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## Into the void of discourse

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## ABSTRACT

In this conceptual essay, I propose a way of viewing silence or silent texts in discourse for educators and educational researchers who are facing the growing call to bring to light hidden biases, histories and other sociocultural phenomena largely hidden from public audiences. Specifically, I explore the potential affordances from going against the grain of the long and widely established view of silence as anything but void. Taking up the scientific notion of void as the known unknown, I examine what we can gain as educators and researchers when viewing silence as unexplored time-space of social matter, a view acknowledged long ago by literary giant James Baldwin. Using media about recent sociopolitical movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, I explore the void of discourse—the unpublished works, hidden exchanges, and forgotten or misrepresented experiences that are brought forth through the guidance of those with respective cultural knowledge and expertise, once given the space to do so. Viewing silence as a discursive void positions the educational researcher as a co-learner who attends to the contextual aspects of social interactions with open acknowledgement of the racialized and gendered systems that bind our social spaces. Implications for epistemological approaches are discussed.

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## 1. Revisiting conceptions of silence in discourse

Scholars have long noted that what is often said or written into being is barely the tip of the iceberg in terms of representing voices and experiences. Even in this era of ever-evolving social media platforms, much about life experiences and perspectives are left unsaid or misrepresented, hence shrouding much about the human condition in silence (Dyer, 2020; Rocavert, 2019). Discursive silence has been long and widely studied and as such, has amassed varied characterizations along with a generally accepted description as anything but void; in fact, this explicit description—anything but void—is uttered by scholars in anthropology, discourse and feminist studies, religion, and comparative literature (Bobin, 2011, p. 171; Colinet, 1890, p. 256; Drijvers, 2002, p. 178; Lipe & Lipe, 2017, p. 33; McDonald, 2014, p. 73). In other words, silence cannot be equated with nothingness. This non-definition leaves more latitude than what may be useful for our current time of societal reckoning; we are in need of a new compass that can support educational researchers in maintaining a constant check on assumptions while engaging in explorations of social phenomena. In this conceptual essay, I introduce a different view of void in discourse and, with supportive references to social media and

scholarship, I demonstrate how this new view can serve as both an instructional and an epistemic anchor for making visible the silences that pervade our socio-educational spaces.

Philosopher Dauenhauer (1982) and communications scholar Miller (1993) associated silence with meaningful, obligatory pauses in musical compositions. But is the intended meaning of pauses juxtaposed with sound may not translate in the same way to those who listen. As put by the literary author and social critic James Baldwin (1965):

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours.

—from *Sonny's Blues* (p. 119)

Baldwin's description aligns with the notion of silence as anything but emptiness. Further, the fullness of the void may not be completely acknowledged or understood, or at least understanding is limited to the efforts made by the listener. The reference to the musician's triumph marks the emergence of a new voice, which is analogous to the emergence of individual or localized thinking

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for spurring progress in societal understanding, doing, and being. The ‘void’ in this sense is different from an absence of sound or meaning. Baldwin’s void is far more dialogic, including possibilities both terrible and triumphant. It is this view of void, an invisible space full of potential meaning, that is the central topic of this conceptual essay. I have pulled in examples both from little known and widely disseminated histories, journalistic entries, research programs and visual artwork to show what exploring and navigating a discursive void can look and sound like. As educational researchers, silences (absences of expressed perspectives and experiences) in discourse are potential clues for exploring the void of various contextual phenomena including the politically charged and culturally shaped perspectives and experiences largely hidden from public eyes and ears.

As a cultural guide for the reader, I make visible what is often missed when we approach a concept, problem, or question as knowers of sociocultural phenomena—that is, when we engage in research with preconceived notions about what and who counts as important for a given line of inquiry. When we position ourselves as learners, we position ourselves to be led by our participants who can help us understand and acknowledge what was previously masked by various forms of cultural and linguistic bias that all of us are socialized to enact without awareness. As such, I focus on a notion of silence as hidden or unacknowledged human endeavors, accomplishments, needs, and rights, hence shifting from silence as anything but nothing to silence as an ever-present unknown bastion of social matter.

I am honored to join my colleagues in this special issue on silences within learning communities. The discursive void is filled with untold experiences, discoveries and achievements, many of which have been rewritten to tell a different history. I guide readers in a tour of examples of what it means for literacy educators and researchers to explore the discursive void. Such exploration is crucial for building awareness of biases that silence the sociocultural realities of marginalized groups of students, educators, and researchers. This goal has recently moved to the foreground in educational research as we confront systemic racism and the atrocities committed against Black, Indigenous, and non-Black people of color as well as other socially, educationally, and professionally marginalized groups. With greater awareness of the silences that pervade learning and research contexts, we are more able to foster the equitable learning communities we need for socially just societies.

Given a dialogic notion of void, I unpack prevalent silences within global and local community spaces, bringing hidden or unacknowledged human endeavors into the social spotlight within educational contexts. Over the past several years, I have identified and integrated contributions from micro-histories, journalism, literary scholarship, visual artwork, and educational research that exemplify recent global and local efforts in empowering young girls, women and transgender individuals across color lines, the bulk of whom have experienced some form of societal censorship. Hence, the discursive void that I explore is a constellation of silenced creations and contributions by and about gendered and racialized ideologies, which often compound the lived experience (Crenshaw, 2011). Using examples from social media as well as from my research studies involving pre-adolescent and adolescent youth, I offer examples of what it means to embrace the known unknown of social and academic realities and how language in its many forms and formalities can serve as a beacon for acknowledging and including voices previously overlooked or evaded.

