence, and as a strategy to try and get her students to speak (see Chapter 5). I still argue that is part of it, but in the context of her teaching practice, Sonia is also trying to do exactly what she claims her jokes are for. She uses them as a strategy to help her students feel at ease, attempting to relieve them of the pressure to perform she felt as an L2 undergraduate.

Sonia's jokes in response to silence tend to be at her own expense, laughing off her own struggles with communicating in English all the time. When asked to describe her teaching style in just few words, she used the words, "challenging, fun, and safe." She explained:

I am an instructor who likes to, kind of like, make a more comfortable environment where we're safe to tell jokes or make fun of each other, not of each other, but of me. [laughs] So, I always tell them, "I know, my English is not very well, and this is a rhetoric class. So, if I mispronounce a word, let me know, hahaha." ...And they always laugh. And so, because I open that door, then they, they start making jokes. ...So, it's like a fun environment. And then "safe," because, again, like I try to create like a safe community where we all feel safe to participate and where like, it's a safe place to express your opinion.

Because of Sonia's past experiences, I think Sonia understands that the discomfort and pressure students might feel during silence might have nothing to do with the silence itself and a lot to do with possible traumatic experiences, related to using language in particular ways that they bring with them to the classroom. When silence is pressure to perform, there is an underlying question of who is producing the silence and who is responsible for breaking it. In the case of the quiet student feeling the pressure, they see the professor, and perhaps their fellow students, as producing the silence to push them into speaking. The professor sees the quiet students as producing the silence for unknown reasons, and as I discussed in Chapter 2, new teachers are often taught to hold or curate their own silence to wait for students to speak. Sonia, through jokes, is trying to erase the production of silence as pressure altogether, to make her students, who she identifies with, feel safe.

#### **"INSERT INSECURITY HERE": CONTROLLING SILENCE BY FILLING SILENCE**

Space or time is another common metaphor participants use to describe silence. Sometimes this is a positive thing. Robin and others sometimes see directed silence or writing time as an "invitation to reflection," which they find productive and useful. Sonia, too, in the previous section, says that she enjoys silence when her students are clearly "reflecting and actually doing something productive for the class." Other times, however, participants experience silence as a vacuous void

that needs to be filled or broken to be controlled. We see this a bit in the previous section when Cindy, Vincent, and Sonia feel the pressure to perform when silence emerges. For Cindy that pressure to perform as a good graduate student comes with a need to fill the silence with words. Maria, however, centers her understanding of silence around it being an empty void in need of filling, not because she feels pressure to perform in expected ways but because she finds the silence itself to be uncertain and uncontrollable. For Maria, silence is an uncontrollable emptiness, and the only way she can control it is by filling it with noise.

Maria, a second-year doctoral student, has 17 years of teaching experience at various levels and at a wide array of types of institutions. She's also an army wife with two children. She identifies as a "highly communicative person," and not unlike almost every other participant in this study, she finds silence to be incredibly "uncomfortable." Maria wrote in her first writing response, "As a student, I still hate silence." She hypothesizes that her discomfort and hatred of silence might come from what she describes as her "loud" Italian upbringing, writing "[t]here was never silence at the dinner table, in the house, in the car, or wherever." However, based on the way she describes her experiences of silence, it appears that her discomfort is most directly linked to a feeling of being in or out of control. She explains how she sees silence as a graduate student:

I've noticed, especially in my class meetings on Zoom, that online spaces feel cavernous during silent spells. Some students choose to have their cameras off, which is already off-putting and gives the feeling of distance, but when the class is small (say 6 grad students) and we're discussing bulky readings or themes in the field, the silence fuels my anxiety. I feel bad for the professor, who may be fine with it, but their facial expression says otherwise; I feel bad for the other students, who may not want to contribute but may feel that they have to; I feel bad for me because I feel like I need to swoop in and save the discussion, even if what I end up saying is wrong. I constantly flirt with the line between participation and monopolization. I have gotten better, but still, it's hard for me. (Writing Sample 1)

For Maria, silences are "cavernous," particularly in online spaces. As a student, she feels bad for everyone involved when it's quiet—for the teacher who may feel like their lesson plan has gone wrong (like Robin or Vincent), for other students who may feel pressured to speak (like Cindy or Sonia), and for herself because as a highly talkative person, she feels the need to "swoop in and

save the discussion.” She sees herself as the person who must rescue the discussion from silent disaster by saying something, “even if what I end up saying is wrong.” In other words, she experiences silence in the ways that much of the literature constructs it: as something that should be filled as soon as possible for the conversation—and learning—to continue.

However, I should point out that Maria doesn’t exactly mind being called on for input. In her interview, she claimed that if silence went on for too long in certain courses, “if [Robin’s] in the class with me, then...it’s almost de facto that one of us gets called on, even if we didn’t volunteer anything.” When I asked how she felt about this “de facto” expectation to fill the void, she said “I mean, whatever. ...I can manufacture a response pretty fast. It’s kind of a feather in my cap a little bit.” For Maria, being called on to “save the discussion” is a point of pride. She sees it as a sign that her professors think she belongs in the doctoral program and that she is a reliable student who has done the work and has something worth saying.

When describing herself as a student in her younger years, Maria calls herself a “pleaser,” not just of other people but of herself:

I wanted to feel pride, and I knew that I could control my success in the classroom. So, there’s always a control aspect for me too. It’s like, well, I know that if I study and I do my work, and I do well on a test, then the grades that follow are within my control.

Speaking and participating orally in the classroom is something she feels as if she can control. She also feels this way about her teaching practice. She explains that while she loves when a lesson plan goes wrong and she must be spontaneous, “There has to be some sort of structure at the outset, and then, if it breaks, it breaks, but at least I know I tried.” Her plans and structure are part of controlling the way interactions occur in the classroom. Even if things go “terribly wrong,” she has a plan to fall back on. Silence, however, is something that she can’t control, something that seems to have no structure, and something she can’t plan for. What she can do when it emerges is fill it up with something else. She writes in her first reflective response that “As a teacher [silence] makes me feel like I need to fill it, but I also know that it’s necessary for contemplation and

growth.” Even as she acknowledges that silence might be “necessary for contemplation and growth,” enacting that belief can be difficult because of how uncertain silence itself feels to her.

Maria’s feelings about silence as empty space and her attempts to control that emptiness are most present in the following narrative:

[Silence] still makes me uncomfortable. Only because I, well not only because, but because I, I just think of it as like an open space that needs to be filled. I’m that way with furniture in my house [gestures at the room behind her]. Like, there’s not a space that’s empty. I don’t know, I guess because emptiness to me, whether it’s silent space or it’s physical space, to me, just represents uncertainty or unpreparedness or not knowing. And that, to me, is very uncomfortable, and I don’t like that. I need to like [motions with hands and fingers like she’s covering something]. It’s really hard to be an Army wife, I’ll tell you that much. So much about our lives that I just don’t know or that, that is silent too. You know, like when my husband is deployed, and he can’t talk. You know, your mind wanders, like, why can’t he talk to me? What’s going on? Where is he? What’s happened? That’s a very unsettling feeling to me, and I think— We’ve had some hard deployments, and this has nothing to do with your study, I’m sure, but you know, the just, your, your mind wandering with— You just don’t know, right? So, you, you fill— You tend to fill in the gap yourself. And sometimes it’s, oh, well, the students are quiet because they didn’t read, or, oh, they don’t care about what I’m saying, or, oh, I’m uninteresting. Or I don’t know, insert, insert insecurity here.

The discomfort and out-of-control feeling Maria has when she encounters silence transcends from space to space, context to context. Over and over, she constructs silence as something that requires her to fill it up with different things, depending on the context. When silence is a physical space, she fills it with furniture. Because I interviewed Maria on Zoom, I could see her home in the background. When she gestured behind her, I could see furniture, yes, but I also saw the space as highly organized and controlled. The emptiness is also a lack of communication that represents “uncertainty” or “not knowing.” In the case of her husband being deployed, she fills the silence with anxious questions, finding not knowing, “unsettling.” This uncertainty related to her husband’s deployment follows her to the classroom, where the not knowing is transferred onto her students. There, she fills the “gap” with explanations for why the students might be quiet— “they didn’t read” or “they don’t care what I’m saying” or “I’m uninteresting.”

Finally, she sums up her entire experience of silence by saying, “insert insecurity here.” This visceral and embodied insecurity she feels in silence directly shapes the way Maria engages

with it. In this narrative, we can see that each time silence emerges for Maria is different. That is, it is a performance that sounds the same each time but differs based on the context and other objects in the scene. However, Maria constructs the silence over and over with “insert insecurity here.” And through these feelings of insecurity, she is compelled to fill the empty void of silence with something else, something more controllable like words.

### **“WE WERE NOT ENCOURAGED TO ASK QUESTIONS”: EXPECTED SILENCES AND THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE**

Thus far, I have been describing the ways participants experience silence in negative, often anxiety-ridden, ways, that align with the normative constructions of silence in western educational contexts. For some, it is a sign of someone (either student or teacher) not performing to expectations, for others it is a pressure to perform, and still others, it is a void in need of filling. These experiences are shaped by the way silence and speaking are disciplined and controlled in western classroom environments, where students are expected to break silences to share their ideas, responses, and interpretations of course material. With these expectations come a lot of emotions, anxiety, and insecurity, as we saw in Maria and Sonia’s narratives. Sarish, however, relates to silence from an entirely different perspective. He understands the quiet in less overtly emotional and anxiety-filled ways, and instead links reasons for speaking or remaining silent to when he is the holder or the receiver of knowledge.

Sarish is a second-year international doctoral student from Nepal. Before he came to Border University, he taught various courses for over a decade at the college level in Nepal, and his perceptions of silence are heavily influenced by his schooling and teaching experiences in Nepal. As Sarish describes it, the school system he attended as a child and as a college student values a banking model of education in which students are expected to be silent while the teacher does most of the talking (Freire). In Sarish’s stories, teachers and students have clearly defined

roles. Students are to be silent receivers of knowledge, while teachers are to be the arbiters of that knowledge. Sarish is very explicit about this, saying in his interview:

Well before University I was silent students, right? I wouldn't ask any questions to teacher. Silence would be preferred in the classroom, right? Teacher would, you know, enjoy just delivering their teacher lecture, whether they are a teacher of schools or University. That was the practice back in Nepal. So, I was quiet, silent, I guess. And if teacher asked, I would respond, right? I would submit something, right? Otherwise, I wouldn't ask. And what was the situation was that if I ask questions and some people will laugh, right? [They would say,] "You don't know this, even this," right? And teacher wouldn't also encourage, right? They wouldn't encourage us to ask questions. Most of the teacher.

Sarish describes a scene in which the teacher is lecturing as a holder of knowledge, while the students listen silently, only responding verbally when asked to do so. He also suggests that if he asked questions of the teacher, then other students would laugh at him, and that the teacher discouraged this kind of speaking out of turn. Interestingly, this laughter seems to be in response to Sarish's lack of knowledge in the need to ask a question; thus, in this context, to speak is to reveal that you don't understand the teacher. To remain silent is to exhibit understanding of the material.

According to Sarish, the expectations within this knowledge exchange in the teacher-student relationship go both ways. Teachers expect silent listening from their students, but students also expect their teachers to be highly knowledgeable. Sarish explains students believe that a good teacher in Nepal is someone highly capable of transferring information to their students through lectures and notes:

Our students want to be deposited from teacher, right? They prefer teacher notes, right? Something, if teacher provide, if a teacher provides notes, and that's a awesome teacher, wonderful teacher, right? We would also count the same way, right? And it still, if you don't provide any notes right, and, teacher notes, they don't like you right?

An "awesome" teacher is one who provides information, while a bad teacher, or an unlikeable one at least, withholds it from their students. Sarish is silent as a student in Nepal for the same reasons, which he describes in his pre-interview writing response. His choice to speak or remain silent are

closely linked to the idea of who holds knowledge and power in the student-teacher relationship.

I quote his full pre-interview reflective writing response here:

There are several times I was silent as a student in both school and college life. Some reasons made me silent in the class. The first reason was that I was trained to listen [to] teachers' lectures and to be deposited from them. We were not encouraged to ask questions. Some teachers would not entertain questions. Another reason is that I would not know what to ask question. To ask question some knowledge is required on the subject that has being taught. The third reason is that even if I asked questions, I would not get satisfactory answers from teachers. These all were the reasons that made me silence in the class. When I would not get satisfactory answer, I feel bad and frustration. In later days, I did not ask the questions to the teachers who did not answer my questions well. I assume that these applies to my students, too. (Writing Sample 1)

Silence begins as a sign of obedience, of fulfilling the expectations of the educational model he grew up within by filling the expected role of attentive student. But in his second and third reasons for silence, it becomes a choice that is centered around who has knowledge and who doesn't. Here, and throughout our interview conversation, Sarish describes students breaking their imposed silence by asking questions (as opposed to voicing ideas as we have come to expect in dialogical writing classrooms in the United States). While his teachers discouraged questions in general, questions seem to be the primary way a student could potentially break the expected silence of intentional listening. Sarish's second reason for choosing silence, however, points out that he often remained silent anyway because he "would not know what to ask." He believes that to speak as a student, one must have some knowledge to begin with. That is, to ask a question, to interrupt the expected silence of the student, he must ask an intelligent question that reflects knowledge of the material. This suggests that only those students who hold, or have received, more knowledge should speak while everyone else should remain silent.

Sarish's third reason for choosing silence is an interesting turn on these classroom expectations, however. He writes that he would choose silence if he had asked questions of that teacher in the past and had received unsatisfactory answers. I asked him to elaborate on this choice in his interview, and he responded:

Some students, for example, whether I'm a student or a teacher, right. If a teacher could not answer the questions asked by the students satisfactorily, then later days, students

would not ask questions, right? Even if you ask questions, if she couldn't answer the question, what's the point to ask questions, right? So, I felt this in my life also, as well as, same may happen to my students, sometimes, right? Right? If I could not answer the question, students' questions, all the questions, then the students will not ask questions. ...Some questions are difficult to answer, no doubt, but the questions related to content, right, that is being taught, should be answered by the teacher, right? Or he should say, or she should say, "I will answer, if I don't know right now, I will answer to tomorrow" right? [They should say] "I know you haven't got this point. I couldn't answer well these questions. I'll tell you tomorrow." Or he or she should answer the question right now. Right away, right? So, so my point is that students will be discouraged, or they wouldn't like to ask questions, they remain silent, because teacher couldn't answer the questions. Yeah, that's my point.

Again, Sarish reveals the nature of the teacher-student relationship in which the teacher is expected to hold all the knowledge. Students in this context expect their teachers to easily answer all questions about course content. However, what's interesting to me is Sarish's choice, as a student, to remain silent when given the chance to speak, because he knows the teacher will give him an unsatisfactory response. I read this choice as a form of resistance. As a student in Nepal, he loses respect for the teacher who doesn't fulfill the role of speaking knowledge arbiter. He says, "what's the point to ask questions, right?" Thus, silence becomes a signal of disrespect, a twisting on the expected silence in the banking educational model he's, thus far, described. At the same time, this choice about speaking or remaining silent as a student reveals the high expectations, he has of himself as a teacher. He later discusses the way he broke from expectations in Nepal, asking his students to complete presentations and by encouraging them to ask questions.

Yet, the theme of silence and speaking in relation to who is the holder of knowledge continues when he relates details about his life at Border U as an international student in the U.S. He says that in his first semesters at Border U, he would avoid speaking in class. He explains:

Because I didn't know the practice of teaching. I wasn't habituated. ...So due to genre familiarization, due to the lack of genre familiarization, I was hesitant to speak. I was unfamiliar with the genre, right? What to speak, right? And that was the main things, right? I don't know about the codes, right? I would read, but I couldn't grasp all the idea, due to genre, right. And I would avoid to speak, honestly speaking.

In the U.S., he chose silence at first because he felt a distinct lack of knowledge as a student. He felt he didn't understand the rules or codes of interaction ("genre familiarization") in the U.S.

classroom, particularly a graduate class in which students are usually expected to carry much of the conversation about course readings. Other GSIs in this study, Sarish's classmates, have described speaking in their graduate classes, even if what they are saying turns out to be wrong. They do so because the expectation is to speak, even if you are unsure about your knowledge. Sarish, however, chooses to remain silent because he does *not* feel knowledgeable enough to speak. That knowledge is sometimes linked to the modes of interaction and sometimes tied to whether he fully understands the reading, but knowledge is still at the root of his choice to speak or remain silent. Sarish's lived experience in the U.S. classroom reveals the ways expectations for speaking and silence, as well as the dominant narratives that define classroom silence are shaped by the dominant educational contexts and by personal histories within those systems.

Now that Sarish is in the U.S., he responds to classroom silence as a student much differently from other GSIs in this study, particularly Robin or Maria, who are members of Sarish's cohort. For example, when I asked about how he observes other teachers handling silence in the classroom, Sarish described this situation:

Here, but here [in the U.S.], you know teachers encourage us, right? [They ask,] "Do you have anything to say," right? "Do you have anything to say?" Just they encourage, "Anybody?" Like that, they encourage us to put— Just, you know, in our last class, last week right, we remain silent, right and [Professor's Name] asked us, right, "Do you have anything to say? Do you have points to say something on this, right?" Just he encouraged us right, to bring some points. Because he didn't have anything to talk, right also. He was hoping to, you know, he was hoping to, from us, right? His plan was that, right? But we didn't, we were silent, we were tired, right? Lots of reading, lots of writing. We were tired, so we wanted to stop the class, and but he was encouraging us to put our opinions.

In this new context, Sarish's expectations of the professor diverge from his expectations of teachers in Nepal. While teachers in Nepal are expected to hold all the knowledge, he has come to accept and understand that students are supposed to participate in knowledge creation in the U.S. by sharing their ideas and opinions. When silence appears in this new environment, he doesn't see the teacher's response of "Anybody?" as a professor's unpreparedness or lack of knowledge, and instead, he sees it as encouragement. As a follow-up, I asked him if he felt this encouragement from the professor was positive or not, and Sarish insisted, "No. That was positive. That's positive.

I consider that encouragement positive, right?” He reads his own and his classmates’ silences as a sign of being “tired” and overworked, and he understands that the professor’s plan was to rely on students to carry the conversation. When Sarish says the professor “didn’t have anything to talk,” he is not expressing a negative judgment, but rather an acceptance of the way the U.S. graduate classroom is supposed to function.

Other participants recount similar situations in their graduate courses to what Sarish describes above, but they find them frustrating. Robin critiques these kinds of responses to student silence, believing they are unproductive. Maria finds the “Anybody?” question from professors to be accusatory, implying that perhaps students didn’t do the reading. Both Robin and Maria allude to the implied pressure on students like themselves who already speak often, calling upon them to talk even more. So, it is interesting that Sarish finds this professor’s response to silence “encouraging.” While silence and speaking, for Sarish, are linked closely to who is expected to hold or create knowledge, silence itself does not seem to bother him or make him uncomfortable in the same ways that silence emotionally affects others in this study, likely because he has different formative educational relationships to silence from his peers.

Sarish’s less emotional experience of silence offers a few things in thinking of silence as a performance constructed over time. First, his definitions of silence, like his peers’, are shaped by his previous educational experience. I hesitate to spend too much time on cultural differences as I don’t wish for Sarish’s narrative stand in for all Nepali relationships to silence and certainly not for all non-Westerners’ understandings of silence. However, I think we can presume that what Sarish’s story does show is that the perceived and actual values of schooling greatly determine the way we define silence over time, that the more often certain narratives of silence are enforced, the more that definition of silence is solidified.

Secondly, Sarish’s less emotional relationship with silence offers a counterpoint to the discomfort so many other participants feel when they encounter silence in the classroom. That is, silence need not be inherently uncomfortable, and silence is not inherently the sign of something going wrong in a classroom. Past experiences with education construct silence in such negative

ways over time, but silence itself emerges differently in different contexts and is shaped by the relationships and interactions we have with it. In Sarish's story, there is the possibility of relating to silence differently.

## **“SILENCE IS WIELDED DIFFERENTLY”: INTENTIONAL SILENCE AS A TOOL IN CONTEXTS**

### **OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL**

Robin's stories about silence outside of the university offer another example of constructing a different relationship to silence that is outside the dominant narratives that work to define silence within the classroom. In the first section in this chapter, I focused on the ways Robin views silence as a sign of something gone wrong in the classroom and how they sometimes struggle “to bridge these developing understandings of people's wide-ranging relationships with silence and how I have seen silence expected to manifest in academic settings.” That is, the roles of silence and speaking are clearly delineated in Robin's past educational experiences. However, when we step outside of school with Robin, their relationship with silence becomes much more complex. They explain:

I am a Quaker. Silence is important to my religious life in that Quakers worship with what we call active listening, where we meet in silence in worship and when people feel moved to speak, they do. There's no like pastor or a lot of other things, and it's part of this theology of like, there's God in everybody, and so, anybody can be guided to share. And so, it is a perfectly acceptable experience, and I have been in worship meetings where nobody speaks for like 40 minutes and like, it can be a great time so— And by great, I mean a moving process and experience. ...I joined as an adult. I came to Quakerism when I was like 26 or something, and I'm only 30. And so, that has definitely changed my relationship with silence, but I think not in education settings fully yet 'cause there's so many different expectations. But it has certainly like given more comfort in my own, personal life with being quiet and using silence as a way to sit with feelings, sit with thoughts, all sorts of things. I've been on silent retreats now, for days at a time. Stuff like that.