### 1.1. A tale of two voids

The polysemous nature of the term void presents two opposing realities—one that is rife with dialogism, and one that is presum-

## The Existential Void of the Pop-Up ‘Experience’

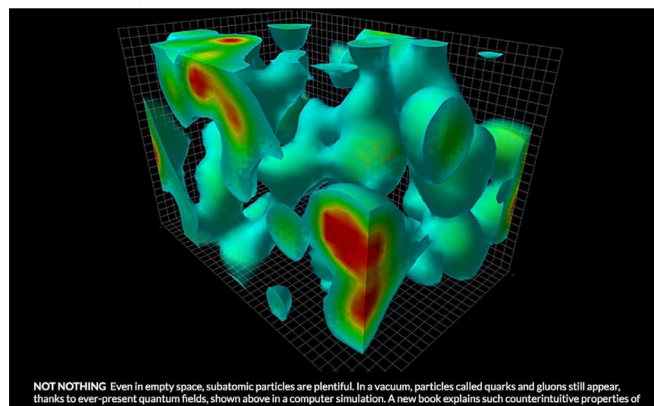
I went to as many Instagramable “museums,” “factories” and “mansions” as I could. They nearly broke me.



## ‘Void’ dives into physics of nothingness

New book chronicles scientists’ evolving views on empty space

BY EMILY CONOVER 7:50AM NOVEMBER 13, 2016



NOT NOTHING Even in empty space, subatomic particles are plentiful. In a vacuum, particles called quarks and gluons still appear, thanks to ever-present quantum fields, shown above in a computer simulation. A new book explains such counterintuitive properties of the void.

Fig. 1. a & 1b. Polysemous examples of the term “void.”

1a. Article from *New York Times*, September 26, 2018.

1b. Article from *Science News* (Magazine of the Society for Science and the Public), November 13, 2016.

ably absent of any meaning at all. Fig. 1a and 1b below illustrate these different meanings.

One may question whether social displays as featured in Fig. 1a are instances of void in the rapid sense; the common practice of posing for pictures—along with the new tradition of Tik Tok dancing posts—can in itself connote a sense of connection and belonging. However, there are growing concerns about the lack of depth in such aesthetic displays (Holowka, 2018), a contrast to the notion of dialogic action as engagement in meaning making as described by Bakhtin (1981). According to Bakhtin’s view of semiotic mediation, multiple voices meld, contract, and even combat one another, filling the pages with “a certain semantic openness, a living contract with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality” (p. 7).

The scientific view of ‘void’ as represented by Fig. 1b seems to align with Bakhtin’s sense of dialogism. Void is a placeholder for physicists who maintain the assumption that even unlighted, unexplored areas in the universe that seem empty—cosmological voids—are full of particles and substances that have yet been identified or discovered (Shields, 2006; Weatherall, 2016). In this sense, the void is the known unknown, full of possibilities. This scientific position seems to align with Baldwin’s assertion that commu-

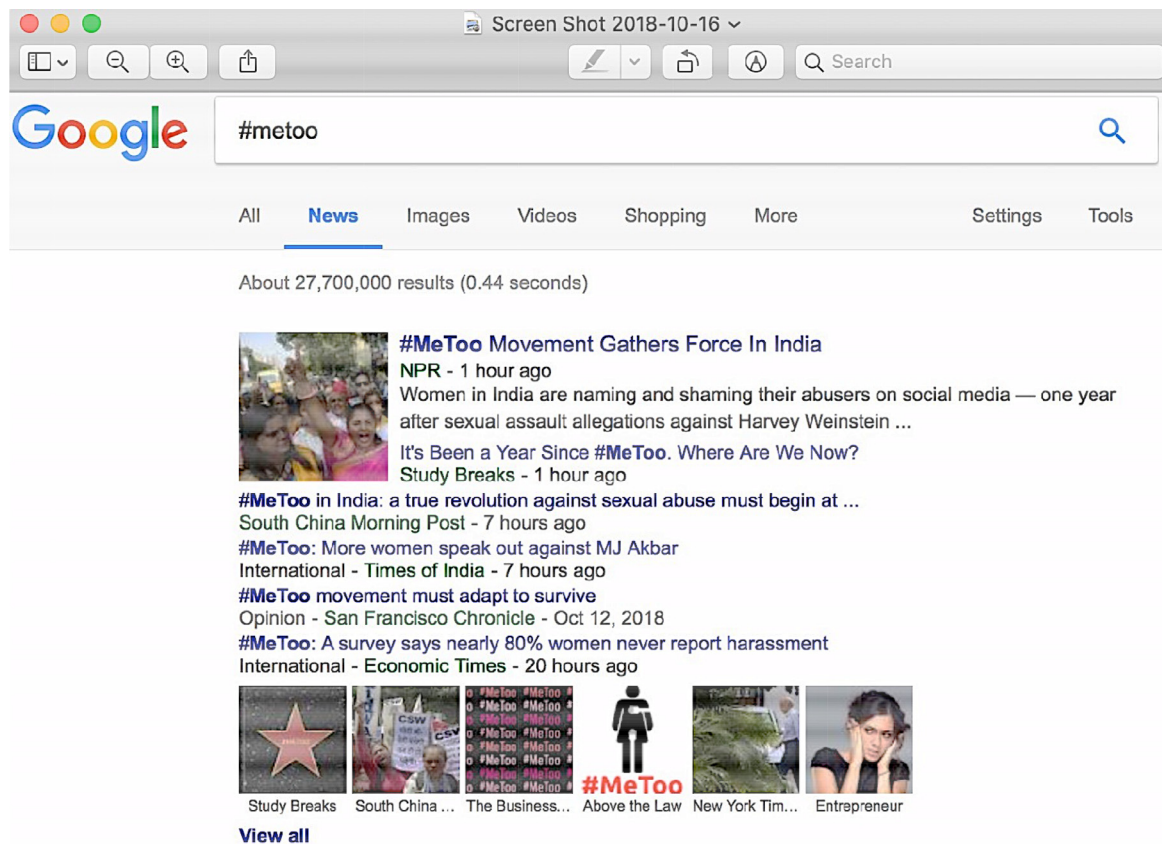


Fig. 2. Google news search on October 16, 2018. The global spread of the #MeToo movement.

nivative acts emerge from an undefined realm of possible inquiries, declarations, and commands. The bolded text in Baldwin's excerpt above serves as a conceptual anchor for this essay that focuses on the dialogic nature of silences within and across learning communities. What role can language and social interaction play in exploring the dialogic void and unveiling the silences held from public understanding?

## 1.2. #MeToo

In 2017, activist Tarana Burke finally broke through typical silencing of social media boundaries when her decade-long "Me Too" movement was popularized via a tweet from actress Alyssa Milano. The celebrity sponsorship coupled with the shareable ease of hashtag-codified messages were sufficient fuel to foster public awareness of Burke's movement that was founded "to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing" (Burke, 2018, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/>, para. 1). One year later, outcry from around the world brought long forgotten or ignored injustices against women to the global stage, all connected through #MeToo (Fig. 2).

The digital hashtag serves two purposes. First, it is a search tool for connecting and learning about the abuses inflicted upon women and other marginalized groups around the world. Second, this global constellation provides a space for listening, learning, and co-constructing social values that inspire action against exposed injustices. Sociologists, legal scholars, and political scientists have long observed counter movements to dominant sociopolitical systems that shape everyday life (e.g., Collins, 2002; Ginsburg, 1984; Lo, 1982). In her essay on the 1973 ruling of *Roe Vs. Wade*, the Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Ruth

Bader Ginsburg (1985) explained her concern that this ruling "remains a storm center" and that the Court "ventured too far in the change it ordered" (p. 376). According to Ginsburg, the move to argue for a woman's right to medical privacy (rather than the right to equality) during court testimony was an unfortunate misstep that in part contributed to the emergence of fierce opposition that continues today.

Thirty-four years later, the U.S. Constitution remains without explicit language that ensures equal protection of inalienable rights regardless of gender—hence a type of silencing of gender equity. In her 2016 book, *My Own Words*, Ginsburg explains that in the U.S., judges are supportive mediators of "dialogue with other organizations of government and with the people as well" and thus views her position as one that helps the nation evolve together to greater social justice for all residents (p. 196). In the current political climate, Ginsburg sees her role as a dissenter who is far more facilitative of dialogic progress than might be publicly perceived.

There is nothing better than an impressive dissent to lead the author of the majority opinion to clarify her initial circulation . . . the final draft, released to the public, was ever so much better than my first, second, and at least a dozen drafts more" (p.281).

The iterative nature of drafting, reading, dialogue, and revision between the opposing sides of a case allows for "ameliorating alterations" that follow when shared space and time is given to acknowledge perspectives and experiences previously overlooked or denied (p. 281). Ginsburg's book is a flashlight into the void of decision making, which necessarily includes important peer editing as well as the troves of dissenting remarks that are filed away in a locked repository. Without the insider guidance of RGB, we would have no knowledge of such dialogic practices among members of the Supreme Court.



In a speech on the House floor, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat of New York, addressed the remarks made by Representative Ted Yoho, Republican of Florida. House Television, via Associated Press

Fig. 3. Article from the New York Times, July 23, 2020.

Since Ginburg's (2016) publication, we continue to see the ways that public figures are confronting dehumanizing, misogynistic acts that remind us that we have far to go before reaching gender equality. In summer of 2020, U.S. House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez spoke on the House floor about recent gendered attacks from another member of congress; in making such a public comment, Ocasio-Cortez sealed the previously unknown incident into the U.S. Congressional record (see Fig. 3 below). Never before has a member of congress been publicly indicted for using gender as a way of attacking another member of congress; hence, the recorded speech of Ocasio-Cortez is the first of its kind to be cataloged. The published account of this incident served as a beacon similar to the #MeToo hashtag that would otherwise be shrouded within the void of gendered and racialized discursivity.

Representative Ocasio-Cortez expressed reticence in bringing forth the "sexist vulgarity" (Broadwater & Edmonson, 2020, para. 2) from Representative Yoho, citing the context of the discursive attack—the front steps of the capital building with reporters present—as a warrant for her testimony. Her stunning speech shined a light on the void of congressional work and the unmistakable truths of gender discrimination and sexual harassment that were echoed by colleagues like Representative Pramila Jayapal with testimonies of their own. Once such formal protestations are brought to public attention, a pathway into the void of congressional discursive matter emerges.

In parallel with this political reckoning of gender equity are efforts to address the dearth of women in professions associated with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), comprising the majority of the fastest growing occupations and projected to be 65% of all available positions by 2020 (Jones et al., 2018; Kennedy & Jansenn, 2018). STEM educational initiatives designed to engage students of marginalized groups including girls and women of color, have increased in recent years and have been characterized by critical literacy scholars Ong et al. (2018) as "'safe spaces' at the margins for groups outside the mainstream of STEM education" (p. 209). Such safety should not be confused with comfort; social justice educators Arao and Clemens (2013) acknowledge the "fear" and "discomfort" that is often associated with gaining a new, different perspective on social phenomena, hence proposing the notion of "brave spaces" (p. 141).

We cultivate brave spaces by acknowledging all sources of knowledge and experience as legitimate and important for engaging in STEM learning, hence elevating family and community resources (people, historical artifacts, etc.) as valuable guides that inform school science curricula. Such a space makes room for un-

packing experiences of exclusion and discrimination, thus integrating sociocultural and sociohistorical matters with the practices of STEM learning and innovation. The three discursive contexts described in this section reaches a crescendo to the arguably irrefutable point that similar to the cosmological void, the void of gender inequities is far greater in size and reach than what is publicly acknowledged. Hence, as educational researchers, we must question what, who, and how we assume to be representative of reality. In the following section, I guide readers through the dialogic void in an educational context, highlighting examples from an educational program called the STEMInist Project that is one of several programs associated with the initiative called Community Based Literacies (CBL). Such examples make visible how educational programs can provide brave spaces for exploring the known unknown of scientific achievements and innovations of traditionally marginalized groups in professional contexts.