When discussing their practice of Quakerism, Robin frames silence very differently from the way they talk about it in education. In their religious life, silence contains many more possibilities than it does in the confines of the classroom. It is an intentional practice of “active listening,” and sitting

in silence for long periods of time is a “perfectly acceptable experience.” Where Robin describes silence in the classroom as uncomfortable and as friction with a teacher’s plans, silence in the religious context, is “moving” and a “way to sit with feelings, sit with thoughts, all sorts of things.”

We were approaching the end of our interview when Robin brought up Quakerism, but I felt as if we had hit on something important. I wondered why they saw the ways their turn to Quakerism has “definitely changed my relationship with silence, but I think not in education settings fully yet 'cause there's so many different expectations.” I pressed Robin a bit on the line they drew between silence in and outside of the classroom. I did so not because I think the Quaker silence Robin describes belongs in educational settings but because I wondered why Robin, throughout our interview, had been placing a box around the types of silences that could and should exist in the writing classroom. They elaborated on this boundary, saying:

‘Cause it's not culturally there in an education setting. Like, Quakerism is not a dominant cultural attitude or approach, and so it's not a space where I think that everybody's going to be on the same page around like, we can all be really silent and sit with ourselves. I think a lot of people would have a lot of trouble with that. For many, many, many reasons. Because it's emotionally difficult. It's hard. It is genuinely different than meditation, but meditation has a lot of parallels to it, in that, meditation, is super, really difficult if you are frustrated or annoyed, or in emotional pain for some reason. And I think a lot of people are on a dai— You know, in a classroom kind of setting, stuff is stressful. At the graduate level, that's the narrative about graduate school is that it is a stressful experience, and certainly many undergrad students here are navigating so many other aspects of their life. It is a stressful time, it is a stressful time and place to be in a classroom, and it's laborious. And so, I think silence is wielded differently, in part because sitting with your thoughts for a while is really hard. It's part of why writing is hard is you have to listen to yourself, and you have to be comfortable listening to yourself. And that's really uncomfortable for I think a lot of people.

Robin points to how context and environmental expectations matter in considering the ways in which silence can be “wielded.” Because the rules and expectations for interaction in a classroom are quite different from the religious spaces where Quaker silence is practiced, Robin does not imagine a space for a similar kind of deep silence in the educational experience. In part, they draw this division because sitting in silence is so difficult and uncomfortable, and thus, Robin explains that silence is “wielded differently” in the religious context.

Their word choice of “wielded” implies that silence has the potential to be a kind of weapon. Robin’s thinking process suggests that asking students to sit with their thoughts in silence, silence could be dangerous because of how “emotionally difficult” this practice is. Thinking of silence as a weapon that can cause, perhaps unintentional, damage, makes me think of Sonia and the pressure that she felt in silence as an undergraduate, a pressure that was linked to her experiences outside of the classroom. I think Robin is saying that by inviting any kind of deep silence in which students are required to sit with their thoughts, may also invite trauma and stress. They question, rightfully so, whether it is appropriate to invite students to bring those experiences into the classroom when being a student is “a stressful time, it is a stressful time and place to be in a classroom, and it's laborious.”

This concern about students’ emotional well-being when considering the role silence can play in the classroom is an important one, but it is interesting that Robin likens the difficulty of silence to “why writing is hard.” They directly compare the experience of sitting in deep silence to the practice of writing saying, “It's part of why writing is hard is you have to listen to yourself, and you have to be comfortable listening to yourself.” To be clear, I do not suggest that what the writing classroom needs to be a specifically Quakerly silent practice, but I do think that in Robin’s argument *against* inviting deep silence into the classroom, they are also making an argument *for* it. If the primary purpose of an FYW class is to explore and enact the writing process, and silent practices that encourage sitting with one’s thoughts offer a parallel or similar opening into that uncomfortable process, then why wouldn’t we want to invite a form of this kind of silence into the classroom?

Robin continued with their explanation, saying:

So, I think about it that way of there's both different structural expectations, and people aren't coming into the room to be like, I'm here to sit with myself and do the work of being rejuvenated and listening to what everybody says in a really intentional and spaced out kind of way. I'd be interested in structuring a class such that, like we build a culture around that, but I think that would be [pause] hard. I definitely don't— think that would be a big aspiration. I think that would take more— me to develop more teaching skills than I have, both in terms of confidence of giving people the space to do that and

also confidence of saying, “This is a vision that I have for this classroom that I think that we can have this semester.” And having students buy into that and be along for the ride. And I don't know if the first-year writing class is the space for that. It might be. Especially if I tried out that writing time as a regular part of how we meet and stuff. Then maybe, but it would need to be down the road, probably.

Robin came to Quakerism and the practice of Quaker silence as an adult, and thus, choosing to practice this kind of silence is deeply personal for Robin. Experiences of silence, for most of the participants in this study, are deeply personal ones. We need only look to Maria's experiences of insecurity and Sonia's feelings of pressure to perform to see how personal and emotionally wrought silence can be. However, for Robin, this personal choice is one reason why they struggle to see a role for deep silence in educational settings. That is, they see the choice to move into silence as just that—a choice, which they are not necessarily comfortable making for their students. Robin's decision to engage in Quaker silence was a personal one they made outside of the classroom, and because of the structural expectations of education, they question whether they can ask students to partake in any kind of silent practice when first-year writing students simply don't have much choice in the matter.

In sum, Robin believes choosing silence needs to be natural, intentional, and collaborative. Earlier in the interview, when considering what silences have value in the classroom for them as a student, they said:

If it's an intentional silence that I think has been, that we as a group have chosen to create, then we use it in a really different way, in that, if we're all like, let's all take a moment and collect ourselves and think about something, then it indicates this isn't the time where we, have to talk. And so, silence is not this indication that something is going wrong [making air quotes] with the have-to-talk protocol, but instead, silence is this invitation to look inwards, take a moment, gather yourself. And I think there, it's definitely a much stronger tool, simply because it feels natural and feels less awkward and all these kinds of things.

If Robin, as an individual, or as part of a group, makes a choice to enter silence intentionally, then it can be a “natural” and “stronger tool” for gathering the self. However, they are uncomfortable with the idea of introducing silence, apart from reflective writing time, when they are in the role of teacher.

## **SILENCE IS A PUMA: OPENING THE QUIET BY STARING IT DOWN**

Many participants acknowledge that silence may be a choice that students make for particular reasons in the classroom, even if those reasons are at times, mysterious. As I discussed in the first section, Robin tries to imagine experiences of classmates who enact silence for reasons outside of their own experience. Most participants forward these kinds of statements, recognizing that people exist in classrooms in different ways. Participants, however, all see silence as being produced by someone in the scene, whether that be themselves, students, classmates, or a professor. For instance, in the first section, Robin sees silence as being produced by students as a sign of something not working according to the teacher's plans, and in the previous section, Robin understands silence as a choice that people must deliberately and collaboratively decide to generate. In Sarish's story, students are expected to produce silence. In Sonia's narrative, she experiences silence as pressure, but the silence is coming from herself and then her students. In sum, people deliver silence.

Miguel, on the other hand, often perceives silence as an entity outside of the control of any person or group of people. Miguel describes silence as a natural, yet potentially dangerous, presence that must be acknowledged, not for the reasons it exists but as an actor with agency of its own. A musician, Miguel is an international doctoral student from southern Mexico. He recently transferred to Border U after completing his coursework and teacher training at another university. He writes in his first writing response about his adjustment to being a doctoral student in Rhetoric during his first semester at another university in the United States, writing:

First, as a student, the first time I noticed silence it was in my Proseminar class...The class was mostly based on discussions from different perspectives about rhetoric. But since all of us were new, we didn't feel with enough confidence to make a statement that would demonstrate how good we understood the topic, or how idiots we were. Then, many times, the professor asked us several questions and silence appeared in the room.

At first, it seems like Miguel is recounting the pressure to perform, as I discussed in Sonia's narrative. He does talk about not feeling confident enough to speak. However, in the next sentence,

he doesn't say that he and the other students were silent, or that they chose to be silent. Instead, he writes that "silence appeared in the room." This phrasing suggests that for Miguel, silence isn't necessarily something produced by a person. Rather, silence appears, as if out of nowhere. He continues in his writing response,

At this point, I noticed how everyone tried to evade silence by looking at the laptop screen and maybe look for the answer to the question. When you sit ready for a class your head looks straight to other people and you move freely. But when silence appeared, our head looked down to the floor and we tried to vanish. Silence made the class uncomfortable and full with stress. (Writing Sample 1)

Silence acts on those in the room, making them feel uncomfortable. It affects students' bodies, pushing their gaze to the floor. He describes wanting to "vanish," and the class feeling "full with stress." He links these emotions to the appearance of silence.

While other participants think of silence as representing someone's presence or absence, no one else overtly thinks of silence as its own entity or force, existing outside of a person, and acting on those in the room. Maria's narrative comes close; she strives to control something that, for her, is very uncontrollable. While the silence seems to emanate from her students, or from her deployed husband who is unable to communicate with her, most of Maria's discomfort in these silences comes from her own insecurities about what the silence means. That is, silence is acting on her in ways that make her feel uncomfortable. It is difficult to account for some of these emotions that Maria and others feel if silence can only act rhetorically if it is intentionally delivered by an actor. In these stories in which silence is unwelcome, it seems silence must always be someone's fault. Miguel's understanding of silence, however, offers another way to open silence to other possibilities beyond the dominant paradigm that silence is a problem.

Miguel further argues that silence always and already exists in the room, whether we like it or not. To return to my discussion of silence as a performance, Miguel understands the ways in which silence appears as an event in relation to others, but he says that it is how we choose to respond to silence that defines it. To make this view of silence apparent, Miguel uses a metaphor

in which he likens silence to a puma.<sup>6</sup> He writes that silence is “like the [puma] that you can’t give your back because it will kill you by surprise. But if you face it, if you know it’s there the [puma] leaves, maybe doesn’t move, or becomes your friend” (Writing Sample 1). If silence is a puma, silence is always potentially dangerous, but through the process of recognizing the presence of silence, the possibilities, meanings, and effects of silence change. The puma/silence can leave, it can remain present, or it can “become your friend.” When Miguel describes silence as a possible friend, he means that it can be an opportunity for us to “stop in time and think.” That is, it’s an opportunity to slow down and a pathway into deep thinking.

In his interview, Miguel elaborated on the metaphor of the puma, saying that that he saw a video on social media of a guy who was jogging on a trail,

and suddenly there is a puma in front of him. And it was, I guess it was a female puma. And the puma is just standing there in front of him...and he’s very scared. And suddenly the puma starts walking straight at him. But what was surprising to me is that the guy didn’t run. The guy stayed there, and he was slowly walking backwards, walking backwards. And he was like, “Hey, I’m scary!” And he was yelling, and he was trying to look like a big monster. He was trying to transform himself to save his life because actually there is a puma in front of you. I mean, that cat can kill you with one bite. And if it angers you, I mean with one anger, you are dead. And the guy keeps walking backwards.... He’s able to grab a stone, and when he’s about to grab the stone, the puma was about to attack him. But he did it faster, and then he threw the stone and the puma left. ...And the relation with silence is the same, that when you’re aware that silence is there, and you communicate that to the students. And that you will use it as part of your class. The silence can help you to relax your class, to make it less stressful, to make it more manageable, to make it more friendly, okay. But even when it is something scary, because it is something we all take as something scary, uncomfortable...because we ignore. Because it is, it is so here that sometimes we ignore it, and we forget to think about it, about silence. But if you give your back to silence, and you start teaching that way, it is still there. It is something that cannot, that won’t run away from you. And if you give your back to silence, silence...can attack you because...silence knows that you are weak, that you are ignoring him. ...And then when you are not capable to face silence, you give your back, silence can strike your class. Silence, silence can make it uncomfortable, make it, make students go put their faces down, not to speak, not to collaborate, can put pressure, and can kill your class. ...Because in a rhetoric class you— It is by force that you need to discuss things. And if you don’t provide that knowledge and silence, and if you keep ignoring it, then the class is dead from the beginning.

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<sup>6</sup> In his writing response, Miguel uses “tiger.” During our interview, he used puma. I’ve changed it in his writing for consistency and to align with the video he describes in his interview.

In Miguel's extended metaphor of the puma, classroom silence is a corporal entity outside of the control of the teacher or the students. It is not something that someone produces or invites or controls or even intentionally moves into. Instead, it is an inevitable appearance that is always potentially dangerous—it can “kill your class.” It is something we encounter and must respond to. Miguel does not believe we can control silence. What we *can* control is how we react to it. That is, when you stare down the puma, talk to it, or at the very least recognize its existence, the potential for danger decreases and the opportunity for building a different kind of relationship with the puma opens.

While I take issue with the ways his metaphor constructs silence as always potentially dangerous, Miguel offers us a way to think about silence that moves beyond the dominant paradigm for silence. If silence itself can't be controlled, or if we recognize that silence will emerge in different ways based on how we relate to it, then there is opportunity to build a better, more nuanced relationship with silence.

Moreover, Miguel's metaphor aptly summarizes the way other participants feel when they encounter silence. In the narratives I've introduced in this chapter—other than Sarish's—emotional discomfort cuts across them in palpable ways. Even as participants try to pin down the meanings of silence as a sign of not meeting expectations, a pressure to meet expectations, a void that needs filling, or even an intentional tool that can be used in certain contexts, their discomfort when they encounter silence is tangible. The participants name and define silence over time, based on the dominant expectations of the classroom but also to give meaning to silence and alleviate the unsettling nature of silence. However, as I'll explain in the next two chapters, defining silence doesn't make these emotions go away. Miguel's metaphor of the puma helps us to begin to account for this phenomenon. Participants like Maria try to control silence, but if silence can't be controlled, then that explains why the feelings of discomfort, insecurity, and anxiety remain.

To be clear, I think that people can and do deliberately produce silence for intentional rhetorical effects in the ways Glenn argues in *Unspoken*. I also believe that students can deliberately choose silence in the ways that Reda explores. However, Miguel's metaphor opens a way to consider silence as an exterior presence, as something we encounter with our bodies. If it exists outside of ourselves and other people, then it is something we can build a relationship with, rather than something we must always try to avoid. That is, the embodied nature of the puma allows us to think about silence in new ways, understanding that each time silence emerges in the room, it has different meanings and capabilities. It's a way forward in thinking that silence can have many meanings in many different contexts. This metaphor also offers a way into thinking about the emotions that people feel in the presence of silence, and it is with Miguel's conceptualization of silence as something we respond to rather than something we can control that leads me to focus, in Chapter 5, on the discomfort that cuts across many of the definitions described in this chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Accounting for the Discomfort of the Quiet: Silence as an Object of Emotion**

### **SILENCE AS DISCOMFORT**

If we look back at some of the different ways in which the participants in this study relate to and interpret silence, there is a common theme that cuts across many of their experiences: a palpable sensation of discomfort. For most study participants, their stories of silence begin with an expression of feeling uncomfortable: they find silence to be stressful and filled with pressure, tension, or anxiety. Maria explains that silence, “freaks me out when no one is saying anything. ...It’s just uncomfortable.” Classroom silences make Vincent feel “stressed.” Cindy points to the silence she experiences in the classroom when she’s a student and says the “tension is just so thick,” she will often say anything to break it. Sonia, narrating her own silence during our interview says, “Are you gonna be like we had a 3-minute silence? I’m just kidding. [laughs] See how uncomfortable I get with silence?”

For Cindy, Vincent, Maria, and Sonia, silence is something they strive to avoid whenever possible. I don’t think these expressions of discomfort are surprising or uncommon. I expect that many people feel this way when they encounter silence, particularly within a space like a classroom where it is generally expected that someone, whether that’s a teacher or a student, will always be speaking. In such spaces, teachers often fixate on silence as a problem that needs to be corrected, and many quiet students feel an overpowering (and not necessarily empowering) pressure to find something, anything, to say during class discussion. Through my participants’ stories, I have come to see the emotion of discomfort working through silence to compel people away from silence. Silence has an uncomfortable, perhaps even painful, effect on many (though, not all) who encounter it. In this chapter, I aim to account for this discomfort and other negative feelings towards silence, in order to understand how such emotions work on teachers and students to shape the way they construct silence and to explain how such constructions are circulated. Ultimately, I think that by understanding how emotions work on teachers and students through silence, we can

work to open different possibilities for silence in classrooms, allowing it to be part of the conversation.

### **Embodied Emotional Encounters with Silence**

Glenn writes that while all silences have meaning, it is often the unexpected silences that draw our attention (*Unspoken* 11). The expected silences, the ones mandated by custom (as in the required silence of a courtroom), or by enforced subordination (as when performed by the disenfranchised), go unnoticed because those silences are expected and even valued in the contexts in which they emerge (*Unspoken* 10-11). On the other hand, the unexpected silences, such as when someone isn't holding up their end of the conversation, or when we find ourselves tongue-tied, those silences "unsettle us, often making us anxious about the specific meaning" (Glenn, *Unspoken* 11). Glenn states that it is the ambiguity of these unexpected silences that leads us to feeling anxious, that the uncertainty of meaning in the silence—whether it be our own or someone else's—makes us feel uncomfortable.

I think Glenn's point about unexpected silence is accurate to an extent: Because silence is so often experienced as uncomfortable and because we feel and express that discomfort in visceral, bodily ways—sweating, blushing, tension in the shoulders, nervous laughter, and other indescribable feelings of anxiety—it makes sense that those unexpected silences are the ones that we think of first, the ones we try to define, to fill with explanations or with questions, or to try to avoid all together. I also believe that uncertainty of meaning plays a role in creating the discomfort we feel; however, I also think there is more to the unsettling feeling than that uncertainty. Glenn's understanding of rhetorical silence does not fully account for the body in these moments of discomfort. The embodied emotional response to silence, particularly when that response is discomfort or another negative emotion, is more than just a reaction to in-the-moment ambiguity of meaning. Such emotions contain a history; they are an emotional reaction to a history of encounters with silence. These encounters are shaped by personal experience as well as by social

norms that compel us to construct silence over and over again as unexpected, uncomfortable, and unwelcome. If we attune ourselves to the emotions these encounters with silence generate, or if we pay attention to the discomfort we feel when we experience silence, we can come to understand the way such emotions determine how we construct silence and how those beliefs about silence get circulated.

Communications scholar, Kris Acheson briefly critiques Glenn's argument in *Unspoken*, explaining that while Glenn does see silence as more than just a "space in which speech manifests," she still limits silence to a "meaningful absence," "strategically used omissions," or "the deliberately unspoken" (536). In other words, Acheson argues that Glenn's rhetoric of silence begins with defining silence as the absence of speech. While the absence may have a function, Glenn is theorizing from a place of silence being a "zero sign" (Acheson 537). Acheson asserts that Glenn and others who study rhetorical silence don't go far enough to consider the "semantic silences, silences that mean something" (536). By comparison, Acheson considers silence to be a language all on its own, one that functions in much the same way as verbal speech. In sum, Glenn asks us if silence is standing in for something that is being deliberately left unsaid, while Acheson asks if silence is the language that is being produced, not in place of speech, but as its own system of signs. I think silence can be both of these things, both a deliberate rhetorical omission or delivery as Glenn argues, but also a way of communicating that doesn't require verbal explanation to make sense of it. I am arguing for seeing the multiplicity of silences, and Acheson's claims alongside Glenn's help to expand what silence can be, mean, and do.

One of the ways Acheson supports her claim about silence as its own language system is by showing the ways that silence, like speech, is an "embodied phenomenon" (546). Whether we are listening to it or producing it, "silence, like spoken language, seems to emanate from people, moving out through the air around them towards others just as would waves of sound" (546). In other words, silence comes from people and therefore, it plays a role in our experiences and in the interactions we have with others, just as verbal speech does. We can see the way it plays a role in the way we try to puzzle out its meaning by looking to the silent person's body to tell us if they

are engaged or disengaged, nervous or deliberately resisting, listening intently, thinking deeply, or simply zoned out. For example, an instructor may read a quiet student as disengaged because he isn't making eye contact, when really the student is intently listening to the conversation going on around him. The quiet body emanates silence in ways that teachers try to read, which can result in a misreading of the silence, particularly in classrooms where silences are often fraught due to expectations for participation and dialogue.

Acheson goes on to write, “[w]e only know [silence] to be present because we sense it, and I do not mean to limit this sensing to what we hear, for silence is more than heard. We feel it in our bodies” (547). In other words, we don't just hear silence, we experience it in embodied ways. Acheson suggests that silence is not just the absence of speech but that it is its own language, and the proof of that is in our bodies, how our bodies produce it and how our bodies respond to silence in visceral ways. Acheson illustrates this point further: “Because they affect us so bodily, silences call our attention to our own being-in-the-world” (548). By “being-in-the-world,” she means that encounters with silence seem to make us more aware of our own bodies in time and space. We become mindful of the passage of time through our subjective understandings of the duration of silence, and of our own spatiality, in noticing our relationship to the space around us and the physical and emotional distance between ourselves and others (548).

Silences can also make us more aware of our own bodies as bodies. For example, Cindy describes struggling to speak in her first semester of graduate school: “It's not that I didn't want to participate...it literally felt like I couldn't. It was kind of a physical, even like a physical feeling that I couldn't speak.” For Cindy, her own silences make her aware of the physicality of her body and that body's inability to do what is expected of it. I suggest that by thinking about silence as embodied, both in the way we produce it and in the way we encounter it, we can establish a new way of listening to silence, not to search for a definitive meaning but instead to listen more deeply to our own bodily responses to it. By listening to those responses, we can understand how those emotions shape our relationships with silence, how they compel us to define silence in particular ways, and how those constructions of silence get circulated. I also argue that by learning to tune

into our own emotions towards silence, we begin to think more critically about the productive possibilities for silence, opening silence to a multitude of meanings to interrupt circulations of discomfort.