## 2. Silences in education

Many educational researchers, particularly those who have taught in K-12 classrooms, have developed an understanding of unspoken or invisible histories, assumptions, and perspectives that can impact students' engagement during discussions and activities. In her 2009 book, *Rethinking classroom participation: Listening to silent voices*, educational scholar Katherine Schultz describes a rich world of participation through what is often viewed by teachers as nonparticipation. Schultz identifies such acts of nonparticipation as instantiations of "[r]esistance, reluctance, assertion, protection, and reflection" (p. x), and notes that silence can be reframed as a "container of meaning" and thus aligned with the aforementioned definition of silence as anything but void (p. 17). Schultz offers rich descriptions of how participation can look, sound, and feel in the classroom. Passion can grow with the freedom to express ideas through aural, visual, and written modalities. While the legitimization of multimodal participation can help in fostering greater participation in the classroom, the promotion of brave spaces by Arao and Clemens (2013) make visible that multimodality of participation is only part of the puzzle.

The overlay of multimodality (Schultz, 2009) with the aforementioned notion of brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Ong et al., 2018) aligns with the programmatic design of the STEMInist Project that is a university-community partnership with a local Girls Inc. center (e.g., Nation et al., 2019). This project annually engages approximately 40 students in grades 4-12 who identify with a feminine or non-binary gender and participate in activities and discussions with STEM women and transgender professionals. Young participants interview and explore various phenomena and technologies with their femtors, gaining knowledge about parasitic diseases of endangered island foxes or dying coral reefs. Integrated with such knowledge are told experiences of being underpaid, ignored or harassed within their respective professional contexts.

Video and audio records, photo narratives, first-hand explorations, and written texts document the work of the young STEMInists, the majority of whom (74%) identify as Latinx and are tasked with researching, writing and publishing the stories of their senior STEMInist colleagues. As such, participating femtors guide their young STEMInist co-learners through the void of the STEM work context, shining a light on challenges that marginalized professionals face as they strive towards discovery and innovation. A key outcome of this work is a growing confidence among the young participants who have in turn memorialized the practice of asking any invited guest speaker at their Girls Inc. center about the challenges they faced, often leading with the question, Did anyone ever doubt that you could succeed in your career? Hence, the young STEMInists have crafted their own flashlight by which they can peer into the void of sociocultural inequities.

The approach of fostering engagement in multimodal, critical communication may be helpful for educators who strive to critically explore unspoken or underexplored knowledge and experiences of students. [Schultz \(2009\)](#) describes how teachers and students should engage in inquiry that gives voice to unspoken knowledge and experiences. Critical scholars and educators ([Arao & Clemens, 2013](#); [Ong et al., 2018](#)) seem to push this idea further, breaking the fortress of inscribed school instruction to acknowledge and unpack the assumptions students and teachers bring to the classroom space. Through critical exploration that is grounded in mutual respect and acknowledgement of various forms and formalities of participation, peers and teachers as co-learners can enter the dialogic void. The reward for such potentially uncomfortable engagement with silences is a non-hierarchical learning community in which members teach one another, leading to collaborative innovations that are far greater than what any one member, regardless of skill and expertise, could do alone.

### 2.1. Community based literacies

The STEMinist Project stems from a larger programmatic framework—[Community Based Literacies \(CBL\)](#)—that assumes young students, family members, and members of the larger community as potential teachers or co-learners, who must work together to shed public light on important knowledge and expertise lodged in the discursive void. One key component of this framework is the CRUSH-it! model ([Arya & Meier, 2020](#)) that guides small groups of co-learners during discussions of various forms of textual media that bring potential mysteries, misconceptions, and evidence of bias to the forefront. Any text, including those used within school contexts, are viewed as imperfect, biased ‘co-learners’ that should be questioned and challenged with suggestions for revisions. Researchers unpack all forms and formalities of texts, (including diagrams, visual displays, and videos) through a dialogic, strategies-based approach, beginning with calling out the text (discussing title, subheadings, illustrations, etc.), and proceeding to reaching for key ideas that seem most salient for group members. Unfamiliar terms and phrases are viewed as opportunities to apply strategies (e.g., looking for contextual clues and applying prior multilingual and conceptual knowledge). Such strategy use for unblocking barriers to key ideas aligns with the model called Collaborative Strategic Reading developed by late special education and bilingual scholar, Jannette Klingner ([Klingner et al., 1998](#)). Following strategic clarifications, group members summarize key ideas through discussion, checking for consensus on salient points as well as agreeing to disagree about implications. The final and most important move for the group is hacking into the text, which focuses questioning on what’s missing, potentially inaccurate, and prejudicial. Hence, the group is positioned as a critical review panel armed with the power to accept or challenge the text under discussion.

The ultimate goal of CBL activities and projects is the co-creation of culminating projects that benefit broader public audiences, encouraging young minds to contribute to societal interests, like PSAs and public demonstrations that bring to public light what was shrouded in the void, such as the potentially inequitable handling of public lands for corporate gain. Efforts to elevate critical reading approaches in school reading practices are emerging, which is most explicitly addressed in the Reading Framework for the 2025 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, [WestEd, 2020](#)). However, such critical engagement is still not prominently valued in this era of high stakes testing and school accountability, even with the acknowledgement of having greater potential for fostering postsecondary readiness ([Ravitch, 2016](#)).

Being a social critic of dominant, societal structures, [Baldwin \(1980\)](#) was no stranger to the void of schooling and

education. Using capitalization in similar fashion to modern hashtags, he introduced the idea of E/education in his 1980 landmark essay *Dark Days*, in which he wrote that “education with a small e different from Education with a large E. In the lowercase, education refers to the relations that actually obtain among human beings. In the uppercase, it refers to power” (p. 44). In using capitalization as a type of beacon, Baldwin unveiled the hidden reality of Education as a colonizing force for marginalized groups who are largely voiceless in the development of benchmarks, curricula, and assessments. With such constraints on school expectations, it is unsurprising to observe so many instances of colonization (silencing of non-dominant, unsanctioned knowledge and experiences) within classroom discourse ([García, 2019](#); [Luke, 2018](#); [Smagorinsky, 2021](#)).

If given the opportunity, students can serve as cultural guides for teachers and school leaders within the void of untold student experiences and the sociocultural network that shapes such experience. Students who are positioned as colleagues or co-learners with teachers and peers are able to critically engage with issues and concepts, that connect more with their own experiences and hence foster a sense of agency and investment in learning. The following description of the STEMinist Project illustrates evolution and culmination of such critical exploration.

Exploring STEMinists in the Wild. The research theme for the STEMinist Project during 2018–2019 highlighted the various disciplines of study (marine biology, geology, chemistry, etc.) represented in the work of six scientists, five who identified as women and one who identified as nonbinary. Each of these professionals used discipline-specific approaches to investigate the effects of climate change on marine life and ways to mitigate the devastating losses due to increasing greenhouse gases and pollution. With this general theme in mind, I worked with my colleagues (a graduate student coordinator and a faculty member) to recruit 16 undergraduate students who served as facilitators and co-researchers with 38 young participants spanning grades 4–12. All participating youth assumed the role of “co-researchers” and engaged in brainstorming, planning, researching, interviewing, critical reading, video recording, hands-on inquiry, and writing in small and large group configurations. All literacy activities supported the development of a book about the work of six scientists who agreed to participate in this project.

The very first university visit for the STEMinist Project began with a plea to the young participants for help in making visible the accomplishments of many women and nonbinary scientists and engineers on our campus. We invited young participants to investigate the void of scientific progress, and to learn more about who is contributing to new understandings about our world. During this introductory meeting, one young participant responded, It’s like that movie, *Hidden Figures*. The content featured in published artifacts were not fully predetermined; young members were given license to craft interview questions and research inquiries that would not have necessarily transpired from adult minds. For example, all young researchers were clear about the importance of asking the interviewees about their favorite color in order to coordinate with colors used in artistic illustrations. Our young co-researchers also wanted to ask about pets, which seemed to serve as a key of relating with their femtors. Other personal questions more tied to professional experiences emerged from discussion. Did you always want to be a biologist or mechanical engineer, etc.? Did anyone ever doubt you? What were you most proud of? What did you do when you were our age? Interviewees encountered the many questions with thoughtful amusement and acceptance, seeing their younger selves exploring their labs, looking through microscopes, and flying drones. Making a space for actively pursuing social and academic curiosities opened a path into the dialogic void of little-known work by professionals who have experienced

gender and racial discrimination, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to show what they know and what they have done.

The dialogic practices exemplified by STEMInist participants are not new to educational scholars. In addition to Bakhtin (1981), educator and philosopher Friere (1970) and psychologist Vygotsky (1978) have dominantly influenced the meaning of dialogic within education. We learned from Friere (1970) that a dialogic classroom is one that combats the 'banking system' metaphor of learning (i.e., explicitly directly inserting information to students' minds through lecture), opening a space for unpredictable directions in discussions about key concepts and processes. We learned from Vygotsky (1978) that learning is inherently social, even if it occurs within the individual. Hence, we have learned from these three great thinkers that learning is fostered through open dialogue, acceptance of multiple viewpoints, and a willingness to follow students' and their proclivities. What Baldwin (1965; 1980), Ginsburg (1985; 2016) and others mentioned in this essay bring to this trinity is a glimpse beyond the shadows of dialogic action, the unseen forces that shape visible or public dialogic tensions. There is more to social and textual interactions than what can be seen and heard; for everything that a reader or listener encounters there are hidden layers of histories and voices that make up the known unknown of our social world.

How can educators explore the dialogic void with their students? Educational theorist and teacher educator Gloria Ladson-Billings (1996) openly shared reflections on how she came to reinterpret the silence of her college students who were predominantly White and from middle to upper middle-income families. What she, a Black educator, had presumed to be a quiet group of undergraduates in her course focused on multicultural education was potential engagement in "acts of resistance and defiance" in response to the political agenda they sensed from her teaching (p.80). She described her journey into the dialogic void (using the term 'silence') of intercultural education as one fraught with landmines. Students' journal entries revealed surprise in confronting how little was known about African American history and the great discomfort of feeling ignorant and possibly ashamed of racially biased assumptions.

Journaling activities as well as role-play and small-group discussions helped Ladson-Billings unpack misconceptions and biases. Her advice to educators is to never ignore silence in their classrooms, and that "teachers must ask themselves what complicity they have in creating student silences" (p. 85). As in the case of the STEMInist project, all members (participating youth and undergraduate facilitators) were encouraged to openly reflect on their assumptions about what counts as science and who engages in scientific work. Admissions of beliefs that only men do this kind of work and that science is one kind of thing were given space for critical examination and revision.

Critical questioning (what is called hacking in the CRUSH-it model) is one of the most powerful tools at hand for unpacking this dialogic void. Ladson-Billings (1996) reminds us that there must be time and space for teachers to explore what is not said in the classroom. Educational researchers thus have a responsibility to demonstrate what it means to explore the dialogic void of learning and to show potential benefits from such exploration. As such, in addition to exploring examples of what one may find in the discursive void, it is important to explore how educational researchers construct systematic lines of inquiry that will lead to new discoveries.