Acheson's argument about embodied silence and the experiences of participants like Cindy in my study suggest that silence is an object of emotion. Sara Ahmed theorizes objects of emotion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, where she argues that a subject's emotions are generated through contact with objects. Ahmed doesn't write of silence as an object of emotion, but her theory of affect offers a way to read and contemplate the discomfort participants feel when they encounter silence. Contact with silence generates feelings or impressions about it, which in turn, generate judgments about silence and those who produce it. Ahmed contends that, "*We need to remember the 'press' in an impression.* It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace" (6). Colliding with silence leaves marks or traces on our bodies. These marks determine how we construct and name silence in the current moment but also shape how we experience and construct silence in our pasts and in our futures.

By thinking of experiences of silence as bodily encounters, the emotions my participants (and I) feel, which are generated by those encounters, can account for another aspect of silence that Glenn's rhetoric of silence doesn't fully acknowledge. To view silence as rhetorical, as Glenn forwards, is to acknowledge that humans can deliver silence in purposeful, powerful, and even empowering ways (*Unspoken*). I don't disagree with this argument—I agree with it wholeheartedly—but it only describes one side of the stories of silence. That is, Glenn accounts for the purposeful delivery of silence and silencing and the way such silences can enact rhetorical power, but she doesn't account for how bodies encounter silence, including our own silences, and what our emotions can tell us about those encounters.

## **Emotional Constructions of Silence**

Much anxiety about silence seems to focus on what the user of silence intended, even if silence is being viewed as a rhetorical choice. For instance, Reda's study of quiet students asks students why they choose silence in the classroom. Reda values silence as a student's choice, as she seeks to understand what questions quiet students ask themselves when making the decision to speak or stay quiet in class (16). Her objective is not to break quiet students' chosen silences. She just wants to understand why they choose to be silent in the first place, centering quiet students' voices in order to counter the mostly negative narratives that teachers tell about them. Offsetting these stories is important work and one of the reasons I began my own study of classroom silence. I set out to try and understand how newer teachers might come to carry such negative stories about silence and quiet students into the classroom. I wanted to understand where those narratives about quiet students came from and how newer teachers might resist them. What I've come to recognize by talking to my participants is that emotion plays an important role in the circulation of such narratives about silence and quiet students. Reda's work counters the narratives about quiet students by creating a space for students to speak for themselves, but her aim is still part of an attempt to understand silence, to get to the root of its meaning or, at the very least, to understand why it exists in places like classroom discussions, where norms tell us it shouldn't.

I suggest that this compulsion to pin down the intention behind silence—and therefore what silence means—is part of how emotion acts upon us through our bodily encounters with silence. Rather than listening to our own emotions that emerge during an encounter with silence and how those emotions affect our definitions of silence and those who produce it, we typically turn to the silent one to ponder their intentions, or sometimes even to blame them for our discomfort. I'm thinking primarily of teachers' responses to classroom silence, but I think this also applies in other social situations where ongoing conversation is expected, and silence emerges instead. In the case of Reda, she asks quiet students why they are choosing silence. In my study, many of the graduate student instructors try to come up with generalized reasons for why students might be quiet. They

thoughtfully consider that students might have legitimate reasons for being quiet, but they still puzzle over what those reasons might be. For example, Maria speculates,

So, I have a neurodiverse child. My son has SPD [sensory processing disorder] and forcing him to have any sort of sensory output, whether it's speaking or you know, listening, or whatever. It's really hard for him, and I know that there— If it's— if a student is being silent, it's not necessarily because he or she doesn't know the answer. It may be just because they are almost paralyzed in terms of the social space. Which is kind of the benefit of teaching class asynchronously online, I think, for some students, who might have that social phobia or that lack confidence. Some students are just not confident, you know. They don't want to be told they're wrong, or they don't want to look like they didn't do the work when they really did.

Maria's thinking comes from a place of generosity, but she still wants to understand the silence, to figure it out and perhaps resolve it, if possible. Her possible answers come directly from her own experiences of having a neurodiverse child, influencing the way she has come to think more generally about students' silences in her own classroom.

In other cases, we might turn to the situation itself to puzzle out what caused the silence. For instance, teachers might ask if it's their own fault that students are so quiet—perhaps their question wasn't phrased well, or they were asking too narrow of a question. Several participants ask themselves these types of questions, self-consciously pondering what they did to make their students stop talking. As we saw in chapter 4, Robin, in particular, takes this line of thinking in a different direction, as they think of silence as “an indicator that something else is not working well.” Placing a lot of the onus on instructors, including themselves, they reflect back on their own early learning experiences as an unmotivated or disengaged student saying:

It definitely goes back to the experiences I've had of, like, if I'm not motivated, why would I care? And so— And definitely putting that on the teacher of like, I recognized pretty early that it wasn't my fault as a student if I, if I felt disengaged. Or if I didn't care about the subject. I put that on the teacher. I never thought of it as my responsibility as a learner to be like, well, just suck it up and learn it. ...I see it as the teacher's role to make this work. I don't see it as a deficit on the student's part to— That they are disengaged or unmotivated or something. Like, that is, one, either poor timing, like other shit is going on in their life. ...But at the end of the day, it's on me then to be like, let's find other ways to make this work.

Robin brings their own experiences as a disengaged student to their teaching practice. While they begin to try and think about the reasons why a student might be quiet, they still bring it back to the teacher's responsibility to engage the student, to "make this work." This kind of thinking sets Robin up as a compassionate instructor, but it also means that if silence emerges, Robin holds themselves accountable for it and what to do with or about it. In trying to explain silence, teachers might also consider what the silence might mean in that context. For example, maybe it was 8am on a Friday and students were just tired from a long week of classes. And of course, as Reda discusses and criticizes at length, teachers might decide that a quiet student is just resistant, or disengaged, or unprepared.

I see these efforts to explain why silence exists as one of the ways emotions act upon us through silence. Explaining the presence of silence is part of what we do when we feel uncomfortable, and it works to defer an understanding of our own emotions in relation to silence, while at the same time, blocking many of the productive possibilities that silence holds. That is, explaining silence is one of the things we do in relation to silence as a way of concealing our own emotions about that same silence. I suggest that instead of trying to find a definitive meaning or reason for silence when it emerges, we tune into the ways feelings are acting on us through silence to understand what those emotions tell us about silence and how they shape how we orient ourselves in relation to silence in our pasts, presents, and futures.

Ahmed, using pain as an entry point, breaks down encounters that make us more aware of our own bodies as separate from other bodies and things. While I don't think silence typically causes literal, physical pain, the discomfort so many of the participants in my study experience when they encounter silence lends itself to Ahmed's exploration of pain. In conversations about silence, I have heard people—and not just my participants—speak of it as a painful experience, the moments passing in excruciating slowness. But it is not so much the pain or discomfort itself that I want to focus on in encounters with silence, and instead how silence becomes an object of emotion, which is often pain or discomfort, and how that discomfort influences our ongoing relationships with silence. Ahmed explains the process of a painful encounter for the body:

I become aware of my body as having a surface only in the event of feeling discomfort (prickly sensations, cramps) that become transformed into pain through an act of reading and recognition (“it hurts!”), which is also a judgment (“it is bad!”). The recognition of a sensation as being painful (from “it hurts” to “it is bad” to “move away”) also involves the reconstitution of bodily space, as the reorientation of the bodily relation to that which gets attributed as the cause of the pain. ...I move away from what I feel is the cause of the pain, and it feels like I am moving away from the pain. (24)

Ahmed’s example is the literal contact of stubbing her toe on a table. She explains that a close encounter with an object involves a sensation, which the subject reads as pain. Through contact with the table, Ahmed recognizes that encounter as pain. Through the reading of pain, she then judges the table itself as painful, and moves her body away from the table that caused her pain. In other words, the experience of pain becomes an orientation towards the object itself. As Ahmed explains, emotions like pain produce the boundary between ourselves and other objects and shape our orientations to those objects. Through a painful encounter, we come to understand the relationship our body has with a particular object as painful. Thus, the compulsion to move away from the painful object becomes the definition of that object and our understanding of it.

To consider silence as an object of emotion, like the table in Ahmed’s example, is to recognize the ways in which our bodies are affected by coming into contact with silence. When we encounter silence, we become aware of our own bodies and their boundaries, particularly if discomfort is what we feel in a meeting with silence. And through these collisions with silence, we come to orient ourselves towards silence as something that causes discomfort and is therefore something we should turn away from. To return to Acheson’s argument about embodied silence for a moment, she argues that silence makes us aware of our own “being-in-the-world” (548). Coming to an awareness of our own being-in-the-world can be what Ahmed calls a painful encounter. Our bodies collide with silence, we feel discomfort, judge the silence to be the cause of that discomfort, and then make efforts to move away from silence as a painful or uncomfortable object. In the process, silence is defined as painful and uncomfortable.

While I don’t think all encounters with silence are painful ones, many of my participants’ narratives feature discomfort as the primary emotion shapes their experiences of silence. Many of

them feel discomfort that they attribute to silence and sometimes even to the person who is producing the silence, as well. Ahmed calls this transfer of affect from one object to another the “stickiness” of objects, or what objects of emotion do to one other (91). Teachers, for instance, might encounter silence in their classroom after they pose a question to the class and feel uncomfortable. What happens next is a, likely unconscious, transfer of affect from silence to the person(s) who seems to be emanating that silence. In their discomfort, the teacher might judge silence as uncomfortable (and therefore unwelcome) and then, blame the student(s) who produce the silence as the cause of that discomfort. Thus, the quiet student(s) become a painful object as well. The teacher as subject, describes the student(s) as not meeting the expectations of the classroom, but underneath that description is the judgement of the quiet student as an uncomfortable object, and behind that judgment is also an understanding of silence itself as an uncomfortable object.

### **“Unsticking” Negative Emotions from Silence by Centering Silence**

By focusing on the ways our encounters with silence affect us emotionally and how those emotions work on us to shape our relationships with silence, I make moves to “unstick” discomfort or pain from silence. I take the term “unstick” from Laura Micciche who, in *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, and Teaching*, works to “unstick ‘bad’ affect” from the identity metaphors that have come to define the field of composition (41). Also drawing on Ahmed’s theory of affect, she argues that the metaphors that are often used to describe composition have worked to invest negative emotions as part of composition’s identity. Unsticking, for Micciche, involves constructing new metaphors, using new language in order to refuse the static (classed and gendered) narrative about composition as a field of study. I use her term, unstick, to argue that we need to unstick discomfort and other negative emotions from silence. To unstick negative emotions from silence, I argue we need to *center* silence. By centering silence, by being conscious of the ways our affective responses slide from the silence as painful object onto those around us, we can

begin to unlearn the instinct to move away from the object that we believe causes us discomfort and instead explore, together with our students, the possibilities for silence.

When silence is welcome and experienced as positive, participants usually describe it as time or space. Silence can be associated with time to think, to process, to reflect, to write. Most participants recognize these benefits of silence and sometimes even crave that silent thinking time as students in their graduate seminars. Yet, despite the mental awareness of silence being productive for them, there is also almost always a compulsion to move away from that silence, even when it's productive. In these moments, I think the stickiness of discomfort prevails, and that discomfort turns into fear of silence, even when it's useful. Fear causes us to strive towards breaking the silence. I think there is an underlying assumption that for silence to be productive, there must be an end product, something to show for having sat in the silence, otherwise, it would seem to be a waste of time. That product could be an insightful comment, a written note, or the spark for a lively conversation, but not to produce anything would mean to leave room for the possibility of silence failing, and therefore, a continuation of discomfort. And in that fear of silence failing, there is still even more pressure, more discomfort, which stands in the way of silence having the opportunity to be a time to think or to be enacted as part of the conversation. In silence, there is still the threat of silence continuing forever, and that threat still carries the stickiness of discomfort, which causes us to fear silence in the present and in the future.

To unlearn this relationship with silence, to listen to silence differently, would be to accept that the silence might lead to nothing outwardly visible or verbally spoken, or that it might not lead anywhere in a single class period, and that's okay. It would be to acknowledge that silence itself is part of the conversation—a way of communicating—rather than the enemy of the dialogical classroom. But before we can open ourselves up to these possibilities, before we can make moves to unstick the negative affect, we must first fully explore the bodily discomfort that many feel in encounters with silence and see what that discomfort does. We need to attend to how that discomfort can limit the ways we construct, define, and name silence, how those definitions of silence shape how our orientations towards (or rather, away from) silence, and how those

constructions of silence get circulated and transferred onto silent bodies, even when those silent bodies are our own.

**“SO, I GUESS SEEING MY OWN SILENCE, IT KIND OF FREAKED ME OUT”: HOW THE DISCOMFORT OF SILENCE STICKS TO THE QUIET SELF**

While many participants express moments of discomfort in their encounters with silence, Cindy’s experiences most clearly reflect the kind of painful collision with silence and the return to the body that Ahmed theorizes. Cindy is a second-year M.A. student in literature at Border University, where just a year before she started her graduate program, she also completed her B.A. in the same English department. The transition to graduate school proved difficult for Cindy, a high-achieving college student who, at the time of this study, was soon to be recognized by the English department faculty as the outstanding M.A. student for that year. She describes developing imposter syndrome in her first semester, which resulted in a “physical feeling that I couldn’t speak.” She experiences silence, particularly her own silences in the graduate seminar classroom, as “awkward” and “weird” and as “high tension” that she feels within her body. When I asked Cindy to describe how her own professors respond to classroom silence, she said,

They kinda just stay quiet. They wait for somebody to break the silence. And if nobody, if really nobody— And usually somebody does. And a lot of times, it’s me, actually, because I feel— It makes me feel weird, you know. I’d rather just break the silence and say anything than just sit there and just [be] awkward. But if nobody breaks it, then they kind of ask a follow up question to try to help us think of whatever they asked in a different way. But it is, it’s always very high tension when that happens.

As a graduate student, when Cindy encounters silence, she is affected by it, feeling “weird,” an uncomfortable and unwelcome sensation for her. But by experiencing silence as weird, Cindy also passes judgment on silence as something that *is* weird and something she has come to fear. We can see this judgment of silence in how she attempts to move away from it through speaking. She says she would “rather just break the silence and say anything than just sit there and just [be] awkward.” In this encounter with classroom silence, she judges silence as weird or uncomfortable

and tries to move away from the thing that is making her feel uncomfortable. Silence becomes something she's afraid of that she would do anything to avoid.

Cindy describes herself as a “very outspoken” college student, but when she became a graduate student, she also became quiet. She explains, “where I used to be extremely outgoing, I was very, very quiet, and I don't think I talked for like the first half of the first semester at all.” Throughout her interview, Cindy calls this transition from undergraduate to graduate and from outgoing to quiet a case of “massive imposter syndrome.” She explains,

I don't know why, in my head, I felt like I needed to prove myself why I was there. And I had done my undergrad here, so a lot of the professors that I had, I had them before. So, I kind of wanted to show them too that I was supposed to be here. And not only that, some of my first classes in my first semester...there were students in there that were in their second year already, and then it was my first semester, my first year, so I kind of felt like double, like triple I need to prove myself, I guess. So...I guess there was a lot of this pressure that I kind of built up in my head.

Cindy reflects on her imposter syndrome as feeling the pressure to prove her belonging to herself, to her professors who also knew her as a college student, and to her more academically experienced classmates. In the case of the composition pedagogy course she took her first semester, these were also much older classmates who had more life experiences, as well as more diverse academic experiences. In this moment of our interview, she directly links performing the role of good graduate student to the act of speaking in class. Speaking in class becomes a sign of her ability to demonstrate her sense of belonging in graduate school, to showcase that she has the knowledge and ability to be a good graduate student. She also feels the gaze of her more experienced classmates and of the professor, and she imagines how they must see her. This “pressure” builds up inside her, which then renders her silent, in the “physical feeling that [she] couldn't speak” that she describes elsewhere. She's caught in a loop: To prove herself, she must verbally participate, but the pressure to speak has silenced her. And then, completing the cycle, her silence stands in as proof that she may be incapable. Her professors notice as well, validating the pressure-filled gaze she imagines. Her professors, who had also taught Cindy as an undergraduate student, ask her if she is okay, and Cindy finds it “nice to know that they've noticed, but then at the same time, I was

like, damn, I need to actually like really try harder now to speak up because they're noticing that I'm not."

Because speaking is highly valued in the dialogical classroom, particularly a graduate-level seminar, it would be easy to read Cindy's silences as fear of speaking in class because of the pressure she feels. However, converse to the threat of speaking in class and revealing the self as incapable is the threat of *not* speaking in class, the fear of her own silence. By centering Cindy's encounters with silence and the emotions that come out of those encounters, I can read her imposter syndrome differently. It is through encounters with silences, particularly her own silences, that Cindy judges silence as weird, uncomfortable, and high tension or high pressure. These judgments then stick not just to silence but to herself.

Ahmed writes of the "stickiness" of certain emotions, that is "what objects do to other objects" (91). When certain objects of emotion come into contact with other objects or bodies, they can transfer affect (91). For Cindy, the sticking of silence's discomfort to herself is visible in her efforts to pin down why silence makes her uncomfortable:

I don't know, I guess the moments when I'm very uncomfortable— The moments when I'm silent in class, it's usually when I am worried that I don't know the answer. If I'm not going to, if not, I'm not gonna say the right thing, I guess, if I didn't understand the reading correctly. If you know, I'm way off topic.

She begins this explanation by correcting herself; she first sets out to describe her discomfort but immediately switches to explaining her own silences, suggesting that her discomfort and her own silences are linked for her. Here she frames her silence as a choice rather than a physical inability to speak. She rationalizes that she chooses silence in certain moments out of fear of saying the wrong thing; she chooses not to break silence when she is uncertain of the answer to a question. At first, silence seems a conscious decision, one she implements as a form of self-protection. Some of the students in Reda's study talk about using silence as self-protection in order to maintain their private selves, or the people they are outside of the classroom. To speak would be to risk revealing that private self, so they choose silence instead (Reda 130). Cindy's self-preservation is less about keeping a different self as it is preserving her own sense of who she is as a student. But in choosing

silence as self-protection, Cindy also must encounter silence. Her body emanates her chosen silence, and when she comes into contact with her own silence, it becomes complicated for her. She continues thinking through this discomfort saying,

I guess now that I'm teaching too, if I get a silence, I'm gonna feel like, oh shoot, nobody really understands what I'm trying to say, or nobody read a thing. And I guess me, as a student now, when I'm thinking about silence, it's kind of like, I want to know that I'm correct, you know, before I break the silence. I kind of don't want to, especially now in the graduate space, and especially...last semester, I didn't want to show that I was incapable. ... So, I guess seeing my own silence, it kind of freaked me out 'cause I was like, Oh shoot. Maybe I'm supposed to know this better. Maybe I didn't read it right. But then in hearing other, like, in feeling other people's silence, I kind of felt like maybe we're all in the same boat, one. And two, I don't know, I guess I'm thinking about also how the instructor would feel. Like somebody should say something right now.

Choosing silence forces Cindy to encounter silence, to come into contact with it as an object—she is “seeing [her] own silence” outside of her body. And that contact “freaks [her] out,” implying some sort of anxiety, fear, or discomfort. Thus, the silence becomes an object of emotion. The reasons she chooses silence in the first place—to avoid revealing herself as incapable—become the very reasons silence freaks her out. In colliding with her own silence, she starts to think, “Maybe I'm supposed to know this better.” She gets caught in a cycle: She chooses silence to avoid revealing herself as incapable, but encountering her own silence makes her feel uncomfortable, which in turn makes her feel incapable. This uncomfortable encounter with silence becomes not just a judgment of silence but a judgment of herself as the cause of that discomfort.

Cindy then retrospectively uses “imposter syndrome” to tell the story of her own silence, to explain it to herself and to others, including her professors, in a way that is more acceptable to herself and to her professors. In other words, by naming the reason for her silence as imposter syndrome, she creates new orientations towards her own silence as an object of emotion (Ahmed 14). Because imposter syndrome is a common narrative in graduate school, describing her encounters with her own silence as imposter syndrome normalizes her silences in such a way that she can eventually move through them to become a student who is comfortable speaking in class.

Another way to read Cindy's encounters with her own silence is through the way she imagines the gaze of the other bodies in the room. Ahmed explains that "In experiences of shame, the 'bad feeling' is attributed to oneself, rather than to an object or other" (103-4). Cindy's encounter with her own silence is painful, and that pain is pinned back on herself as the cause of the pain. But shame, according to Ahmed, also requires a witness or, at the very least, an "imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to herself" (105). That is, "In shame, I expose myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other" (Ahmed 106). In Cindy's description of her own discomfort in silence, Cindy puts herself in her imagined professor's position. She says, "I guess now that I'm teaching too, if I get a silence, I'm gonna feel like, oh shoot, nobody really understands what I'm trying to say, or nobody read a thing." In imagining the gaze of the other—in this case her professor— she experiences shame when coming into contact with her own silence.

In the context of the dialogical classroom, the ideal self would be a speaking subject. Cindy feels as if she has failed to "approximate" the ideal, speaking graduate student. Shame, felt when Cindy encounters her own silence, operates then as a "deterrent," as a means of pushing Cindy back towards the ideal (Ahmed 107). That is, Cindy works to avoid encountering her own silence in the future. She says, "I'd rather just break the silence and say anything than just sit there and just [be] awkward." And she strategizes ways to eliminate her own silences altogether. She says that when her imposter syndrome was at its worst,

It got to the point where I kind of had to write down what I wanted to say in class before class and then in class I would just read out loud what I wanted to say in class 'cause I'm not the best speaker, generally, so I don't know, it kind of amplified in that space. I got really, really nervous.