### 3. Epistemic considerations

Up to this point, I have focused on discursive silences in educational contexts and on how critical questioning and co-learnership are key for helping students explore the dialogic void, thus fos-

tering critical, brave classroom spaces. What remains unaddressed are the guiding philosophies, sources, and approaches that may be helpful for fostering brave spaces in educational research. There is more than one way to explore the dialogic void of teaching and learning; I highlight key epistemological principles and practices associated with social and academic discourse practices.

#### 3.1. Philosophical perspectives on knowledge construction

##### 3.1.1. Ethnography as epistemology

Educational scholars who engage in discourse analysis within an anthropological tradition prioritize the goal of making visible what is actually happening as opposed to what one thinks is happening during interaction (see Bloome et al., 2004; Green et al., 2004). This difference highlights a view of participants as insiders, or cultural guides for the researchers who must be mindful of their own assumptions that may override intended meanings from participants. A researcher cannot determine what is happening, what is important for whom, under what conditions and for what purposes by merely observing behaviors, hence elevating the need to make visible what is initially silent (invisible) to the researcher. A child laying his head on their desk, for example, may be a result of efforts to focus on what is being discussed in the classroom rather than a dismissal of engaging in the discussion. Anthropologist Agar (1994) called such misinterpretations 'frame clashes'; the ontological frames (assumptions and views of reality) of the observer (researcher) conflicting with those of the community.

Through multiple interactions with community members, researchers' interpretations are revised and 'rich points' of understanding emerge. Clarification of intentions, perspectives, assumptions, and interpretations requires the ideological positioning of participants as co-researchers. An ethnographer must be actively open to the possibility of being wrong in previous thinking, hence opening the possibility for a revised, rich-point understanding to emerge. To create a brave research space means to openly invite refutation, which is, according to Nobel laureate and physicist, Feynman (1969) the key to being a scientist. As we actively question our assumptions about reality through open exploration of multiple perspectives, we can gain a broader understanding of the inequities that exist in educational spaces.

##### 3.1.2. Critical ethnography

Emerging over the past decade is an epistemic frame that could be viewed as an effort to engage in brave research—critical ethnography (e.g., Brayboy et al., 2012; Carspecken, 2013; Castagno, 2011; Powell, 2021). The distinction of critical ethnography compared with other similar epistemologies is the maintenance of explicit awareness about "the realities of schools" and, in Foucauldian spirit, efforts to "challenge and disrupt the status quo rationalities of government" and corporate systems (Powell, 2021, p. 2). The active acknowledgement of institutional power to shape life experiences positions the ethnographer as both a scientist who strives to understand reality and an activist who strives to change it. According to scholars associated with Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM), such activism includes efforts to understand and acknowledge that a scholar's inquiry should reflect a community's way of knowing and thinking about the world (Brayboy et al., 2012). While ethnography has been long noted to be an epistemology that seeks to trace reality and its multiple layers of complexity, Native scholars like Wilson (2008) have contended that researchers of Native groups should align questions, approaches, and values with those of the participating communities. As such, the decolonizing efforts of critical epistemology includes transforming the educational research field and associated areas of study that are part the institutional void. The burgeoning work of scholars affiliated with CIRM has brought to light the problematic his-

tory of Western-dominant, educational research, which largely reflects a narrow and colonized understanding of educational success (Battiste, 2002; Smith, 1999). As such, CIRM is a beacon that makes visible the ways that educational research programs and institutions have (albeit at times inadvertently) subjugated the populations being studied.

Feminist scholars have characterized such critical inquiry as engagement in catalytic validity; this term seems to have roots in Friere (1970) who encouraged scholars to understand reality for transformational ends (Lather, 1986; Leuverink, & Aarts, 2019; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Hence, critical ethnography positions the educational researcher as both a witness of reality and a catalyst for changing that reality to bring greater equity to educational spaces. And for a portion of these critical scholars, the greatest change needed may be in the researcher and the lines of inquiry they construct in their work.

### 3.1.3. Criticality in discourse studies

Similar to the intended purposes of critical ethnography, scholars engaged in critical discourse analysis (CDA) prioritize the goal of unpacking invisible sociocultural and sociopolitical tensions in discourse in spoken and written texts (Fairclough, 2001; van Dijk, 1999). An underlying principle of CDA is the notion that textual productions such as journalistic publications or speeches are driven by an unspoken agenda that is not always intentional. When critically unexplored, such unrecognized systems and interests have maximum opportunity to shape the perceived realities of readers, viewers, and listeners. Using a critical lens, the researcher can view ideological perspectives on social media sites like Facebook to understand how social groups develop and gain sociopolitical influence on others. Such reading involves a three-dimensional conceptual framework that guides the researcher from descriptions of what was produced/observed moving to deeper layers of interpretative analysis. While not prescriptive in terms of analytic moves, CDA provides a frame for capturing the multiple layers of semiotic constructions in discourse.

CDA scholars like Rogers and Mosely (2006) and Mazzei (2004) have explored and demonstrated the ways that educators can use this analytic tool for unpacking the tensions and silences within classroom exchanges. Mazzei (2004) suggested that the “deconstructive practice” of exploring and reshaping the dominant hierarchy of classroom talk (e.g., teachers ask the majority of questions raised and serve as evaluator of student responses) and critically exploring “meanings present in the silent traces of speech” can be a powerful tool for fostering equitable practices within schools (p. 28). I view the practice of such deconstruction as maintaining a mindful eye on the known unknown of voiced and unvoiced meanings that are lodged in the void of classroom practices. Similar to critical ethnography, CDA positions the scholar as a kind of activist revealing injustices in need of reconsideration and action on the part of policy makers, teacher educators, school leaders, and other stakeholders. In this sense, Agar’s (1994) frame clash is more than a conflict between expectation and experience; it is an opportunity to confront and transform inequality and biased neglect. However, having a critical lens does not guarantee a full picture of reality; we must also consider what sources of information are included and excluded from such analysis.

### 3.2. Data sources

Searching primary sources. In *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, historian Lepore (2015) provides readers with an insider’s view of the complex world of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century feminism and the even more complicated antihero Marsten who created the comic book character Wonder Woman in 1942. Lepore provides a rich account of how Wonder Woman came into being during a time

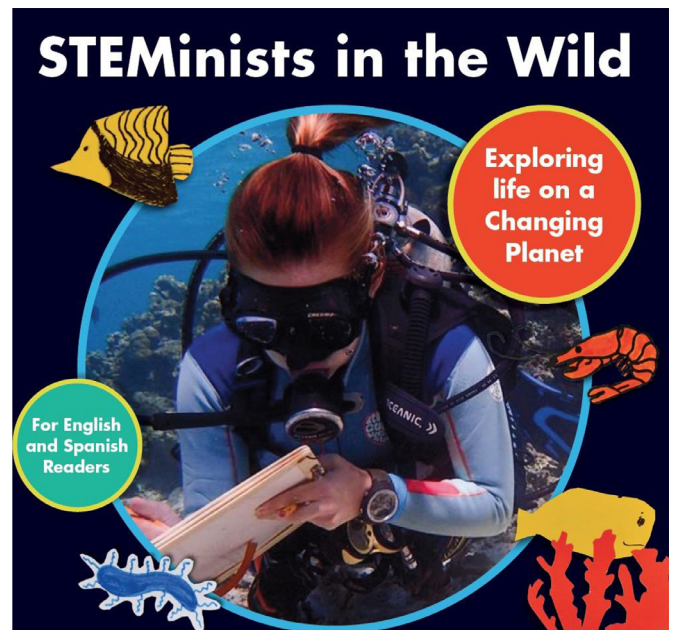


Fig. 4. Cover of book, currently in press.

of political turmoil from two world wars and a social awakening among women seeking a life beyond housework and childcare.

Lepore guides the reader into the void of unpublished works by Marsten and those who were close to him. Hermeneutic explorations of personal diaries, half-finished memoirs, and in-person accounts provided an explanatory background for the earliest publications of Wonder Woman comics during the early 1940s. Readers looking for a neatly tied narrative of women empowerment will undoubtedly be disappointed; indeed, life is complicated, just like Marsten and the women that surround him. Through Lepore’s windy account of mishaps and achievements, one begins to see the nonlinear path leading from one hidden source to another via inadequately veiled code names and intertextual references from colleagues and family members. Her painstaking work involves at least two key qualities—sustained curiosity and willingness to seek non-canonical, primary sources based on participant recommendations.

Aforementioned scholars engaging in ethnography seem to align with Lepore’s nonlinear, community-based approaches to truth searching in the sense that what counts as important sources are not predetermined by prescribed surveys and other canonical instruments for gathering participant responses. Rather, participants are cultural guides to what is important, offering advice on where the researcher should search to deepen their understanding. Such inquiry requires an open, iterative search for knowledgeable others, and that even the smallest mention of a name or experience matters in reconstructing what happened, what was accomplished long ago. This active, inclusive stance on gathering sources is a contrast to practices that may privilege some ‘knowers’ over others based on ontological assumptions and other sources of epistemic bias. For example, a published study about the development of ‘high-quality’ science texts for young readers may stop at expert vetting for conceptual accuracy and literary structure and exclude perspectives and input from targeted young readers.

Representing silenced voices and experiences. Artist and philosopher Piper (1991) has been long noted for her ability to capture racism in visual form, as in her work titled *Decide Who You Are*, Anita Hill, shown below.

Fig. 4. Adrian Piper, *Decide Who You Are*, Anita Hill. From the series, *Decide Who You Are*, #1: *Skinned Alive* (1991).



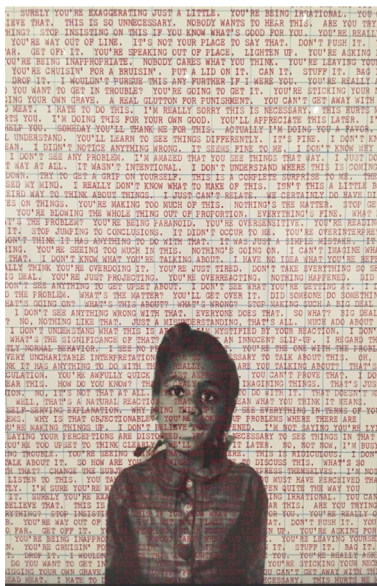


Fig. 5. Adrian Piper, *Decide Who You Are*, Anita Hill. From the series, *Decide Who You Are*, #1: *Skinned Alive* (1991).

In her 1992 interview with Delores Brandon produced for National Public Radio segment, *Crossroads*, Piper explains that the Anita Hill piece was a reconstruction of instances of “marginalizing preemptory dismissal” she had experienced in her life (para. 9). The small yet capitalized red print is a visual manifestation of racism and gender bias; comments like **LIGHTEN UP** and **I DON’T SEE ANY PROBLEM** attempts to silence the young Anita, who demonstrates the superhuman strength to smile through it all. The photo of Anita Hill was a serendipitous discovery that, for Piper, communicated a “sense of vulnerability, and the sense of not feeling any fear . . . no shame, no sense of inhibitions. That photograph of her as a child in part explains why she had the courage and strength to do what she did as an adult” (para. 10). Piper’s explanation of her work offers a contextual ground for the moment in U.S. history when legal scholar Anita Hill testified to Congress in 1991 about her experiences of being sexually harassed by U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

Piper’s work allows us to see the silencing effects of dismissed experiences and knowledge of members of culturally nondominant groups, what philosopher Dotson (2014) describes as epistemic oppression. Here, silence is a largely subconscious effort to keep hidden in the void of social experience the daily onslaught of racism on marginalized groups, particularly Black Americans. Young Anita’s image peeking through silencing discourse is a visual manifestation of epistemic oppression, and from historical records, we can witness the double bind that, according to Dotson, follows from such acts of oppression. The older Anita (Professor Hill) was caught between two equally bad options for responding to a dismissal from the listening jury of congress members about allegations of sexual harassment by Thomas—either she pushes back, running the risk of losing credibility, or she leaves the fantasy of false understanding uncontested, feeling even more invisible. Dominant structures and systems are maintained through this double bind, which can only be deconstructed through active inquiry and protest. While Dr. Hill’s testimony may have itself been silenced with Thomas’ ultimate ascendancy to the Supreme Court, her bravery arguably helped make visible forms of oppression that kept voices like hers in the void of the social experiences of marginalized groups.