By centering silence as the object of emotion, we can see that it is a fear of her own silence, not merely a fear of speaking, that leads Cindy to move away from her own silence (by saying anything) and to prevent her own silence (by writing down what she has to say before class). The act of writing things down in order to read them aloud in class is a means of avoiding the shame and discomfort she feels in encountering silence by taking control of her situation while

simultaneously moving towards the ideal, speaking graduate student. In sum, the shame or discomfort she feels when contacting silence shapes her relationship with silence, as well as the relationship she has with herself as a graduate student and as a new teacher.

### **“I’M NOT GONNA SAY ANYTHING UNTIL SOMEBODY SAYS SOMETHING”: THE PERFORMANCE OF NAMING SILENCE**

In the previous section, I explored how Cindy’s experiences of coming into contact with silence generate feelings of discomfort, which act on Cindy, causing her to move away from or to avoid silence. I also investigated the ways these uncomfortable emotions stuck to Cindy, transferring the discomfort from silence to her own silent body. In this section, I focus on how silence gets named as uncomfortable or inappropriate through performative speech acts, as well as embodied nonverbal performances. When Cindy renames her silences as a symptom of imposter syndrome, she works to orient herself towards her own silences as something that is more normalized. Now, I focus on how Cindy and other participants perceive other people, particularly their own professors, constructing silence as uncomfortable through speech acts and embodied performances and what effects those perceptions may have on participants as students and as instructors. The professors, as characters in the participants’ narratives, name silence as uncomfortable through both language and bodily actions, generating uncomfortable silence as an object and, moreover, engendering the emotion of discomfort itself. That is, their naming of silence as uncomfortable creates other uncomfortable effects and affects. By looking to the way participants perceive others constructing silence, I hope to better understand how the negative emotions that stick to silence get circulated and reproduced, as well as how those emotions can be unstuck from silence by talking and thinking about silence differently.

Silence, as an object of emotion, works performatively on bodies, as seen through Cindy’s experiences with her own silences, but it also works through discourse. Judith Butler theorizes that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but rather, as the reiterative

and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies* xii). Silence doesn’t already exist as uncomfortable; it is constructed that way through a process of reiterative performances which cite particular norms. As Butler states, a speech act “derives whatever power it has to act from the citational chain in which it operates” (Butler, “When Gesture” 174). That is, utterances that function as speech acts are repetitions, or citations that work to both produce and regulate norms. In the context of the dialogical classroom, the expected norm is the verbally participatory student. When the norm of the participatory student is enforced, then the norm of the verbally participating student also demands that silence be uncomfortable. Through particular types of performances, professors repeat the norms of the classroom to push students towards participating verbally, but in the process, they also reinforce the norm that silence is uncomfortable.

Ahmed explores performativity further, drawing on Butler’s theory:

According to Judith Butler, performativity relates to the way in which a signifier, rather than simply naming something that already exists, works to generate that which it apparently names. Performativity is hence about the ‘power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration’ (Butler 1993: 20). The temporal dimension of performativity is crucial. On the one hand, the performative is futural; it generates effects in the constitution of materialization of that which is ‘not yet.’ On the other hand, performativity depends upon the sedimentation of the past; it reiterates what has already been said, and its power and authority depend upon how it recalls that which has already been brought into existence (Ahmed 92-3)

In other words, through repetition, a speech act works to generate the object of emotion (in this case, uncomfortable silence) via the act of naming it. The emotion (discomfort) that is stuck to the silence then works performatively on the subject (Ahmed 92). Thus, uncomfortable silence is constructed through performances, which rely on the reiteration of what has been said in previous encounters with silence to generate future effects based on what has come before. Therefore, to name silence as uncomfortable not only generates uncomfortable silence in the present and future, but the very act of naming silence as uncomfortable also relies on a past history of silence being experienced and named as uncomfortable.

Ahmed applies this conceptualization of performativity in the form of speech acts to the emotion of disgust, explaining that,

To name something as disgusting—typically, in the speech act, ‘That’s disgusting!’—is a performative. It relies on previous norms and conventions of speech, and it generates the object that it names (the disgusting object/event). To name something as disgusting is not to make something out of nothing. But to say something is disgusting is still to ‘make something’; it generates a set of effects, which *then adhere as a disgusting object*. (93)

In my use of Butler and Ahmed, I look not at the way Cindy names silence as “weird” or uncomfortable in her interview—though this could work as a performative speech act as well—but at the ways speech acts work in the silent encounters that Cindy and other participants describe when they consider others’ responses to silence. In particular, I focus on the way participants perceive their past and present professors naming silence and the effects these perceptions have on the participants themselves as both students and teachers.

In the participants’ narrative descriptions, no one overtly says out loud, “This silence is uncomfortable!” Rather, the professor characters in these stories name silence as uncomfortable in much more subtle ways, sometimes not even through a verbal speech act at all, but through an embodied performance that students may read as discomfort. These speech and bodily acts operate in much the same way as Ahmed’s example of, “That’s disgusting!” That is, these performances rely on social norms, and they generate a set of emotions and effects, which then stick to silence as an uncomfortable object, creating and sustaining orientations away from silence.

It’s important to acknowledge at this point that the professors in the examples I consider below are reconstructed characters in my participants’ narratives about silence. That is, the words and actions of these professors are filtered and summarized through the stories my participants told to me in their interviews. In most cases, the professor isn’t even named by the participant telling the story; rather, it might actually be a composite character made of multiple teachers. Thus, I’m not reading the professors’ words and actions as literal records of what happened in the classrooms of my participants’ memories. Instead, I look to how participants perceive their professors responding to and naming silence. I listen to participants’ descriptions of their

professors' performative speech acts and embodied performances in order to understand how participants may or may not internalize such performances into their own narratives in relation to silence as both students and developing instructors. Through these narratives I can also see how participants may be imagining alternative possibilities for themselves, constructing their instructor identities in relation to silence as overtly different from their past experiences as students.

In what follows, I introduce three examples in order to highlight the different, but overlapping, ways performances of discomfort emerge for participants, as well as the divergent ways participants respond to those perceived performances. The first two examples, taken from Cindy and Maria's interviews, focus on a common performative speech act used by their professors—paraphrased as “If you don't talk, I won't either”—and the generative effects of this phrase and others like it. The third example, explored through Miguel, highlights a professor's silent but embodied performance that works to name and generate uncomfortable silence through a reiteration of norms. In all three of these examples, the participants perceive their professors' responses to silence as generating discomfort. However, the ways Cindy, Maria, and Miguel respond to these performances and invest in them vary, suggesting that while performances of silence as discomfort may be normative, responses to these performances are individual, multiple, and malleable.

First, I wish to linger with Cindy's experiences for a moment, as she tries to pin down when exactly she becomes uncomfortable during silence in order to focus on the role her professors play in her story:

When it goes on for, I don't know, I mean, it doesn't sound like a long time, but sitting in silence and just staring at everybody for a whole minute tends to get weird, you know, and everybody's kind of avoiding eye contact and— Especially when the professor says, “You know what, I'm not gonna say anything until somebody says something.” You know, then it's extra like, no one's really gonna say anything? You know, so, I don't know. [laughing] It doesn't take that long of a silence for me to feel like somebody needs to say something.

At first, this narrative reiterates what I explored in the previous section of this chapter: In her own contact with silence, Cindy feels the “weirdness” of the moment, becoming aware of her own

being-in-the-world (Acheson). Her feeling of weirdness gets extended or transferred to the others in the room—everybody else is sitting in silence, staring at each other while simultaneously avoiding eye contact. Cindy reads this body language as a sign that everyone is feeling weird or uncomfortable in this extended silence. It's clear so far that in her own contact with silence, Cindy is already feeling uncomfortable, but then the professor in Cindy's story says, "You know what, I'm not gonna say anything until somebody says something." I argue that this phrase, and others like it, operate as performative speech acts, which, in relying on norms and past experiences, generate uncomfortable silence as well as other effects.

Cindy feels the imagined professor's performance as surmounting pressure on herself and her classmates to speak. She reads the professor's words as reinforcing her own thought process that someone should break the silence and speak, and that reinforcement manifests itself as added pressure upon herself to speak. She doesn't fault the professor for this pressure exactly—though she does seem to feel the added intensity from his words. Instead, she spreads out the blame onto herself and her classmates, saying "someone needs to say something."

I don't know if Cindy feels this way, but I interpret Cindy's professor's performance as a kind of ultimatum, even if that is not the professor's intention. The professor's words threaten to withhold something that students presumably want (him speaking and ostensibly sharing his knowledge) until the students give the professor what he wants (student participation). I believe the aim of the professor's speech act is a well-meaning attempt to push students back towards the ideal conversation of a dialogical classroom, similar to my own "I'll just wait," from my own introductory narrative in Chapter 1 with my student Angela. In many ways, saying "I'm not gonna say anything until somebody says something" also serves as a marker of the silence and the professor's strategy to wait students out. Waiting out the silence is a common teaching strategy, one that is encouraged in many of the teaching guide books I discussed in Chapter 2. In this case, Cindy remembers the professor calling attention to their act of waiting out the silence.

However, this speech act does much more than push student back towards the ideal conversation. Butler explains that "The exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed...

requires a simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings” (*Bodies* xiii). Put differently, constructing a normative subject requires the simultaneous production of that which exists outside of the norm. The abject is the other, the one that the subject is regulated by reiterative norms *not* to be. In terms of classroom silence, the ideal conversation of the dialogical classroom is what western classrooms have come to uphold as the norm; therefore, silence is something that must be pushed out of the classroom.

Communications scholar Richie Hao points out, “Because US classrooms highly value oral skills as part of the curriculum, silence is often thought of as an academic deficiency because the assumption is that it prevents students from engaging in dialogue and independent thinking” (“Rethinking” 268). That is, by valuing dialogue as the norm, the western classroom is also constructing silence as unwelcome. Thus, when silence does inevitably appear, it’s easy for it to be experienced as uncomfortable. Hao points out that “performativity helps us understand how classroom performances are ritualized” (“Rethinking” 271). He explains how the performative act of discouraging silence in the classroom has normalized the performance of oral participation in western classroom settings and simultaneously set up consequences for those students who perform silence. He argues that “silence has been constructed in the western education and, even in critical pedagogies, as not capable of contributing to democratic education” (“Rethinking” 276). The professor in Cindy’s example is doing just that with their performative speech act—reinforcing and reproducing western educational norms through citation, naming silence as uncomfortable and unacceptable through discourse. But in regulating the norm through the reiteration of the speech act, “I’m not going to say anything until somebody says something,” the abject, or all that is *not* the norm, is also produced.

Another way to think about the abject is to understand that speech acts can diverge from their aims, “producing consequences that were altogether unintended, and oftentimes quite felicitous” (Butler, “When Gesture” 176). Cindy’s professor’s speech act may have intended to push students back towards the ideal conversation, the norm, but there are other consequences to this speech act as well, one of which is the generation of the abject—silence and silent students—

as that which exists outside of the normative classroom. The speech act produces silence as outside of the norm, and the discomfort felt when we come into contact with silence works on subjects to push them back towards the norm of a speaking subject.

But in naming the silence as uncomfortable, the speech act, “I’m not gonna say anything until somebody says something,” also generates other unintended effects. For instance, as a result of the professor’s performance, Cindy feels *more* pressure than she did before either to break the silence herself or to internally will her fellow classmates to break the silence instead. She explains, “You know, then it’s extra like, ‘No one’s really gonna say anything?’” The professor’s speech act constructs the silence as an uncomfortable object, resulting in Cindy’s *extra* discomfort. What follows from that discomfort is a set of other effects that the professor may not have intended. Cindy, presumably along with other students, feels the pressure to say something, anything, to make the uncomfortable silence go away. I showed in the previous section how Cindy would “rather just break the silence and saying anything that just sit there and just be awkward.” Thus, in constructing the silence as uncomfortable, the professor may actually be eliciting an unproductive conversation, rather than the ideal they are striving for.

Other unintended effects of this speech act might be *more* silence (which is again constructed and named as uncomfortable), important subject material that may go unaddressed, or students’ frustration or anger that the professor is misusing their authority to withhold information and punish them for not knowing the answers. In my own experiences as a quiet student, such speech acts from instructors have actually shut down my thinking process. When I needed silence as time to process the question, material, or ongoing conversation, the professor named that same silence as uncomfortable, generating my own discomfort (and subsequent further silence) when I could have had time to reflect and perhaps verbally respond instead. In sum, this kind of performance on the teacher’s part constructs silence as uncomfortable and does not work to produce the equitable, safe classrooms that dialogic pedagogical aims imagine. Instead, they cite norms that serve as a means of regulating the behavior that we have come to expect in the dialogical classroom.

I have already shown in the previous section how Cindy internalizes this narrative of silence. As Ahmed points out, emotions such as discomfort are not in and of themselves contagious—while everyone may feel uncomfortable, they “don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling” (10). For Cindy, the professor constructs the silence as inappropriate, generating discomfort from Cindy (and presumably some of her classmates, which I see through the way Cindy describes their averted eyes). That discomfort then sticks to the silence as an object of emotion, which then sticks to Cindy as someone who is producing the silence. Thus, the professor’s performative constructs not just uncomfortable silence but also Cindy as an inappropriately silent student.

Because the scenario I’ve been analyzing is not a specific event but rather a generalized description of Cindy’s discomfort with silence, we should read Cindy’s narrative as unstuck in time and place. Again, the professor is not a specific professor but a composite of how Cindy perceives her professors’ responses to silence and perhaps even a stand-in for Cindy herself and how she imagines a professor must think and feel about a silent classroom. But the speech act has happened more than once; that’s why it works as a performative and has the effects it does, by citing other instances of the same speech act. It’s through reiteration that it exerts its power of regulation. Therefore, I also believe that the professor’s speech act is generating the uncomfortable silence that Cindy encounters not only in her present but also in her past and future experiences. In Cindy’s narrative of the event, the discomfort she feels chronologically *before* the professor’s performance in her narrative is *also* generated by that same speech act that comes after it. Because the discomfort has stuck to silence as an object, each time Cindy encounters the object she is predisposed to feel discomfort. The knowledge of previous encounters with uncomfortable silence affects Cindy’s present and future encounters with silence (Ahmed 27).

While Cindy helps me to understand how such performances of silence can become internalized by students and cause unintended effects, my next example of Maria shows us how such performances circulate through reiteration. Maria describes a professor who uses a similar speech act as Cindy’s professor; however, it elicits a different reaction from Maria. Maria is a

doctoral student with 17 years of teaching experience, at least 12 of which she's spent teaching first-year writing. She considers herself a highly communicative person who has always relied on her ability to speak well; she doesn't describe ever struggling to find a way to speak when she is asked to or expected to speak. In fact, she thinks of speaking as a type of composing and a way of getting the feedback she needs from her peers and professors. In sum, Maria often thinks through speaking. Silence, however, makes her uncomfortable because of the seeming lack of control she has over it. As I recounted in the previous chapter, Maria sees silence as a void in need of filling.

When I asked her what she has noticed about how her own teachers or professors responded to classroom silence, Maria recalls,

I had a professor who used to say, "Well, if you're not gonna talk, then I'm not gonna talk." And it was like, "Well, that's weird." So, then people would just like start saying things, and they weren't necessarily meaningful responses, but it was like, oh, we don't want to piss this guy off.

Maria's professor's words are almost verbatim what Cindy's composite professor said, but Maria doesn't seem to feel the pressure that Cindy felt in the same situation. Maria recognizes that others might feel the way Cindy does, noticing that "people just start saying things," but Maria doesn't seem to include herself in that set of people. She does recognize the way silence has been named as uncomfortable—she calls the situation and the professor's words "weird" and acknowledges how that comment might compel students to speak in ways that aren't necessarily meaningful, just to avoid making the professor angry.

However, where Cindy might feel extra pressure to perform as a speaking student, Maria sees this professor's discomfort—and her own parallel discomfort—in silence as a sign that she belongs in higher education. When I asked Maria if any of her experiences as a student have informed her thinking about classroom silence and quiet students, she returns to this same professor's speech act:

Going back to the professor who used to say, "If you don't talk, I'm [not] going to." I think, kind of— And that was before I became an instructor in any way, shape, or form. I think that was like, oh, this is what's expected at the college level. This constant banter. And a lot of why I got into education was for the, you know, the dialogue, not the

monologue. I mean, I can look at myself in the mirror and talk. I don't, but I could. So yeah, I think that that particular experience as a student did impact and has impacted the way that I think about it.

While Maria understands that the professor's performance is problematic, she also sees it as a sign of what is expected in college: a "constant banter" that she wants to be a part of. As a person who has no trouble filling up silence with speech—"I can look at myself in the mirror and talk"—the professor's response is not a sign of pressure or tension for her but rather a narrative of higher education. It is what is "expected." She sees that she can belong in that narrative of higher education because of her ability to participate in the dialogue and fulfill the expectations of a speaking student. For both Cindy and Maria, the narrative of silence as uncomfortable because of its inappropriateness in the dialogical classroom sticks, but where Cindy sees her own silence as a sign of her not belonging, as evidence of her imposter syndrome, Maria sees her ability to talk and her own corresponding discomfort in silence as a sign that she *does* belong.

Maria's response to her professor's speech act about silence, despite her feeling weird about it, begins to circulate through further reiterations in her own practice as a teacher. In the following narrative, she recounts a story from very early in her teaching career when she had assigned students to read something for a literature class at a community college and had received silence instead of the discussion she'd hoped for:

And I, back then, took silence as unpreparedness, like that to me was a symbol of unpreparedness, and it made me angry. It made me really angry, and I just remember— I mean, I wasn't yelling at the class. That's not really my style. But I just said, I was like, "Really, nobody? Did anybody read?" And nobody, nobody shook their head. Nobody nodded. I mean, there were like crickets. By the way, the class was an 8AM class, so there's that. Many of them and many of my students were nontraditional students. So, many of them were either, you know, working the night before or were exhausted parents. Again, I had no awareness as a young twenty-something-year-old, who didn't have, wasn't living that lifestyle. Which meant I also had no grace to give. I had no sense of mercy. And I'm ashamed of that.

Maria expresses a wide array of emotions in this narrative in relation to student silence. As a young new teacher, when Maria comes into contact with classroom silence, she feels angry, and she reads her students' silences as unpreparedness. As I've argued before, this effort to explain the

silence as unpreparedness is one of the ways the discomfort in silence acts on teachers, but it's also how that explanation for silence sticks to the quiet students. Maria found her way into education because she liked the dialogue and the constant banter. When her students don't participate in that narrative of education that her professor confirmed for her through his speech act about silence, Maria's affective response is anger. And in her anger, she asks the class, "Really, nobody? Did nobody read?" This questioning is another iteration of silence being named as unacceptable in a classroom where dialogue is expected. Maria doesn't repeat her professor's speech act directly, but her performance in response to silence continues to reiterate the norms of the dialogic classroom and works to generate silence (and her silent students) as uncomfortable or inappropriate. It's only in retrospect, now that she is a more experienced teacher with more life experience, that Maria can see her lack of grace or mercy, and she becomes "ashamed" of how she responded to her students' choice of silence.

Maria's encounter with and response to silence as a young new teacher is not unique; I imagine many instructors can see themselves in Maria. Maria's anger is a product of the reiterative devaluing of silence in the dialogical classroom as it is constructed as inappropriate and therefore uncomfortable over and over. I'm not saying that there's a direct causal relationship between Maria's professor saying, "If you don't talk, I'm not going to" and Maria's own angry performance of "Really, nobody? Did nobody read?" There is nothing unusual or unique about these performances because they are reiterative and regulative of the norms we have come to expect in dialogical classrooms. My point is that silence, when it emerges in classrooms, is already sticky with discomfort because it has been constructed as something that does not belong in the dialogical classroom. Thus, the normative response to silence has become moving away from it with attempts to erase it as we continue to construct the speaking student as the ideal. People have come to fear the potential onset of silence and feel anger or shame or pain when they come into contact with it, despite their efforts to avoid it. Silence as an object of discomfort is circulated until the point at which it becomes very difficult to unstick the affective response from the object itself. And as we've already seen with Cindy, it can quickly stick to the silent student herself, both in the ways

teachers are set to perceive them as such but also in the ways quiet students can come to see themselves and their silences as uncomfortable and out of place.

Finally, I want to turn to one more example of the performative naming of silence, but rather than a verbalized speech act, as in Cindy and Maria's stories, this example is an embodied performance. The body acts out the performative naming of silence, even when the professor doesn't actually say anything overtly about silence. Miguel, an international doctoral student from southern Mexico, is the storyteller in this example. He recently transferred to Border University from another university. The previous university was where he taught for the first time and where he did all of his doctoral coursework. When I asked Miguel about how his own professors respond to silence, he described and partially acted out what one of his professors at his previous university, Dr. Olive (pseudonym), did, not with her words, but with her body.

**Miguel:** I feel. I noticed that they start to feel uncomfortable. And I feel that they start thinking about, "Okay, that's not the right question. Let's formulate another one." And when there is silence, yeah, they feel uncomfortable, and they spread that to the whole classroom. That's what I feel. Actually not, not feel. I saw it.

**Natalie:** You saw it? What do you mean?

**M:** Yeah.

**N:** Can you say more?

**M:** I saw it. For example, I saw it when, for example in one of the classes with [Dr. Olive]. She used to ask very complicated questions, and I notice how when no one was replying, she started— Well, the first move, it was that she put her head down [Miguel looks down] and she started to read [acts like he's reading]. But I saw that she couldn't focus. And I'm like, "She's thinking." [points to his temple] And then, when she did that, the whole classroom, [makes a circular motion with his pointer finger] they were replying the same move: head down [looks down], trying to read, but they couldn't focus either. And I'm like, I'm not going to do that because I'm not going to focus either. What's the point? But it is something that we do automatically. If someone does one— If the person with more ethos do one thing, the automatic response is that we all do it. But sometimes we are not even aware of that.

In this narrative, Miguel explains how Dr. Olive doesn't ask a follow-up question or call attention to her silence in some way with her words but with her body, and Miguel interprets this performance as embodied discomfort. She silently looks down, averting her gaze from the students

and looking at the papers in front of her instead. I surmise that Dr. Olive has put on this performance of pretending to read her notes in an effort to distance herself from the position of authority, hoping to encourage students to speak up by relieving the pressure that her gaze could have on students. Miguel, however, notices her inability to focus and reads all of her body's actions as signs of Dr. Olive's discomfort. He sees also that her embodied performance is working to name silence as uncomfortable, just as the speech acts I considered in Cindy's and Maria's stories operate. For instance, Miguel observes what Dr. Olive's discomfort does to the other students in the room. He reads his classmates' body language as a "reply" to Dr. Olive's performance as they follow Dr. Olive's lead as they try to read. It's as if the bodies in the room are in silent conversation with each other as silence emanates from them all and is then circulated as an object of discomfort among them.

Miguel blames this silent embodied conversation between teacher and students on Dr. Olive's ethos, saying that because she has the most authority, she shapes the way the students respond to silence. I agree with Miguel's analysis of Dr. Olive and his classmates' actions to an extent. While in this section, I have been focused on professors' words and actions and the effects of those words and actions, I don't think Dr. Olive's perceived authority as the leader of the class is *the* reason that these performances carry such weight. Rather, her performance constructs silence as uncomfortable because of the way it operates in the citational chain of norms within the dialogical classroom, particularly a graduate seminar where the expectations placed on students—and the stakes—are higher than in an undergraduate class. Just as the speech acts in Cindy's and Maria's stories rely on reiteration, so too does Dr. Olive's embodied performance of waiting.

Dr. Olive's performance—though perhaps awkwardly executed—is a common teaching strategy: waiting out the silence. The point of waiting is to rely on the discomfort to act on others and push them away from silence and into speaking. Cheryl Glenn and Melissa Goldthwaite say as much in *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*. They advise newer teachers to wait out their students' silences, quoting advice from a colleague that "They'll crack before you will" (64). Through the body language of her waiting, Dr. Olive constructs silence as inappropriate, just as

much as the professors in Cindy's and Maria's narratives do when they say, "If you don't talk, I won't either." However, instead of producing conversation, Dr. Olive's performance produces silence as an uncomfortable object and the unintentional effect is more uncomfortable silence. It's not her authority that produces this effect, though I'm sure it does play a role; rather, it is the way her performance cites norms about silence and speaking within the dialogical classroom.

Interestingly, Miguel sees himself as an outsider in this silent conversation; he is an observer watching it and feeling it happen. He sees Dr. Olive's embodied performance as uncomfortable and unproductive—no one can focus—and he asks, "What's the point?" He explicitly removes himself from the silent conversation, choosing to do something different with his body than what Dr. Olive has prescribed through her embodied silent performance. He says: "I'm not going to do that because I'm not going to focus either." He forces his body not to respond to the silence with discomfort. In doing so, he begins to separate silence from discomfort in order to conceive of silence as something that can be more than just uncomfortable.

#### **"I'M NOT BOTHERED. I DON'T FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE": NAMING SILENCE**

##### **DIFFERENTLY**

I see Miguel's refusal to engage in the performance of discomfort as beginning the work to unstick discomfort from silence. In the process, he can imagine himself as a different kind of teacher from Dr. Olive and his other professors who feel uncomfortable when they encounter silence. When I asked Miguel if his experiences as a student have influenced his thinking about silence as a teacher, he said,

Yes. Yes, there is a— Because from what I saw with [Dr. Olive]— I mean, in most of the classes that I took in the PhD program at [previous university], the moments of silence were sometimes very awkward. But that's because no one, ever, no professor, ever mentioned how we could use silence in our favor. Ever. They never paid attention to that.

Here, Miguel faults his professors for the discomfort; because his professors ignore silence and refuse to speak about it or how to use it, they are actually generating silence as uncomfortable.

Miguel believes a professor's ethos controls the way silence, as an object of discomfort, moves through the room. As such, he thinks the professor has a great responsibility to perform how to respond to silence in productive ways. He believes that if his professors had explained how students could use it to their benefit, then classroom silence would be less "awkward" or uncomfortable and certainly more useful. He takes the responsibility of performing differently upon himself in his own teaching practice.

In the following narrative, he directly counters his professors' silence about silence with his own teaching strategy that makes moves to unstick discomfort from silence. He explains,

When silence makes you feel uncomfortable and makes you feel that you did something wrong, you try to learn from that silence and try to avoid it later. Because you know that in the next class, probably it will happen the same. And you don't, and as a student, you don't want to repeat the same, the same silence. ... But if you are aware of that— I mean, for example, in my class, I, and since the beginning, I told them, and I constantly remind them, that it's okay to be silent because we stop time with that. Because we are thinking. Or our minds do not, it is not aware of time. And the good thing here is that if we are, if we are aware that silence is there and it will be part of class, we don't feel that uncomfortable. We don't feel like, "Hey, I want to vanish," because you know that the professor is not bothered by that.

Miguel clearly sets up his own teaching approach as opposing Dr. Olive's embodied performance and the ways he observes his professors being silent about silence. Using his own perceived ethos or authority, he aims to resist the ways he, as a teacher, might generate silence as an uncomfortable object. To do this, he explicitly and consciously names silence as something that *doesn't* bother him. When Dr. Olive performs her discomfort, Miguel sees the silence as unproductive because it doesn't allow for students to do actual thinking. Instead, according to Miguel's perspective, students and teacher alike just sit in silence, unable to focus. He wants to change that because he believes that in order to do deep thinking, you have to be able to "stop time." As Acheson points out, silence, as an embodied language and experience, makes us aware of our own being-in-the-world, which often involves awareness of time passing. What Miguel is asking of students—and of himself as the instructor—is to ignore that passage of time, to resist caring about the potential

waste of time, and to instead use silence to become aware of their own being-in-the-world in ways that are less painful and more thought-provoking.

Miguel calls deep thinking “second-level thinking,” which involves students pondering big, perhaps unanswerable questions, and relies on students’ sense of wonder. In silence, Miguel believes there is room for this type of thinking, but only if the teacher allows this stop-time to happen. So, he offers an alternative performative response to silence when it emerges, one that attempts to unstick negative emotions, or what he calls “want[ing] to vanish,” from classroom silence. He continues explaining his strategy:

So, if I tell [my students], “I’m not bothered. I don’t feel uncomfortable with silence. Let’s use silence in our, in our class. And let’s use it in our favor.” So, several times, I asked a question, and I told them, “That’s fine, we have several minutes here. Let’s just use silence.” And I started to move like this [makes wave motion with hand and speaks in a lower, calmer voice], very slow and walking around. And...one day at [previous university], I asked them, “How does it feel?” And one of my students, she said, “It feels really good.” And I’m like, “It feels right, right?” She said, “Yeah, I mean, it’s like there’s no pressure, there is no— I can enjoy it.”

Miguel uses an alternative speech act to name silence differently from the way he’s seen it named in his experiences as a student through professors’ silences and embodied performances. In his speech act, Miguel constructs silence as something that doesn’t need to be uncomfortable; instead, it can be useful. It also acknowledges that silence might already be sticky with discomfort, that students might bring other experiences of silence into the classroom that may prohibit them from using silence productively. So, he directly states, “I’m not bothered. I don’t feel uncomfortable with silence.” Miguel also uses his body differently, reinforcing his speech act with an embodied performance that works in direct opposition to Dr. Olive’s tense embodied performance. He says he moves around the room slowly, and in our interview, he performed this for me, using a lower, calmer voice and miming waves with his hand, as if he were trying to soothe away the discomfort in his students.

According to Miguel, his students feel the difference in his performances. Anecdotally, he says that one student has even told him that there is less “pressure.” They can even “enjoy” the

silence. Of course, this student's response is filtered through Miguel's wish to see his teaching strategy as successful, but I am convinced that at least some students would certainly feel the difference between Miguel's approach and other teachers' approaches where silence seems to be rife with expectations and threats of penalty in participation grades. It makes sense that students, at least while in Miguel's classroom, would start to see silence as something that can be more than uncomfortable and perhaps even useful for doing the kind of thinking that Miguel is proposing.

To be honest, as a fellow teacher and scholar, I often disagree with Miguel's other approaches to teaching writing. For instance, despite his alternative approach to thinking about silence, he still assigns a participation grade. When I asked him about how he assessed participation, it seemed quite subjective and based on, in addition to speaking in class, more extracurricular activities such as emailing him and talking to him before or after class. This participation policy—even though he claims not to force any student to speak in class—seems to contradict his stated philosophy about silence and his efforts to make students feel at ease within that silence.

Still, I do think the particular approach to silence that Miguel describes above holds a lot of potential for unsticking discomfort from silence and, in the process of unsticking, opening up different ways to make silence part of conversations in classrooms. I don't think it's the only way to begin that process of unsticking, as I see other problems emerging from the way Miguel centers the importance of the teacher's authority, including his own. For instance, he is very much in control of how silence is going to be used and places a lot of stock in his own authority and how his students will respond to that authority. While his thinking about ethos leads him to realize he must try to construct silence differently for his students, I wonder if he would be open to co-constructing silence with his students. I wonder, further, what it would look like if he asked his students what they thought silence could do in the classroom rather than telling them to use it for deep thinking.

Finally, Miguel also expects silence to eventually be broken, or interrupted. He explains that when he encounters silence in his classes, he will tell students to take time to think, but then

“there is always someone that interrupts silence.” Silence is still a means to an end, a process we move through in order to get back to the speaking norm, which makes me wonder how open Miguel would be to silence continuing for longer than a few minutes, or to the thinking that emerges from the silence not being as deep as he had hoped for.

Despite the potential problems I see with Miguel’s performance, the spirit of his alternative approach to silence is full of productive possibilities. I will explore those possibilities more fully in my concluding chapter, in addition to offering other avenues of unsticking discomfort from silence in the classroom. But before moving to these more practical applications, I think it’s important to address the ways that Miguel’s efforts to perform differently are only possible if we, as teachers, first work to unstick our own discomfort from silence.

### **“IT IS JUST SOMETHING THAT IS HAPPENING”: UNLEARNING THE EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE OF UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE**

While Miguel does work to resist negative constructions of silence and interrupt the circulation of discomfort by naming silence differently in his classroom, his approach to silence is not common, nor is it easy to implement. To return to Miguel’s metaphor of the puma from Chapter 3, I think it helps that Miguel already sees silence as something that exists outside of the body. To reiterate, he sees silence as a puma, always potentially dangerous but not something we can or should try to control; instead, we must moderate our own responses to the puma. This view of silence as already outside the body tracks in the way Miguel names silence for his students, not to control it but to moderate how he and his students react emotionally.

Other participants, however, do not see silence as something that is uncontrollable. In fact, their experiences and responses to silence are largely focused on trying to control silence in some way—whether that be by filling it with words (Sonia, Cindy, Maria) or by inviting it intentionally into spaces for mediation and reflection (Robin). I believe that this need to control silence comes from the embodied emotional responses to silence that I have been dissecting in this chapter.

Furthermore, I suggest the discomfort of silence is something that we carry with us in our bodies as embodied knowledge, making it a very difficult thing to unlearn. A. Abby Knoblauch argues that “embodied knowledge is that sense of knowing something through the body and is often sparked by what we might call a ‘gut reaction’” (52). That is, embodied knowledge shapes how we interpret our experiences. Embodied knowledge begins with a bodily reaction to something—in this case, silence—but that bodily reaction stays with us. We carry those responses with us, and they become in-flux theories of our experience of that thing. That is, because we have often experienced silence as uncomfortable, each time we encounter it, we carry with us the knowledge of silence as uncomfortable. As I’ve argued in previous sections, these emotions are reiterated and cited through others’ performances in relation to silence. To unstick these negative emotions from the object of silence can be quite difficult, but I suggest that part of doing this is to talk directly about silence, to listen to the ways in which it makes us feel, and to try telling different stories about silence as a way to generate new knowledge about it.

To explore the process of telling new stories about silence, I turn to Vincent. Vincent is a poet in their second year of a bilingual M.F.A. program. An international student, Vincent came to Border University with seven years of experience teaching literature and creative writing to high school students in Mexico. A creative and analytical thinker, Vincent works consciously against their negative emotions surrounding silence but runs up against their own embodied knowledge of silence as an obstacle. For Vincent, silence carries an underlying stressful expectation for them to perform as a good student or good teacher. Consistently, Vincent describes silence as “stressing” or “stressful” in various educational contexts. That stress leads Vincent to try to fill that silence preemptively, and when they are unable to do so, silence becomes a “reflection of my performance and my skills and my knowledge.” In their first writing response, Vincent calls their thinking about silence a “troublesome perspective of what knowledge skill and performance meant.” In our interview, I asked them to elaborate on this “troublesome perspective,” to which they responded:

I think it was actually part of trying to do better, trying to be a better student when I started college because, I’m going to be honest, the undergraduate students in literature

course tend to be—courses—tend to be very elitist and very, at least in my experience, they tend to think they're better than everyone because they read [air quotes around read]. And I wasn't like that, too much. But I did think like, okay, so I'm a literature student. I'm going to be better than anyone. I'm going to be reading everything, and I'm going to be answering every single question in class. So, to my surprise...that was more, that was very difficult for me. ... So, every time there was a question, it was very complex. It was very hard to answer it, and to me, I had the urge to answer that question, but I couldn't really figure it out. And I was like, does that mean I'm not knowledgeable? Does that mean, if even means, I should be here? So, that's when I realized like, oh, maybe I don't know much, or maybe my other classmates don't even know that much as me.

Vincent understands silence as a reflection of their own capabilities, or a sign that they are not performing to expectations. They want to fill any possible silence in class by “answering every single question,” but instead, similar to Cindy, they encounter their own silence when trying to answer the complex questions posed by their professors. Vincent marks this silence as a failure: “I couldn't really figure it out.” Instead of filling the teacher's silence with intellectual responses, Vincent fills their own silence with questions about their own capabilities: “Does that mean I'm not knowledgeable? Does that mean I should be here?” Vincent experiences silence as self-doubt and as a reflection on their performance as a good student, a role they want to fill as an undergraduate. Thus, for Vincent, silence is directly related to their anxiety about a lack of knowledge.

This embodied knowledge of silence follows them as they fill different roles. After graduating from college, Vincent taught high school literature for seven years in Mexico. Their understanding of silence as a reflection on their performance stays with them and is channeled into the way they taught at the high school level. They write,

Since I used to teach Literature classes, most students were not initially engaged with my course at the beginning of the semester, and the silence would feel uncomfortable as I imagined that, to them, it would mean that my class was not well-designed or interesting at all. (Writing Sample 1)

Vincent at first sees their students' silence as a sign of disengagement with the subject matter, reiterating their own fears about being viewed this way by their own teachers. But instead of seeing that silent disengagement as a reflection of their students' performances, Vincent sees it as a reflection on their own performance as a good teacher who is knowledgeable, interesting, well

prepared, and able to engage their students in the lesson. When discussing the teachers Vincent hopes to emulate when teaching, Vincent highlights characteristics of former and current teachers who exude confidence and abundant knowledge. Appearing knowledgeable as an instructor is important to Vincent, and therefore silence becomes a sign that they are not living up to their own expectations of what a good teacher should be. To negotiate their stress about silence, Vincent designs lesson plans that are packed with material:

As an instructor, that stress led to me designing a busy class itinerary. I did always leave a brief time for questions and discussions, but I would always also have something ready in case students wouldn't talk or show any interest. (Writing Sample 1)

But Vincent's relationship with silence becomes more complicated when they begin their graduate degree and find themselves in the required pedagogy course during their first semester. During the pedagogy course, which several of the study participants took at the same time, classroom silence was a topic of discussion one day. In their individual interviews, many of the participants spoke of this conversation but in varying ways. Vincent remembers another classmate talking about her own experiences as a quiet student. In response to this classmate's narrative, Vincent says,

So, when the discussion about quiet students came up, I remember thinking, oh, am I a quiet student? Am I a listener in that moment? And I realized that I am, but not in the same way as other students, as other listeners. Because I notice that some is more, other students that focus on listening are listening without the stress of, I need to answer a question. Like, they don't stress out about it at all, and I admire that. But I still, as a student, I'm a listener but also, I still think that I should be participating, even though I understand that I don't need to at all.

Realizing they are a listener is important for Vincent, as they recognize their own ways of existing and experiencing classrooms, while distinguishing those experiences from other students who might also be quiet and listening. Interestingly though, Vincent seems to see others' silences as non-stressful for those individuals; it is only Vincent's own silence that they find stressing.

This new self-reflexive and intellectualized understanding of their own silences seems to change the way Vincent constructs meanings of silence, seeing it as being in-flux rather than always a representation of their own failure to be knowledgeable. I'm not saying that this small

conversation in the pedagogy course, by itself, is what transformed Vincent's thinking about silence, but their narrative surrounding silence does certainly become more complicated as a graduate student and as a teacher when they think about silence directly. Being asked to talk about and reflect on silence seems to have played a role in Vincent's changing mindset. Instead of constantly fearing silence, they start to see silence as a "tool," an "opportunity," and as a "happening":

And we [the students in the pedagogy course] were discussing [silence] and saying like sometimes it's welcome.... And that's when it finally clicked, like, okay, so I can use silence, and it's useful and something that students might even be, see as an opportunity to discuss about what's happening in that moment, right? And I think with that understanding, then came like, okay, now I have the tools. Now I am seeing what silence is about. Then, that also adds a little bit of stress to my classes because then, like other tools I have learned or other, had other experiences with teaching, now I'm seeing silence as another tool, as another thing I need to get right in my teaching. And that's, that can be stressing. But...I think for that very reason, because it is challenging, I welcome it, and I think it's useful and— to me as an instructor and to my students. And finally, like I think it's something it's— Instead of just trying to be very over-interpretive. Is that a word in English? Overthinking, instead of overthinking it when I'm teaching, I try to see it as, hey, so this is not necessarily a reflection of my performance. It's just something that is happening. Let's use it, or let's just use it as a starting point for another discussion.

Again, the possibilities for silence start to open for Vincent when they begin thinking directly about it. Rather than being a source of stress, Vincent starts to see silence as an "opportunity" to discuss the silence itself or as a "tool" to use to engage with their students. The stress of performing is still there, but their perspective has shifted, and Vincent directly counters their ingrained response to silence by naming silence as "just something that is happening." As a "happening," the uncertainty of silence starts to lose its power as a stressor for Vincent. If it is just an unremarkable event like any other in the course of their time in a classroom, it is no longer a reflection of poor performance on Vincent's part but instead an opportunity to engage with students in a different way.

Importantly, the stress of silence has not dissipated for Vincent. Now, instead of silence being a sign that they are underperforming, the silence becomes something they must use, or "get right" in their teaching. That feeling of stress stays with Vincent as part of their embodied

knowledge of silence, something they carry with them from one context to another. But because of the performative nature of silence as an object of emotion, each time it emerges for Vincent it is a reiteration of what has come before while also generating new meanings based on those reiterations. When Vincent encounters silence again, they construct it not just as a static stressful reflection on their performance but also as an opportunity, a tool, or a happening.

The opportunities for silence to elicit different affective responses open up more possibilities for Vincent when they are the instructor or in spaces in which they fill a position of power. When they are a graduate student, it is more difficult for them to continually reconstruct the meaning of silence. In their role as a graduate student, they explain, “I feel like there are some silences that are expected to be filled like immediately by the other students or by me.” Here, they are pointing to professors’ expectations in the classroom and the way the meaning of silence is simultaneously constructed in the moment by both teachers and students. While Vincent might have realized that they are a listener and that silence can be useful for them, the professor and perhaps their classmates are constructing silence differently; for them, silence is still sticky with discomfort and it is difficult for Vincent not to feel that discomfort, too. When I asked how they knew a particular professor was expecting silence to be filled immediately, Vincent responded,

I think half of it is me. I recognize that’s just my expectations, my own anxiety working in that moment. But I do have other instructors that are very— Like as soon— It’s three seconds in, and they were like, “Oh, nobody wants to comment. Nobody wants to— No one’s interested in what I’m saying.” And I think they are joking. Of course, they’re joking, by the tone.... But at the same time, there is, I think, a bit of sincerity in what they’re saying, and I think it’s also because they are saying it in the first place, even though it’s a joke. There’s a saying in Spanish actually, *de broma en broma, la verdad se asoma*. Like, from some jokes, from joke to joke, there’s a truth. Like the truth peaks his head. And I think that’s true in this situation because I think they’re saying it because they’re sort of filling that silence with their jokes until someone finally speaks up.

Here, again, silence is named as uncomfortable by the professor. Vincent feels that their professor is uncomfortable with silence and is filling it with jokes in an attempt to break the silence. We can’t know what experiences with silence the professor is bringing to the classroom that makes them tell jokes, but we do know that Vincent brings the experience of stress to this scenario.

Vincent sees that half of the co-construction of silence is them, their own anxiety, or their stress about silence. But at the same time, the expectation of the professor that their students will fill that silence is palpable for Vincent. It becomes difficult for Vincent to see silence as anything but stressful and a reflection of their own performance:

I feel very stressed. Like, very, very.... I understand silence now. I think I really do understand silence now, but understanding doesn't necessarily have a response on my feelings. And whenever I feel, whenever there's silence, I feel like not as stressed as back then when I was an undergraduate student. But I still feel, like, beneath, I feel, not necessarily I think, but I feel like I'm underperforming if I'm not responding to the question or filling that small comments section with a comment.

Vincent goes to great lengths to separate their intellectual thinking about silence from their bodily response to silence: "I feel, not necessarily I think, but I feel." While they believe they "understand silence," their body still carries the weight of their past experiences of silence as uncomfortable and stressful. While Vincent is intellectually reconstructing the meaning of silence, their in-the-moment response to silence, especially when they are a student in a classroom where silence is performatively named as uncomfortable, is one of stress.

Vincent's narrative exhibits the difficulty in trying to unstick discomfort from silence. But what I learn from Vincent's story is two-fold. First, listening to our emotions about silence, reflecting on them, and talking about those emotions is important in the process of becoming aware of how we experience silence and how we can move towards unsticking discomfort from silence. By telling new stories about silence, by ceasing to be silent about silence, we can start to develop new orientations towards silence, orientations that remain open to possibilities other than discomfort and the accompanying compulsion to move away from silence as an uncomfortable object.

The second thing I take from Vincent's narrative is that our aim should not be to replace silence as discomfort with silence as comfort, or ease, or as an opportunity for deep thinking. Instead, we should try to embrace silence as something we both perform and encounter with our bodies; as such, the meaning of it and its emotional affect can be constantly in flux. It is not that silence isn't sometimes uncomfortable or that we should work to make it so that silence is always

easy. There are moments when silence *should be* uncomfortable and contexts when silence isn't appropriate. Rather, it is about opening possibilities for silence, especially in our classrooms, so that silence can be more than an uncomfortable object that we feel the need to control and can instead be part of a conversation with multiple meanings and responses.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion: Centering Silence

### COMPLICATING SILENCE: A FOCUS GROUP TALKS ABOUT THE QUIET

In Spring 2021, three months after my final interview with Sonia, I reconvened all seven participants for a focus group conversation on Zoom. When designing this study's methods, my original goal in holding the focus group was to further enact the feminist value of collaboration in the act of research and theory-making. As Kirsch points out, while researchers may inevitably appropriate participants' stories, feminist researchers can work to decenter the power of the researcher by involving participants in the analysis of data (*Ethical* 49, 18). I hoped the focus group would serve as a continuation of the individual conversations I had with my participants, while I worked to decenter my power over their words by offering them a chance to help interpret some of the data. Munday explains that feminist researchers "see focus groups as social contexts in themselves through which partial and multiple versions of social reality are constructed, thus rejecting any idea of there being one, ultimate, objective truth of social reality" (237-8). With this feminist viewpoint in mind, I approached the focus group not simply as a means of collecting information from my participants but rather as an interactive process in which participants could "negotiate and construct their own meanings" of silence together (Munday 237).

I spoke very little during the focus group; instead, after posing a question, I opened the virtual floor for participants to take the conversation wherever they wanted to. During this 90-minute meeting, I shared parts of my forming analysis, usually by quoting from participants' individual interviews<sup>7</sup>. I then asked them to share their thoughts, not only to place a check on my analysis, but also to move towards answering my research questions through a collaborative and socially constructed process.

During this conversation, I found that some participants' perspectives about silence had shifted slightly since our individual interviews. I expected—and hoped—this might happen. I knew while designing my study that most people don't deliberately dwell on or in silence as often

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix D for the full list of focus group interview questions.

or as deeply as I do. For this reason, I wanted to have multiple points of interaction with participants to help me understand what happens when others *do* think about silence deliberately. In asking my original research questions, I wanted to know what happens when silence is at the center of conversation—what can we learn about it, about ourselves, and about our teaching practices? The focus group and participants’ final written responses, taking place some time after participants’ original interviews with me, were to serve as a touchpoint for answering that question.

Sonia was one of the participants who hadn’t considered silence much before we started talking about my project. In our initial interview in fall of 2020, she was adamant that silence made her extremely uncomfortable, but she also insisted that she had never talked about or thought about silence before she met me. When I asked her if she remembered a time in her training as a teacher when classroom silence or quiet students were discussed, she said, “No. Not once. This is the first time I’m hearing about this, with you. Four years later.” Throughout that individual interview, she talked about filling silence up with jokes and avoiding the empty space of silence whenever possible because of how deeply uncomfortable it makes her. In chapter 4, I discussed how Sonia using jokes to eliminate silence in her classroom seemed to be a compassionate response to the discomfort of silence, based in her own experiences with silence as an undergraduate. As a native speaker of Spanish, she identifies so strongly with her L2 students at Border U that she appears to want to relieve the burden of pressure-filled silence from her students’ experiences.

Very early in the focus group conversation, Sonia articulated the beginnings of a shift in her thinking about silence, saying:

I think that it was when we had the discussion, Natalie, about silence and your research that I was, that I became mindful of silence. And I was like, okay, let me, let me see how, how I would react to silence. And I think that from that moment on I, I become more aware and more self, more self-conscious and more self, more aware of how I feel when there’s a silence in the class. And then, I try to say, okay...take a moment and say, okay, it’s fine, nothing is going to happen. ...I don’t have that urge to fill out every single space anymore, if that makes sense.

In addition to teaching writing, Sonia is a yoga teacher, and her own doctoral research focuses on the benefits of using mindfulness exercises in the writing classroom to support both students’

writing practice and their emotional wellbeing. In her individual interview, I was puzzled by why Sonia didn't bring up the role of silence in mindfulness and in yoga. Instead, she reiterated over and over that she had never talked or even thought about silence in the classroom before she'd heard about my research. At many points, she was so adamant about her ignorance of silence that she barely let me get my question out before immediately saying, "No." She was so focused on her own embodied discomfort and anxiety in relation to silence—or, to use my analysis from chapter 5, she was so focused on silence as an object of emotion—that the role silence plays in mindfulness simply never came up in our conversation. However, at some point in the three months between our first interview and the focus group conversation, she started to experiment with being "mindful" of silence in her FYW classes. She says that she wanted to see how she would "react to silence" if she let it be present and if she didn't try to fill the silence. She had to reassure herself, telling herself that "nothing is going to happen." But in the process, she became "more aware of how I feel when there's a silence in the class."

Paula Mathieu, who has recently turned to mindfulness in her scholarship and teaching, explains that mindfulness practices "are fundamentally about what could be called awareness. About being fully present—as a writer or a teacher—in the current moment, and not preoccupied with thoughts of the past or the future" (16). What Sonia describes above is an attempt to be present in moments of silence when they emerge in her role as a teacher. And in the process of becoming mindful of silence in the classroom, of intentionally trying to be present in that moment, Sonia not only becomes "more aware of how I feel when there's a silence in the class" but she no longer feels the "urge to fill out every single space anymore."

Sonia directly relates this shift in thinking to my research, saying, "I think it was when we had the discussion, Natalie, about silence and your research that I was, that I became mindful of silence." Hearing about my research while also participating in conversations that asked her to think more deeply about her experience of silence has led her to use mindfulness in response to silence in her classroom. Sonia's research and mine have begun to inform one another. For her, she turns to mindfulness in response to silence to become aware of her feelings about it, and I have

begun to see the potential for mindfulness practices as a way of listening to silence with the body, a practice which I will address later in this chapter.

Before having the opportunity to talk about silence with me and with her peers in the focus group, Sonia only considered silence to be a positive thing if she introduced it as a medium for exercising mindfulness with her students. If she was controlling the silence, then silence was productive and certainly less uncomfortable for her. Silence was a necessary means for a mindfulness practice, but mindfulness was the tool being used in the classroom, not silence itself. The difference is now she is also *mindful of* the silence that emerges when she is not in control of it—when students initiate it instead—and what that silence can do for her students. She explains this shift further during the focus group, when she describes her normal use of mindfulness exercises in her classes:

So, it's a, basically a guided breathing, guided breathing meditation sort of practice that we do at the beginning of the classroom, of the class, for about 3 minutes maybe, or 5, at the most. And it's this moment that I guide them into, like learning how to breathe consciously...but it's also the only time where the, where the classroom is completely quiet, and I don't feel uncomfortable, because I know they're breathing and they're kind of going through this meditation state of, I, I don't know. So, I, I think that that, to me, has really helped me into understanding— Well, not that I— Now that I'm aware, mindful of silence, into understanding that a quiet classroom can be a very positive thing because it allows the students to reflect and to kind of think inward, as opposed to just being outside. ...So, very yogi of me, but yeah, so that's pretty much what I've noticed more now that I'm aware of silence.

Instead of just using and imposing silence for her students to practice mindfulness, she is also being mindful *of* silence when it presents itself in her class through her students' claiming of silence. This mindfulness practice allows her to recognize that “a quiet classroom can be a very positive thing.” When Sonia chooses to be mindful of silence instead of trying to control it, she notices that it “allows the students” to have more control over their own reflection and inward thinking time. Sonia sees how this practice may benefit students as they are able to “think inward, as opposed to just being outside.” Even if Sonia hasn't set aside silent time in class for mindfulness practices, she now understands how silence, when introduced by her students, can also act as an invitation to inward thinking. If she resists the urge to seize control of it through words and jokes

and instead pauses to be present in her students' silence, then it doesn't seem so daunting, or pressure filled. I read this process as Sonia moving through a fixation on her own discomfort and understanding silence as something more flexible. To do this though requires Sonia to let go of the need to control silence and to listen to it instead.

There are parallels between Sonia's story of coming to mindfulness of silence and Vincent's journey towards opening silence, described at the end of the previous chapter. Vincent's understanding of silence becomes more fluid when they have the opportunity to reflect on who they are as a learner (a listener) and to talk about silence in their composition pedagogy course. Sonia's thinking about silence opens when she thinks and talks about it directly as a participant in my study. However, as I pointed out with Vincent in the previous chapter, the discomfort of silence doesn't dissipate just because their thinking changes. Sonia's anxiety about silence also doesn't disappear in her process of becoming mindful of silence. Silence still makes her feel uncomfortable. Throughout the focus group, she continued to bring up her discomfort and to make jokes when a silence in the conversation emerged. Yet, she accounts for how the practice of being mindful of silence in her teaching practice begins to open new possibilities beyond her own discomfort, including the way her students shift the power dynamics in the classroom as they use silence to practice reflective thinking without her direction.

Sonia's and Vincent's experiences get at the heart of my first research question: How can a study of silence in the classroom help writing teachers understand practices of teacher-student interactions in ways that might promote more equitable learning environments than the typical discussion-based classroom? By thinking and talking openly about her own experiences of silence and by examining her own research and teaching practices, which include mindfulness exercises, Sonia learns that silence can be more than an uncomfortable object. She also learns that some of the uses for silence that already existed in her mindfulness practice can also exist even when it's not part of an intentional and teacher-directed exercise. When she learns to resist controlling silence, she notices that it holds productive possibilities. In other words, by deliberately dwelling in silence and becoming aware of her emotions, the possibilities for silence open, and she disrupts,

or unsticks, the normative narratives told about silence and its discomforts. By accepting that she is not in control of silence, she is beginning to establish a more equitable learning environment; in Sonia's turn to mindfulness, her students can explore the possibilities of silence for themselves. When students claim silence, and when teachers like Sonia listen, teachers and students together begin to tell new stories about silence, expanding what teaching and learning in the writing classroom can look like.

Sonia's mindfulness and consequent rethinking of silence as an object of emotion supports a practice of what I call *centering* silence as an intervention into the default dialogical writing classroom and a shift towards more equitable learning environments for both students and their teachers. Centering silence, as I am proposing it, is not one set of prescribed moves, but instead, a combination of pedagogical and reflective habits of mind that ask teachers and students to attend to silence as an object of emotion in ways that encourage seeing the meanings, purposes, and uses of silence as never static but always in-flux. The primary purpose of centering silence is to "unstick" (Micciche) silence as an object that we encounter with our bodies from the negative emotions we have come to associate with it. I break the process of centering silence into two interrelated approaches, which work together to unstick silence from discomfort. These two practices are centering silence as a *subject* of conversation and centering silence as a *participant* in the conversation.

Centering silence as a subject of conversation is to talk about silence, our feelings in relation to it, and the normative perceptions of it that exist in and outside of the classroom, and that continue to shape our classroom interactions. I will use parts of the focus group conversation to highlight how such conversations can do important work in beginning to disrupt and complicate the lore about silence. I have seen the effects such conversations can have on Vincent, Sonia, and other participants in my study, as well as when having similar conversations with my own students. I suggest that these types of conversations are necessary in order to start telling new stories about classroom silence, and I propose talking about silence not only in writing classrooms with our

students but also in teacher training and pedagogy courses and in ongoing professional development for faculty.

Centering silence as a participant in the conversation is much less straightforward, and likely, much more uncomfortable. Yet, I see it as a necessary concurrent practice to talking about silence as it works to disrupt the dialogical writing classroom. It allows teachers to begin considering silence as not just a pause between words but as an active part of the learning process. To center silence as a *participant* in the conversation is to be deliberately present in silence, to invite it into the room, to listen to it, and, importantly, to let go of the compulsion to think that silence must always be controlled. I suggest teachers must practice listening to silence, not just with our minds and ears, but with our bodies. If silence is an embodied experience, as I've argued in the previous chapter, then we must use our bodies to listen to silence as part of the dialogue. Sonia, in her turn to mindfulness, exhibits one possible approach to centering silence as a participant in the conversation. She yields control and becomes present in silence instead.

In centering silence, my aim is not to replace silence as discomfort with silence as deep thinking or ease, or even mindfulness. Instead, I argue that centering silence allows us to embrace silence—and those who enact it—as something we perform and encounter with our bodies, understanding its meanings and its emotional effects to be constantly in flux. To center silence is to engage with other modes of communicating and learning that go beyond the dialogue-driven lessons that so many teachers imagine and strive for in the teaching of writing. In sum, I propose centering silence as a response to my original research questions for this study. I draw on what I have learned from and with my participants about silence as an object of emotion to forward a means of disrupting the lore that circulates about classroom silence and quiet students. In the remainder of this chapter, I will return to my research questions to summarize my findings and the foundations of my proposed theory of centering silence. Then, I will further explore the possibilities of centering silence before turning to the limitations of this theory and possibilities for future research.

## **REVISITING MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

I began this study operating from the assumption that the lore, or the stories teachers tell each other, about silence places limitations on how teachers might teach and how students might learn. My aim was to disrupt those narratives, which are shaped by dominant power relations, and to expand the possibilities for silence in the classroom. I also hoped that in this disruption, I would press on what teaching and learning could look and sound like. By studying graduate student instructors' experiences and perspectives of classroom silence, I aimed to argue for how writing teachers, by considering silence, could create more equitable learning environments for all students.

### **What We Learn About Silence**

I set out to discover what teachers could learn about silence as a rhetorical trope by looking closely at their teaching practices and experiences. In Chapter 4, I described the ways GSIs in this study construct silence through their own personal experiences and histories as students and as teachers. Each participant defined their relationship with silence based on the ways in which they had encountered silence in their past. In their stories of silence, I noticed how normative narratives of classroom silence persisted in their definitions: Robin and others viewed classroom silence as sign of something going wrong, whereas Sarish understood silence to be a sign of fulfilling expectations in the different educational context of Nepal. Sonia, Cindy, and Vincent read silence as a pressure to perform in expected ways, while Maria viewed silence as a void to fill. Miguel believed silence to be a natural and uncontrollable phenomenon that is always potentially dangerous when it is ignored.

Yet, while the dominant paradigm of silence was maintained in many ways, the individuality of participants' experiences greatly shaped how they related to and described silence. This phenomenon suggested to me that silence itself, by its very nature, resisted concrete definitions, despite the ways people (and the lore) attempt to pin a meaning to silence in every

situation. I began to think about silence as a performance, as an object that participates in an event, and each event, while sounding the same, is different (Schechner 30). In seeing participant's narratives side-by-side, I was able to see that each time silence emerges, definitions of silence are both solidified but also maintain the opportunity for change through the interactions and relationships we have with silence.

With this thinking in mind, I reread participants' interview transcripts and was struck by the way "discomfort" as a thematic code cut across most participants' narratives of silence. While Sonia defined silence as a pressure to perform in expected ways, that pressure manifested itself through a palpable discomfort when silence appeared. Feeling uncomfortable led Maria to name silence as a void in need of filling, while Robin's discomfort lurked behind their description of silence as a sign of something not working in the classroom. In other words, while each participant described silence based on their own personal experiences as teachers and as students, an embodied discomfort appeared to be what was shaping most of those definitions of silence.

In Chapter 5, I argued that this discomfort was more than just an emotion in response to silence but rather the impetus for how we come to relate to silence. Silence acts on us as an object of emotion (Ahmed), shaping the way we engage with it and name it. When our bodies encounter silence, we feel uncomfortable, judge the silence to be the cause of that discomfort, and then make efforts to move away from silence as a painful or uncomfortable object. In the process, silence is defined as painful or uncomfortable, solidifying the dominant narrative that it should be erased, filled up, or otherwise avoided. As we saw with Cindy's narrative, if silence is uncomfortable, then it is very easy for a quiet student to be named as the cause of that discomfort and to be viewed as an unwelcome intruder on the dialogical writing classroom.

When teachers, or other authority figures, define silence as uncomfortable through performances of discomfort, that definition determines and shapes how teachers and students engage with it and with each other in the writing classroom. If silence is always uncomfortable, then teachers and students feel they must always erase it or avoid it by filling it with words or jokes. By looking closely at instructors' past and present experiences of silence, we can learn how

silence has become an object of discomfort and how that discomfort defines our relationships with silence, limiting the ways in which we can engage with one another in classroom.

### **How the Lore is Circulated through Performances of Discomfort**

Understanding silence as an object of discomfort also reveals the ways in which the lore, is circulated and how these stories affect GSIs' developing pedagogies and teaching practices, accounting for another of my original research questions. In Chapter 5, while dissecting silence as an object of emotion, I also explored how professors' performances work to name silence as an object of discomfort, reiterating the norms which shape participants' definitions of silence in Chapter 4. Through performative naming, Cindy, Maria, and Miguel's professors use some version of "I won't talk until you do," performatively constructing silence as an object of discomfort. Utterances that function as speech acts are repetitions, or citations that work both to produce and regulate norms (Butler, "When Gesture"). In the context of the dialogical classroom, the expected norm is the verbally participatory student. When the norm of the participatory student is enforced, then the norm of the verbally participating student also demands that silence be uncomfortable. Through performance, professors repeat the norms of the classroom to push students towards participating verbally, but in the process, they also reinforce the norm that silence is uncomfortable. In sum, I found that the lore about silence and quiet students did not necessarily show up in overt ways but rather through more subtle and insidious ways like the performances Cindy, Maria, and Miguel describe. The lore circulates through performance of discomfort, acting as a citational chain that names silence as inappropriate and enforces the speaking norm in our classrooms.

### **Intervening in the Lore: What a Study of Silence Can Offer**

The primary aim that shaped my research questions and guided this study has been to find ways of interrupting the lore about silence and to make way for equitable learning environments

for all students. In formulating a theory of silence as an object of emotion and how performances of discomfort help to circulate the lore, I have also explored ways of disrupting that lore by “unsticking” (Micciche) silence from discomfort. In Chapter 5, Miguel’s narrative highlights one possibility for unsticking silence from discomfort. His experiences with Dr. Olive performing her discomfort in relation to silence leads him to create an alternative performance for his students in which he tells his students directly, “I’m not bothered. I don’t feel uncomfortable with silence.” Miguel’s performance acts as a counter to the ways in which silence has been named as uncomfortable in his own histories with silence. However, I took issue with the way Miguel places too much stock in his own authority to unstick silence from discomfort. While he disrupts the lore to name silence differently, his new performance risks continuing the process of defining silence *for* students. Thus, I sought more collaborative, co-constructive interventions.

In the introduction to this chapter, I explained how Sonia and Vincent’s narratives offer another means to disrupt the lore that circulates about silence by interrupting the performance of discomfort. Their narratives also forward a response to what a study of silence can offer teachers of writing in creating more equitable learning environments with their students. The remainder of this chapter builds on stories like Sonia’s and Vincent’s to highlight a means of valuing silence differently by *centering silence*. I argue that centering silence acts an intervention into the influence of the lore, unsticking discomfort from silence, and opening alternative ways of teaching and learning in the writing classroom.

### **CENTERING SILENCE AS A SUBJECT OF CONVERSATION**

As I discussed in chapters 4 and 5, I was struck by the various ways participants defined silence through their past experiences, and the ways those definitions were shaped by negative emotions like discomfort. Yet, during the focus group when speaking with one another about silence, participants’ definitions seemed to shift and open, expanding within the conversation itself. They critiqued their own views of silence and learned from each other’s experiences. In

other words, the act of talking about silence seemed to, ironically, open silence to other possibilities beyond their original definitions.

In chapter 5, I analyzed the way the performance of naming silence by authority figures like teachers can have powerful effects on our understandings and experiences of silence. In this conclusion, with the help of my participants' insights and comments, I propose that openly speaking about silence can play an important role in disrupting those understandings of silence. This argument calls back to Reda's premise that when quiet students can talk about their silences, they can begin to change the narratives that are told about students like them. She writes that for quiet students, "to speak about silence is, in some ways, a political act, as it works, even in a very small way, as a corrective to the ways they have been named and misnamed by their teachers and the academy to which they seek membership" (12). Reda is not the only one to make such claims about quiet students naming their own silences. Timothy San Pedro attends to Native American students' silences in the classroom and how such silences are misinterpreted by teachers. He insists that when Native American students have space to story their own silences, it becomes clear that these students use silence in agentive ways or as a means of shielding themselves from microaggressions in the classroom ("Shield"). San Pedro suggests that by breaking their silences through story and interpretation, students can transform their silences "from passive to active and powerful" ("Shield" 144). In sum, talking about silence, particularly one's own silences, can be a powerful rhetorical move for students in telling their own stories.

In my study, I turned to GSIs to see what happened when teachers spoke about silence, and I now build on Reda's and San Pedro's arguments to contend that talking about silence with other teachers *and* with our students—quiet or not—is a necessary part of cultivating more equitable learning environments. I argue that offering opportunities for quiet students to story their silences shouldn't be the only way we engage with silence. As I addressed in chapter 5, focusing on quiet students' reasons for being silent, on its own, can be another way of fixating on the person producing the silence rather than contending with silence itself as a presence and participant in the conversation. To further disrupt the narratives about speaking and silence that shape our dialogical

classrooms, teachers must talk about experiences of silence with their students and with each other in ways that invite embodied emotions into the room and grapple with them. Through these conversations, we can further the political act that Reda introduces, disrupting the ways quiet students have been misnamed while also interrupting how silence itself has been pinned to discomfort and other negative emotions.

For instance, in one of my questions posed to the focus group, I used Maria's definition of silence as an open space in need of being filled (explored in detail in chapter 4) as an example of how the performative nature of silence resists concrete definitions. In the conversation that followed, the meanings of silence ebbed and flowed, while participants also challenged each other to think about silence differently. The conversation that took place between my participants during the focus group is just one model for how open conversations about silence can lead to a fluidity of definitions of silence. Below, I quote from the focus group interview at length and uninterrupted to showcase how the discussion built, how one person's experiences and observations led to another's, and how their stories of silence unfolded. As Munday argues, if the "full potential of the focus group method is to be realized" researchers must attend to participant interactions, not just the content of what each participant says (257). By including a large portion of the discussion, I underscore the fruitful interactions that came out of the time we spent together on Zoom. These exchanges also reveal how participants collaboratively theorized silence, effectively beginning the process of telling new stories about silence that are not always linked to discomfort.

**Natalie:** Part of my emerging analysis is recognizing that silence is performative and that it resists concrete definitions. For example, Maria speaks of silence as an "open space that needs to be filled," but that space can be anything from her students' or classmates' silences in the classroom to the physical space in her house to the silence she encounters when her husband is deployed. So, my question is what does this example and analysis make you think of in your own encounters with silence?

**Robin:** So, I'm thinking back to a couple of words that were used in answers to the previous question of [Miguel] brought up silence is a part of nature. [Sonia] brought up being mindful of it, and I'm connecting these things to just religious practices in my life where silence is an important mode for reflection and listening. In the sense of like a spiritual listening, of listening to yourself, listening to the world around you, trying to be a part of that. And so, I guess I'm curious here of thinking about silence as a vacuum in

that, for me, that's a very intentional mode to like step into, or a space that silence helps create, in a way, like this space for reflection, again, or this space, in some way, gathering yourself that that one can kind of like intentionally move into.

**Vincent:** There's this, this idea that actually what [Robin] was saying just reminded me of that, going back to when I was a student, a junior high school student actually, I remember...watching a lot of TV shows, a lot of animated series that treated silence in a very specific way as an open, open space for a joke. As in, let's wait a little bit, like, let's wait within the silence, and then the joke comes. And I think I wanted to talk about that because growing up as a junior high school student and then a high school student, eventually, I remember that a lot of times whenever the teacher was not saying anything, eventually someone will make, crack up a joke in that moment. And I was reminded of that, of that pacing in those, in those jokes. And I wonder if it's the same for me when I'm a teacher. Like, I treat silence as, as the example that we're [the participants of the focus group] talking about, that it's this open space for a joke or something. But also, that now reflecting on this, it's like, it can be so much more. And yet, the joke is very alluring to a teacher because it's breaking the ice. It's relaxing for everybody to laugh a little bit. Of course, that's, that can also be detrimental, now thinking about it because as [Robin] was saying, I think silence can actually be like this moment of, like it's in different contexts, it works very differently. And it can be good. And yet we, in this need to fill it out in this other context that is our classroom, we end up— Maybe not like a joke, maybe not, it's not just the best thing to crack up during the silence.

**Maria:** You know, [Vincent], that reminds me of a movie, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. And so, Ferris is not in class, and Ben Stein is the teacher and he's doing roll call, and he just continues to call out, "Bueller, Bueller, Bueller." Because he's not there to say present, or you know, not present, I guess. Which, I find myself, when I'm teaching, if nobody's saying anything, the first thing I go to is, "Bueller, Bueller." ...And most of them don't have any idea about *Ferris Bueller*. But like, it's my way, and, [Sonia,] I'm the same way, like, I'm always filling silence, always, always, always [audio breaks up]...But it's my way of like cracking that joke, or I also have noticed that sometimes silence in the classroom is like a punishment...When I was in undergrad, I had a teacher who would say, "All right, well, who did the reading?" And then if nobody said anything, he just stared at us. Like, until somebody talked. There was no reframing the question or redirecting. It was like [crosses arms and sits back in chair]. ...So, then it was very much a punishment of, well, we're just gonna sit here in silence until somebody says something. And I find myself doing that with my kids, too.... So, it's interesting that you talk about it being a joke, and like, just all of the connotations that come with this, this void. I mean, the absence of anything, specifically sounds, leads to the unknown, which can lead to fear. And how do we sometimes deal with fear or unsettling this, or—that's not a word—fear or feeling of being unsettled is to fill something with what we know, which is sound.

**Sonia:** Yeah, [Maria], I think I resonate a lot with what you're saying. Especially because I feel that to me, silence is like, I see— So, I would see silence as a negative thing, not a positive so much. So, I think that that goes back to my childhood. [laughs] We're gonna start like therapy here. [speaks in a joking tone] Like, my childhood trauma— [switches

back to serious tone] No, but like I had a lot of childhood trauma. And reflecting on, on how I grew up, I remember that a silent house would mean, was very negative. It was very triggering to me. 'Cause that meant either my parents were going to fight, or I did something wrong, and I was getting, gonna be punished for something. So, I think that, from there, I tried to fill out every single silence space, because I, maybe there's some connection to how I was raised, or you know— So, it's pretty interesting now that you mention it.

Throughout this conversation, many of the participants' definitions I explored in chapter 4 reemerge, but when those themes run up against each other, they create a space for new meaning making. Each person's response sparked another possibility for thinking about silence, sometimes critiquing their own definitions of it. Consequently, through conversation, participants co-constructed meanings of silence that were less static.

After I pose the question, Robin, who frequently took on a synthesizer role in the focus group, immediately draws upon previous parts of our conversation to introduce a foil to the example I offered in my question. Robin challenges Maria's conceptualization of silence as a void or a vacuum that signals absence by considering their own experience as a Quaker. They propose thinking about silence as playing a role in creating space for "spiritual listening" and reflection. In that spiritual context, Robin sees silence as a necessary and intentional condition for deep listening rather than an empty void in need of filling.

Vincent then uses Robin's challenge to critique their own and others' compulsion to fill silence with jokes. Vincent theorizes that the joke is "alluring" to teachers because it helps relax the class and break the ice. What they point out here returns to my analysis of silence as an object of emotion in chapter 5. According to Vincent, the joke is another way to defer or move away from silence as an uncomfortable object. But, in responding to Robin's example of spiritual listening, Vincent illustrates how silence can be good in certain contexts, and they question whether jokes are the best response to silence in the classroom context. They say maybe "it's just not the best thing to crack up during, during the silence." For me, Vincent's comments raise the question of context and space in relation to silence: When and where is it good to break the ice with a joke, and when and where is it best to let the silence be present? When and where is it acceptable to step

into silence as a mode of reflection and listening and where is it unacceptable? Where do we draw the line between those various spaces and contexts? Who gets to control the silence, its uses, and how we respond to it?

Vincent and Robin's conversation starts to complicate the way other members of the group think of silence. These contrasting experiences colliding with one another allow for further reflections on silence to emerge. Maria, for instance, starts to critique her own use of jokes to break the ice in class, particularly the Bueller joke that, upon reconsideration, she believes may go over students' heads rather than compel them to speak. I believe that in questioning her own joke, she is also starting to question her conceptualization of silence as a void or absence. To respond with "Bueller?" to student-initiated silence is to assume that the students in the room are not present in some way, which I argue—and I think Maria believes now—is simply not true.

Maria ponders that maybe her reason for filling the void with jokes is because silence has often been used as "punishment" in the classroom. She points out what I've described in chapter 5 as silence being named as a negative object by authority figures. These negative experiences are carried between contexts as embodied knowledge. For Maria, the embodied knowledge of silence as a punishment adds to her understanding of silence as a "void" or "the absence of anything," and the way that absence "can lead to fear." She likens this fear to the unknown and suggests that to counteract that fear of the unknown, we fill it "with what we know, which is sound." Maria clearly expresses the way encounters with silence as an object of emotion can lead to fear, and one of the ways we might move away from fear is through jokes. However, I also read Maria's exploration as trying to account for that fear, to figure out where the fear is coming from, and one of the ideas that sticks is thinking about how silence has been used as a form of punishment. I believe that it is through the process of talking about silence with me and with her peers in the focus group that Maria can pose these questions about her own responses to silence.

Finally, Maria's contemplation on silence as punishment or fear brings Sonia into the conversation. Sonia also dwells on the negative emotions that shape her perceptions of silence and tries to trace those emotions. She goes back to her childhood when a silent house meant that her

parents were about to argue or that she was about to be in trouble. While Maria fears the unknown, Sonia fears something that is more familiar. Silence has become a sign that something bad is about to happen. Sonia's fear of silence reinforces my analysis of how experiences of silence become a type of embodied knowledge that move across time, space, and context. Silence is associated with the threat of certain experiences in her past, which may explain why Sonia uses talking and jokes to control the silence, and perhaps why she continues to read silence as a pressure to perform in particular ways. In the passage from the focus group above, she explains that she fills silence up as a way of controlling what is about to happen, as a deferral of the negative events that she anticipates will occur if silence is allowed to continue.

Throughout this conversation, each participant's previous understandings of silence that they expressed in their individual interviews persist in various ways. Robin still sees silence as holding potential for deep reflection and listening, but only in particular contexts and if forwarded in intentional ways. Maria still sees silence as a void in need of being controlled even as the meanings for the void are expanding. Sonia still processes silence as a pressure to perform in particular ways even as she considers other contexts where that is the case. But when these views encounter each other, they are complicated and critiqued in ways that open silence to different possibilities and considerations. It's not that participants' own stories of silence change, it's that they are asking questions about the role silence can play in various contexts. Together, they are contemplating their past histories and how those histories shape the way they think about silence. In sum, their conversation calls forth Munday's understanding of feminist focus groups "as social contexts in themselves through which partial and multiple versions of social reality are constructed, thus rejecting any idea of there being one, ultimate, objective truth of social reality" (237-8). Sonia, Robin, Maria, and Vincent's conversation about silence acts as a social context in which participants can renegotiate meanings of silence in ways that allow them to grapple with the emotions they feel when encountering silence. In doing so, they collectively reject a single ultimate truth about silence in favor for multiple truths and experiences.

I contend that these kinds of conversations are important to have, as they are part of how teachers and students can start to tell new stories about silence in our classrooms and in our lives, stories that are complex and ripe with possibilities, but also stories that shed light on where negative emotions that are stuck to silence come from, to disrupt them. It is through this disruption of assumptions that other possibilities for silence open and that more equitable learning environments can spring forth. When we discuss silence openly and welcome it into classroom spaces, then the possibilities for learning and teaching also expand. In sum, to talk about silence is to open it to other interpretations and to value other forms of teaching and learning.

Sonia's revelation in the focus group passage above also highlights that because silence is an object of emotion, because we carry experiences of silence with us as part of an embodied knowledge, then we must also treat these conversations carefully and with sensitivity. Silence may be filled with past traumas like Sonia describes in the focus group and the ones she recounts in her individual interview, which I discussed in chapter 4. Centering silence involves two concurrent practices: talking about silence, which I'm exploring now, and inviting silence into the conversation, which I will discuss in the next section. Sonia's disclosures emphasize why talking about silence is a necessary step towards creating more equitable learning environments. Because silence is so linked to negative embodied emotions and experiences, it is important to talk about those negative emotions before and alongside listening to silence itself. I'm not suggesting that we should encourage others, particularly our students, to share their past traumas with us, or that talking about silence should be therapy (as Sonia jokingly suggests above). However, I do propose that understanding the negative emotions that are linked so closely with silence is a necessary and ethically responsible step in opening silence to other possibilities. To invite silence into the classroom and to listen to it requires vulnerability from everyone involved and talking about silence is a necessary step to being comfortable within that vulnerability. In sum, because experiences of silence are so complex, that is precisely why we *should* be talking about them, as the GSIs do during the focus group, but also in other spaces like teacher training, professional development sessions, and in writing classrooms with our students. The more conversations we

have, the more new stories we tell about silence, the more possibilities there are beyond the normative narratives that shape our current perceptions of silence.

### **CENTERING SILENCE AS A PARTICIPANT IN THE CONVERSATION**

Likening silence to a puma, Miguel recognizes silence as a constant presence in the room, always potentially dangerous, but when it is acknowledged rather than ignored, we can incite other possibilities for how we understand and relate to it. When you stare down the puma, talk to it, or at the very least recognize its existence, the potential for danger decreases and the opportunity for building a different relationship with the puma opens. I explored this metaphor in detail in Chapter 4, and while I disagree with the idea that silence is always potentially dangerous, what I do like about Miguel’s metaphor is that it requires us to think of silence as an embodied presence that has some sort of agency. The corporal nature of the puma makes it impossible to ignore or erase. Most importantly, thinking of silence as a puma is to acknowledge that it is not controllable. While several participants in this study go to great lengths to try to control silence, filling it with noise or ignoring it altogether doesn’t make silence disappear. It’s still there, lurking in the background. As Miguel says, silence “can kill your class,” if you try to run away from it.

Centering silence is based on the premise that classroom silence cannot and should not be ignored or erased, but instead it should be listened to and considered as part of the discourse of our classrooms. In the conclusion to *Between Speaking and Silence*, Reda proposes that students’ silences can be a deliberate choice and she calls on teachers of writing to “investigate the critical and transformative potential of silence” (155). She returns to the positive and productive ways in which her students use and consider silence—as expressions of identity (156), as evidence of work being done (169), and signs of an internal conversation happening (160), and she asks us to consider:

What can happen when we think about silence through these new contexts my students propose? What is gained by changing our dominant metaphors? What if the filters we use to hear silence are shades of openness, not signs of failure? Can we teachers...see silence

in a whole new light? Can we look beyond our shared meaning of the ‘problem of silence’ to see—and hear—its possibilities as well? (172)

Reda’s questions call upon teachers to enact a radical shift in their thinking, to not only think about silence as something that can be more than a problem but as something that is full of possibilities. I, too, see possibilities in silence for generative and powerful thinking, but I also see the need to resist prescribing or pinning down a meaning or definition for silence. I conclude that it is important to keep possibilities open and to resist the urge to name silence. I recommend centering silence as a way forward into seeing and hearing the possibilities of silence. I contend that for teachers and students to talk about silence and include silence in the conversation, is to begin to create new narratives of silence, generating new modes for interacting in classrooms that disrupt the default dialogical-based pedagogies that have become the norm.

When I talk about inviting silence into the room as an active participant, other teachers often presume I mean that they should curate their own silences to allow students more time to think and reflect. In chapter 2, as part of my analysis of teaching guidebooks, I dissected the underlying assumptions and power dynamics at play in the teaching strategy of wait time. In chapter 5, I revisited the possible negative effects of this same strategy when considering the ways professors name silence as uncomfortable by performing discomfort in response to students’ silences. Even when wait time is implemented with the intention to create space for thinking and reflection, it can maintain those same power dynamics, particularly if used without other teaching practices that support the presence of silence in the room in the first place. Moreover, wait time still presumes that silence can be controlled, and that it is something that needs to be broken for learning to take place. For these reasons, I assert that inviting silence into the classroom as a participant is not merely a matter of adopting a single teaching strategy. Understanding silence as a valuable part of the classroom conversation is a process of not just creating space for silence but actively generating new, outside of the norm, experiences of silence. In the previous section, I argued for talking openly about silence because, perhaps ironically, this verbal act is a necessary part of being able to inhabit silence in our classrooms in ethically minded ways. In this section, I

discuss the ways we can invite silence into the room and the ways we can listen to the silence that is already present.

What I'm suggesting instead of (or in addition to) curating wait time is a process that is more akin to Sonia's use of mindfulness that I explored in the opening to this chapter, or Vincent's deliberate reimagining of silence as "just something that is happening," described at the end of chapter 5. Sonia and Vincent both adopt stances of openness towards silence that allow for other possibilities beyond discomfort to emerge. When Sonia becomes mindful of classroom silence, she finds she can yield control of it and instead see the possibilities for how students can determine their own process of inward thinking. Vincent, who understands silence as a sign of their performing outside of expectations, is inspired by a conversation about quiet students in their pedagogy course to engage in a process of self-reflection. They come to realize that they are a listener in the classroom, and with this newfound self-awareness, they also reflect on their own stress-filled construction of silence as a reflection of poor performance. Vincent complicates their beliefs about silence, and instead of constantly fearing it, they start to see it as a "tool," an "opportunity," and as a "happening." When silence is "just something that is happening," the uncertainty of silence starts to lose its power as a stressor for Vincent. Instead, they see silence as an opening and an opportunity to engage with their students in a new way.

Vincent and Sonia offer two possible avenues for centering silence as part of the conversation. Sonia does this through practicing mindfulness in the classroom and becoming present in silence in order to yield control. Sonia takes steps to be "fully present—as a writer or a teacher—in the current moment, and not preoccupied with thoughts of the past or the future" (Mathieu 16). Vincent centers silence through a process of self-reflexivity and a deliberate intellectualization of silence. I argue that both Vincent and Sonia are practicing a form of strategic contemplation, as described by Royster and Kirsch.

Royster and Kirsch introduce strategic contemplation as a practice that asks researchers to "withhold judgment for a time and resist coming to closure too soon in order to make the time to invite creativity, wonder, and inspiration into the research process" (85). Strategic contemplation

is a methodological approach that encourages researchers to linger deliberately in the moment, to “stop for a time and think multidirectionally, from the outside in and the inside out, not just about the subject of study but also about themselves as the agents in the process, as well as about the process itself” (86). While Royster and Kirsch apply strategic contemplation to the research process (and it is one of my own methodological practices in this study), I contend that Vincent and Sonia are using a form of strategic contemplation in their encounters with classroom silence. Vincent purposefully turns inward to consider their own role in the classroom and then deliberately resists coming to conclusions about what silence means. Instead, they tell themselves it is a “happening,” and use it as a point to engage with students differently. Sonia, on the other hand, in practicing being present in unplanned silence can become more aware of her own emotions and then sets aside the urge to always fill the silence with words or jokes.

Centering silence calls for resisting coming to conclusions about the meaning of silence. While Glenn argues that silence “needs only to be named in order to be understood,” I maintain that teachers shouldn’t rush to finding a way to name or explain silence (*Unspoken* 160). I have explored throughout my analysis that because silence is wrought with embodied emotion, we are conditioned to name classroom silence as something negative and uncomfortable. In seeking answers for our discomfort, we rush to explain the reason for the existence of silence, effectively shutting down other possibilities. I urge teachers to pause and consider what the silence is *doing* in the room, or how it is acting as part of the conversation, instead of racing to understand what the silence means. I also argue that when we resist that compulsion to try and understand the meaning of silence, then those meanings remain open and therefore more collaboratively constructed, with the help of our students. Royster and Kirsch argue that analyses that rely on strategic contemplation

are geared toward understanding a scene and situation rather than toward proving a hypothesis. They encourage us to look for alternatives to first looks, first thoughts, and first impressions, or even second and third ones, in order to engage possibility as a generative, dynamic concept, rather than a static one. Quite fundamentally, they encourage us to leave both knowing and ways of knowing open to negotiation and interrogation. ... [S]trategic contemplation opens up space for observation and reflection,

for new things to emerge, or rather, for us to notice things that may have been there all along but unnoticed. (90)

When Sonia pauses and reflects in silence, she notices that her students are using it to think inwardly. When Vincent pauses and reflects about their own relationship with silence, they can resist their compulsion to think of silence as a sign of poor performance and see it as a new point of engagement with their students. In other words, both Sonia and Vincent “notice things that may have been there all along but unnoticed” (Royster and Kirsch 90).

At times, when I have introduced Sonia’s use of mindfulness as a way of centering silence, other teachers presume that I want them to incorporate more contemplative practices into their teaching. I do think that contemplative practices are a rich and fruitful starting point in moving towards centering silence as part of the conversation. Contemplative pedagogies invite silence into the room and value non-normative ways of interacting with those silences. I believe that Sonia’s experience of becoming mindful of silence and, thus yielding her control over it, is partly possible because she teaches and uses mindfulness with her students already. Because silence is something she practices in her classes in controlled ways, her students likely have different and fuller understandings of what possibilities silence holds. For this reason, and because Sonia’s research has influenced my own pedagogical thinking, I have started incorporating more contemplative exercises into my own classes. I now start many class sessions with a minute of silence to allow students to center themselves. I’ve also incorporated mindful reading activities (Carillo) and have started using practices like the *lectio divina* (Howes and Smith), an exercise that builds moments of silence and time for reflection and thinking into a critical reading exercise. I’ve also introduced a slow peer review exercise, which asks students to practice rhetorical listening and contemplative thinking when responding to their peers’ work (Oleksiak).

Curating positive experiences of silence into a teaching practice is an important step towards centering silence as a participant in classrooms, and contemplative pedagogies are well-equipped to offer those types of experiences. However, when teaching many of these meditative practices in the classroom, the instructor is very much in control of how the silence is structured

and used. For example, in *lectio divina*, the instructor places silences strategically and determines their duration and purpose throughout the exercise. In contrast with this practice, it is when Sonia yields control that the possibilities for silence open. When Sonia becomes deliberately mindful of the uncontrollable silence, she notices the ways her students become more mindful as well. To disrupt the dialogical classroom and to move towards more equitable learning environments that center silence as a part of the conversation requires instructors to yield control and instead, dwell in silence and listen to it with our minds and with our bodies.

While Royster and Kirsch acknowledge that strategic contemplation “makes room for the researcher to acknowledge her or his own embodied experience” (89), I think there is opportunity to make this attention to embodied experience more deliberate when thinking about centering silence as part of the conversation. As I argued in chapter 5, our embodied experiences of silence shape the way we construct and respond to silence. If we are to intervene in the lore that circulates about silence, we must acknowledge and attend to the role the body plays in creating that lore in the first place, and we must learn to listen to silence differently.

To account for the body’s role in centering silence as part of the conversation, I draw upon Steph Ceraso’s theory of multimodal listening to support the mindful and contemplative stances of openness, including strategic contemplation, I have prioritized thus far. Ceraso defines multimodal listening as

the practice of attending to the sensory, contextual, and material aspects of a sonic event. Multimodal listening moves away from ear-centric approaches to sonic engagement and, instead, treats sonic experience as holistic and immersive. Unlike practices in which the listener’s primary goal is to hear and interpret audible sound, multimodal listening accounts for the ecological relationship among sound, bodies, environments, and materials. (6)

In short, Ceraso calls for a more embodied way of listening. She theorizes sound as something we experience with our entire bodies, not just with our ears. Moreover, she argues that sound itself has agency, as it “affects and transforms bodies in a variety of ways with or without consent” (19). While silence is usually thought of as the absence of sound, my argument about the way we experience silence with our bodies, is similar to the way Ceraso describes experiences of sound.

Like sound, silence acts on our bodies, as evidenced by the way we feel discomfort through the slowing of time or bodily expressions of anxiety like sweating. Silence, too, acts on us without our consent. Multimodal listening asks teachers and students to “regard sound as a locus of inquiry as opposed to content to be mined for meaning” (Ceraso 12). If used alongside strategic contemplation, I see potential for implementing multimodal listening to listen to silence for these reasons. Multimodal listening encourages us to see silence as a “locus of inquiry” while also attending to the ways our bodies respond to silence. That is, instead of allowing these bodily responses to compel us away from silence, we can work to listen to silence as a moment to dwell in and interrogate.

In proposing these various approaches to centering silence as a part of the conversation, I have been careful not to prescribe a set formula for doing this in the classroom. In her argument for a pedagogy of radical presence, which relies on contemplative practices (and includes valuing silence), Mary Rose O’Reilley keeps her pedagogical prescriptions to a minimum because she believes in letting “methodology follow from the particular (this student, this hour, this blue spruce) rather than from the world of theory” (14). She believes that to enact a pedagogy of radical presence requires focusing on the particularities of the context and students. Because the meanings and purposes of silence are and always should be in-flux rather than static, I believe centering silence as a participant in the conversation requires a similar approach to O’Reilley’s. When I suggest using strategic contemplation and multimodal listening to center silence in the classroom, I propose a stance or positioning of the body towards silence, and a resistance from erasing or running away from it. I am not offering a method for how silence should be viewed or used in the classroom because I believe it is important for teachers to do their own process of self-reflection on their experiences of silence. I also argue that teachers need to include students in this process of opening silence, rather than naming it for them. In sum, centering silence only works to generate new ways of interacting and learning in our writing classrooms when it is both self-reflexive and collaborative.

## LIMITATIONS OF CENTERING SILENCE: A RETURN TO NORMALIZED EXPECTATIONS

In the final minutes of the focus group conversation, I posed the following:

Do you feel there are limitations on the kinds of silence that can exist in the educational setting? Does the educational setting necessarily impose limits on what role silence can play in the classroom?

At the time of the focus group, I had not yet developed an understanding of silence as an object of emotion, nor had I proposed centering silence as an intervention to the stickiness of discomfort. However, I did know that definitions of silence relied on both normative narratives and individual histories, and I knew I was searching for possible ways to value silence differently in the classroom. I also recognized that it was important to consider the ways in which there were limits on the value of silence, and I turned to my participants—who are generally more skeptical of silence than I am—for those possible limitations.

In response to my question, Robin immediately jumped to the limit of time:

**Robin:** Education systems, or at least the ones that we're teaching in, are very much built around time structures. Both like time that you're agreed upon to be in a classroom, time that a semester will carry out across, time that you have planned for a particular unit or module of a syllabus. All of these things are time considerations, and so that goes back to what [Cindy] was bringing up earlier of like, you know, giving time for people to collect themselves is a matter of like, taking time away from other things, or, or making space for that. Like, it's— We're not doing learning by correspondence across somebody's lifetime. So, there's naturally moments where we're pressing up against silence is the only mode, because we're expecting people to demonstrate their knowledge, or perform in some way, and communicate some, some matter of their learning, either through testing or writing or all sorts of other methods that I think would interrupt reflective silence or digesting things or all sorts of stuff. ...I'm getting ready to come out of coursework, and I'm thinking about the fact that like, how much time do I have realistically to actually just be in question about what I'm doing with the dissertation? Like, how long do I have to like be, quiet and just reflect and not land on an answer before I have to start in on this next stage where I need to be doing a literature review and like gathering all these thoughts on something and like, you know, articulating my position in relation to it all? I don't know how much time I have to just be quiet and read and listen, so to speak, to the conversations that are going on and figure out where I want to be a part of that.

As I discussed in chapter 5, time is often one of the only ways in which participants do describe a positive relationship to silence—it can be a time to think, reflect, or process information. Robin

alludes to that positive experience when referencing Cindy's need for time to collect herself before being asked to speak in class. But Robin also recognizes how that need for quiet time runs up against the expectations of the educational system we are working within. In that necessary quiet time is a constant pressure to produce something. Robin also feels this pressure in their own writing process as a graduate student, questioning, "how long do I have to like be...quiet and just reflect and not land on an answer before I have to start in on this next stage?" Robin recognizes the constraints of the educational timeline—"we're not doing learning by correspondence across somebody's lifetime"—and they understand that as a limitation on the way silence can be used in the classroom.

Vincent and Cindy suggest similar hesitations about the possibilities for valuing silence when it runs up against expectations of assessment and productivity. Here, their contributions play off one another:

**Vincent:** I mean, the elephant in the room always is like grading. That some, that at the end of the day, you will be graded, you will get an A and a B. And that's always, always the, the limitation right there, right. Like within a classroom setting, in a educational setting, that we, we are educating through or with grades and therefore silence can always come up as a, as a, as a limitation. Because at the end of the day, if you are not show, show, displaying or showing that you know, you will be graded accordingly. And this happens, not only in silence in my opinion, but sometimes just not being able to deliver or to like an assignment or anything. Like that, so it's, it's perceived as always, so you are in, you're silent, you're not saying anything, therefore, you have an F. Or you didn't or you didn't completed the task at all. And therefore like I see that, especially now that I'm grading in a college setting and that I've been receiving grades myself as a graduate student, I see that I like, the biggest limitation to me to use silence effectively is that at the end of the day, I will need to assign a grade, even to that, in my opinion.

**Cindy:** I guess that kind of goes back to the question, we were talking before, how we consider what silence means like in the classroom because I know you also said lack of turning in assignments and like maybe absences without contacting you, or you know— So, yeah, there, there obviously is that pressure because I feel like...silence is kind of tied to almost everything. And like, I mean, your actual work that you're producing in college. So, it's, at the end of the day, it's kind of tied somehow to either, you know, just the assignments being done, or actually being there. While you're there, what's happening? And it's kind of... That's why I think it's so hard and understanding how to think about that in terms of the grading. Because we can sit here and say, you know, "I don't want to grade on participation in the classroom like in terms of who speaks up." But then what

about the silences when it comes to things being turned in, or people not showing up to class. I don't know. I don't know the answer.

Vincent ponders the need to grade students, which places a limit on how silence can be used in the classroom. Inherently, silence is not something that is valued by the conventional methods of assessment; students who use silence are interrupting one of the ways teachers can understand how and what students are learning. It is for these reasons that participation policies and grades often exist in the first place (Critel). Vincent suggests that if we are going to incorporate silence into our classrooms, then perhaps we must find ways to give an assessment value to silence. Cindy then continues this train of thought by noticing how silence is “tied to almost everything” and she questions what that means when we’re thinking about production and presence in the classroom.

Vincent, Cindy, and Robin articulate valid, and perhaps inescapable concerns, about what centering silence would mean in the classroom. I described in chapter 4 how Robin, when considering whether the kind of deep spiritual listening they associate with Quaker silence could hold a place in the classroom suggests that some of the reasons why intentional reflective silence is hard are the same reasons why writing is hard:

‘Cause, it's not culturally there in an education setting. Like, Quakerism is not a dominant cultural attitude or approach, and so it's not a space where I think that everybody's going to be on the same page around like, we can all be really silent and sit with ourselves. I think a lot of people would have a lot of trouble with that. For many, many, many reasons. Because it's emotionally difficult. It's hard. It is genuinely different than meditation, but meditation has a lot of parallels to it, in that, meditation, is super, really difficult if you are frustrated or annoyed, or in emotional pain for some reason. And I think a lot of people are on a dai— You know, in a classroom kind of setting, stuff is stressful. ...And so, I think silence is wielded differently, in part because sitting with your thoughts for a while is really hard. It's part of why writing is hard is you have to listen to yourself, and you have to be comfortable listening to yourself. And that's really uncomfortable for I think a lot of people.

In Robin’s hesitations for including these deeper, more reflective versions of silence, they also convey an argument for centering silence in the writing classroom. That is, if writing and silence are hard for similar reasons, then why shouldn’t silence be a central part of our writing classrooms? I am not suggesting that the silences we invite into the classroom need to be akin to the silences accessed in Quakerism, but I am wondering what possibilities deep silence can hold for students

in the writing classroom. Within the current educational system, silence is not valued or assessed. It also does not feel as if there is time to value it when there is so much content and writing to get done. However, I ask: What modes of communicating and thinking are lost when we adhere to these systemic constraints without challenging them? What possibilities for learning exist in silence that we are disregarding in favor of producing communication that is more inherently visible and audible?

Silence, in its feminist roots challenges the status quo. Glenn's study of the rhetoric of silence begins by attending to how "silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience" (2). But she and others after her go on to underscore the ways in which women and other marginalized peoples, throughout history, have used silence in powerful and empowering ways to challenge the status quo. Waite, in her discussion of her student Andy's silences, shows how student silence can also disrupt normative values of speaking in the classroom and the university by exposing the assumptions that exist when speaking is the primary pathway and evidence for learning. In sum, silence can do powerful things outside of the classroom and inside of it.

With my theory of centering silence, I call for teachers to listen to these disruptive possibilities and to consider how talking about silence and inviting silence into the conversation can make strides towards valuing a different, slower, and more nuanced approach to engaging with writing and learning. We will never escape the pressures of time, the institutional demand for assessment practices that rely on normalized expectations of productivity, but I ask teachers of writing to consider what value there is in slowing down, of pausing, and listening to the silence in the writing classroom.

### **A QUIET STUDENT LOOKS AHEAD**

Over the past year, as I drafted this dissertation and entered the academic job market, I had many opportunities to discuss my research on silence with other teachers of writing. During these

conversations, I found that this research on silence could have a unique impact on the way teachers think about how they teach writing. I realized that my theory of centering silence challenges teachers to think more creatively and to find value in slowing down in their everyday teaching practice. Instructors notice that I'm asking them to interrogate some of the major underlying assumptions that we take with us to each writing class we teach. By centering silence, I ask: What exactly are the makings of a productive class session? Who are the students that we are overlooking when we value dialogue over anything else? And when we find ourselves trying to control student silence, what are our motivations in doing so? These conversations with other teachers, as well as with the participants in this study, show me that my research has potential in expanding what the writing classroom looks and sounds like.

I began this dissertation from the perspective of a quiet student who cares deeply about the ways in which silence operates in classrooms to enforce dominant power relations. I wanted to understand how normative values of speaking over silence have come to shape even the most critically oriented classrooms in ways that exclude alternative modes of teaching and learning. I strove to disrupt the lore about silence and to imagine alternative ways of teaching and learning in the writing. I have found, through the process of completing this study, a theory of centering silence, which I have forwarded in this chapter as a combination of pedagogical and reflective habits of mind that compel teachers and students to attend to silence as an object of emotion and to consider the meanings of silence to be always in-flux. But this study has also offered me—as a teacher, scholar, and person—much more than just a theory.

As I approach the completion of this study, I still consider myself a quiet student. I realize I have not been in a classroom as a student in nearly four years, and people who know me would likely not describe me as much of a quiet person or student anymore. Yet, I still hold tightly to the identity of a quiet student for a few reasons, the first and most important being that I do not wish to buy into the narrative that I must move out of silence into speaking to succeed. But I also see the ways in which my identity as a quiet student has come to shape who I am as a writing teacher—more so now than ever before.

When I started teaching almost a decade ago, I felt an incongruity with the way I embodied the quiet and the ways I believed I had to teach writing. Slowly, I have found ways to balance these incongruities. I started with eliminating participation grades. I then began asking my students about their preferred modes of learning and how they identify as quiet students or not, drawing on Reda's work to ask what their silences meant. But as I have analyzed my participants' narratives and come to the idea of centering silence, I have started to identify more ways to incorporate and value silence in every class period. I, of course, incorporate the practices I have forwarded in this chapter. I create new experiences of silence by using contemplative pedagogical activities. I openly talk about silence with my students, and we co-construct meanings of silences together. And of course, when my students claim the silence, I work to unstick my discomfort from their silence and yield control over what my plans were for the day in order to listen to silence instead. However, more than anything, the active and intentional practice of centering silences, even seemingly unproductive ones, is that I am reminded that what matters is not necessarily how much my students are learning on any given day but that they have multiple avenues for exploring what they are learning.

While the applications I see for centering silence begin in the classroom, they also exceed it. That is, writing this dissertation has led me to respect my own silences more. I lean into them, listen to them, and learn from them every day. Centering silence has come to shape who I am as a scholar, not just because I study silences but because I find them to be an important part of my writing process, as well as a primary means in which I see, listen to, and understand the world around me. For me to continue to be a quiet student is to attend to silence in ways that allow me to learn more about myself and about my interactions and relationships with others. Recognizing this has certainly made me a stronger, more patient and compassionate teacher of writing, but it has also led me to think about what possibilities and meanings silences hold for writers outside of the FYW classroom.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear Colleagues,

I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Rhetoric & Writing Studies here at [Border University], and I am currently seeking research participants for my dissertation project. The purpose of my research is to understand graduate student instructors' experiences with classroom silence and quiet students and how those experiences shape their pedagogies and teaching practices.

I am specifically asking for participants who are:

- **Teaching Assistants or Assistant Instructors in the [Border University] Writing Program.**
- You do not have to be currently teaching to participate in this study.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to:

- Complete two directed reflective writing samples solicited at the beginning and end of the study. Producing these writing samples will take 10-20 minutes each.
- Share teaching documents with me, including syllabi, syllabus policies, participation policies, teaching journals, lesson plans, and peer review assignments.
- Participate in one 60-90 minute interview with me on Zoom.
- Participate in one 60-90 minute focus group interview with me and the other participants in this study on Zoom.

The study is IRB approved through [Border University]. If you are interested in participating, please email me at [redacted].

Sincerely,  
Natalie E. Taylor

## **Appendix B: Reflective Writing Prompts**

### **PRE-INTERVIEW WRITING PROMPT**

Please free write in response to the following prompt. You do not need to spend more than 10-20 minutes on your response. You may respond to this question from your perspective as a student or as an instructor or both. You may also consider examples from face-to-face classroom or online classroom environments.

Write about a time when you noticed silence in a classroom you were in (either as a student or as a teacher or both). How did that silence make you feel? How did you respond?

### **POST-FOCUS GROUP WRITING PROMPT**

Please free write in response to the following prompt. You do not need to spend more than 10-20 minutes on your response. You may respond to this question from your perspective as a student or as an instructor or both. You may also consider examples from face-to-face classroom or online classroom environments.

Since the beginning of your participation in this study, have you had any new experiences with silence in the classroom or with quiet students? Please describe any new experience(s) and how you felt during that experience. How did you respond?

## Appendix C: Individual Interview Questions

- Are you a Teaching Assistant (TA) or Assistant Instructor (AI)?
- What degree program are you a graduate student in?
- How long have you held your position as a TA or AI?
- How many total years of teaching experience (at any level) do you have?
- Where has this teaching experience taken place (i.e., four-year American university, international university, American community college, primary or secondary education, etc.)? How many years of experience do you have in each setting?
- How many years of experience do you have teaching first-year composition?
- What kind of training did you receive before teaching first-year composition for the first time?
- How would you describe yourself as a student in your early years of education (pre-university)? How would you describe yourself as a student in your post-secondary years of education, including the present? Has your student identity shifted over the years or does it change in different learning environments?
- How has your identity as a student been perceived by your teachers and professors? Has that perception been consistent? Have your experiences with teachers' perceptions of you changed as you've entered new schooling environments?
- How would you describe yourself as a teacher? If you could name your teaching style in a 1-3 word phrase, what would it be?
- Is there a teacher(s) from your past that you try to emulate or not emulate? What qualities of that teacher do you try to mimic? How do some of those qualities help shape your own teaching persona? Why do you think that teacher was an important role model for you?
- What qualities do you think a teacher of FYC should have? Why do you think that a teacher should have those qualities?

- Can you describe a good student in one of your FYC classes? It can be a specific student or a mix of multiple students. What qualities does that student have? Why do those qualities make them a good student?
- Would you describe yourself as a quiet student? If not, how would you describe yourself as a student in the classroom?
- If you or your classmates were quiet, how did your teachers respond to that silence in your early education? In post-secondary education?
- Do you feel as if some silences were valued more than others in different classroom settings? Which ones? How do you know?
- Can you describe a scenario in which you welcomed silence in your classroom? How did you respond? Why did you respond that way?
- Can you describe a scenario in which you found classroom silence unwelcome? How did you respond? Why did you respond that way?
- Thinking back to your experiences as a student, do you think any of these experiences inform how you think about teaching, your students, and silence?
- Can you remember a time in your teacher training when classroom silence or quiet students were discussed? Can you describe that discussion?
- Did you ever read anything in your teacher training or pedagogy course(s) about quiet students or classroom silence? What was it? What did it say?
- Where have you sought out, received, or given advice about how to handle classroom silence and/or quiet students? For instance, have you ever had a conversation with peers, mentors, or professors about quiet student(s) and/or silence in the classroom? Where did this conversation take place? What was the context of the conversation? Can you describe the content of that conversation?
- Have you implemented any of this advice or training in relation to silence and quiet students in your classroom? If so, in what ways?

- Did you in any way disagree with or resist any of the assumptions that you encountered about silence and quiet students? Do you feel you did things differently in your actual teaching from what you've been taught? If so, in what ways?
- Do you experience conflict between your formal/informal training and your own teaching philosophies and practices in relation to classroom silence and quiet students?
- Do you have any ideas about how you might address silence and quiet students differently in your classroom?
- Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

## Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Vincent spoke in their interview of when they realized that silence could be productive in classrooms and the corresponding pressure that comes along with that realization. They said that in the pedagogy course, when they realized that silence could be useful, along with that understanding, came “Okay, now I have the tools. Now I am seeing what silence is about. Then that also adds a little bit of stress to my classes because then, like other tools I have learned...now I’m seeing silence as another tool, as another thing I need to get right in my teaching. And that can be stressing.”

How does thinking and reflecting on silence affect how you think about teaching?

2. Part of my emerging analysis is recognizing that silence is performative and that it resists concrete definitions. For example, Maria speaks of silence as an “open space that needs to be filled,” but that space can be anything from her students’ or classmates’ silences in the classroom, to physical space in her house, to the silence she encounters when her husband is deployed.

Part 1: What does this example and analysis make you think of in your own encounters with silence?

Part 2: What does this analysis make you think of in your own performances of silence?

3. Many of you expressed the discomfort you feel when you encounter silence, whether that be students’, classmates’, or teachers’ silences. Most of you find silence to be various degrees of threatening, or at the very least, a sign that something is not going right in the class. Sarish, however, talks a lot about how student silence in Nepal is expected. He says that one of the reasons he was silent as a student was that he was “trained to listen to teachers’ lectures and to be deposited from them.” While in the U.S., Sarish says he sometimes chose silence, “Because I didn’t know the practice of teaching, I wasn’t habituated...So due to genre familiarization, due to the lack of genre familiarization, I was hesitant to speak.”

What can we learn from Sarish’s perspective?

4. Do you feel there are limitations on the kinds of silence that can exist in the educational setting?  
Does the educational setting necessarily impose limits on what silence's role can play in the classroom?

## **Vita**

Natalie Elise Taylor graduated from Austin College with a B.A. in English in 2011. She then completed an M.F.A in Creative Writing, with an emphasis in Creative Nonfiction, at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 2015.

She began her doctoral studies in the fall of 2016 at New Mexico State University. After completing her coursework and comprehensive exams at NMSU, she transferred to The University of Texas at El Paso to complete her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Writing Studies. In addition to teaching first year-writing at UTEP, she served as an Assistant Director to the Writing Program.

Her research interests include rhetorical silence and listening, feminist rhetorics, and composition pedagogies.