In searching troves of forgotten and unpublished documents, Lepore (2015) shines a light on the importance of gaining in-

sider perspectives of historical events or eras, capturing the multiple layers of actors, particularly those whose voices have been excluded. Lepore shows how one can pick up threads or mere traces to question such silent texts and voices into being. What Dotson (2014) and Piper (1991) make clear, however, is that one does not necessarily need to be a super sleuth to uncover the discursive silences that pervade everyday discourse; one merely needs to acknowledge and be brave enough to consider information that conflicts or clashes with assumptions and biases of the reader/listener/viewer/researcher.

The summation of epistemological frames and data sources described above signify lines of inquiry that serve to critically explore researchers’ assumptions, intentions, and decisions in what and how research is conducted. Why do I want to study this phenomenon? What am I possibly missing in my thinking? In what ways could my research exploit community(ies) of interest? What safeguards and strategies do I have in place to check my privilege? Such questions may help foster the culturally sustaining research practices needed for deep explorations into sociocultural phenomena.

4. Final thoughts

Consider a bold proposal—silence, contrary to earlier scholarship across disciplines, is a kind of void, one that we can explore deeply to learn about ourselves and each other. To dive into this void means to abandon prescribed frameworks and genres in preference for unpredictable, community-based pathways through iterative questioning and exploration guided by our participants who are valuable co-researchers. In order to embrace the roar that can rise from pockets of little-known experiences and events, one must be willing to listen openly, particularly if it is uncomfortable or difficult to comprehend at first. The more we listen, see, and understand what is happening for/to/by whom, for what purposes and under what conditions, the more we are able to understand and acknowledge the experiences of all who live, learn and create within a given space. Unpacking silence is a shared mission for educators and researchers.

Throughout this essay, I showed what it looks like to see and listen within the void. I highlighted examples from the work of educators and scholars who have explored, uncovered, and (re)presented hidden texts, voices, histories, all intertwined in a terrible and triumphant web of complexity. As we confront our assumptions and biases, we grow in our abilities to see and listen with the help of our cultural guides who can lead us into the void and closer to the realities we strive to understand.

Critical literacy models like the CBL framework position students as co-learners with teachers and other knowledgeable adults within a learning community. Adults are not always correct in their assumptions, and children can be contributing knowers when given the opportunity. Such critical approaches are not only for classrooms; critical literacy scholar McClung (2018) describes a moment in her family when her then four-year-old, Ada, confronted a discovery about a key character’s name (a horse named Blacky) in one of her favorite books (*Princess in Black*). According to Dictionary.com, this seemingly innocuous name is known in many circles to be a “contemptuous term used to refer to a black person” (p. 402). McClung’s feature article is an illuminating exploration into the void of unacknowledged racist references and the epistemic oppression experienced by Ada’s other parent, Jesse (a Black East African immigrant who identifies as transgender), when they confronted the children’s book author (Shannon Hale) on Twitter. Hale’s response echoes the racism running across young Anita Hill’s face in Piper’s (1991) work —“Blacky is a common name children give to pets with black fur. What’s your concern with it?” (p. 403).

A silent text in McClung's article is the fact that I am a member of Ada's family. As her godmother, I can offer readers a closer look into the void of little-known critical family literacy practices and how Ada inspired my development of CBL. A year following the book incident, I discovered how much Ada's critical awareness had strengthened into an active compass for social justice. The following exchange<sup>1</sup> takes place while I am drawing with Ada.

Ada:	we can go to the park before Daya [Ada's name for Jesse] gets here
Me:	well when is she coming
[7 seconds passes; Ada is facing me while I continue to look down at our drawing]	
Ada:	it's not she, it's he or them
Me:	[looking up to Ada] oh you're absolutely right I'm so sorry you have to keep helping me remember to use the right words [Ada nods]
Nicola:	you know what you are Ada
Ada:	wha
Nicola:	you're an ally

Ada's cultural acuity is a stark contrast to adults like me who strive to reconfigure assumptions about social life and identities, which are far more fluid and dialogic than earlier conceptualized. We are facing a new era struggling to be born; this era is one that acknowledges the rights and privileges of all individuals in society to be seen and valued for who they are. Only such intrepid, truth-revealing work can combat what African American studies scholar Glaude (2020) describes as a longstanding "value gap" between white America and Black (and other minoritized) lives who continue to find themselves in marginalized positions (p.7). We are now confronting this value gap that feeds on a number of systemically administered lies—the notion that slavery died after the Civil war, that Native Americans were duly compensated for the genocides of tribal nations, that attempts to make America great again actually means to make white America fall back asleep in Reagan's dreamland. We must confront such lies and the entrenched value gap; millions of cultural guides are showing us the way into the void of institutionalized atrocities against Black and Brown lives through smart phones and social media tools like Facebook and Tik Tok (Herrman, 2020).

I often imagine my goddaughter, now eight years old, flying effortlessly through the discursive void that holds all silenced voices, identities, injustices and brilliant discoveries waiting to be uncovered. She is a new kind of Wonder Woman—one that is full of wonder and is wonderful. Ada gives me hope for the future; through our interactions, she shows me a world in which communities fearlessly embrace the triumphant roar that is released when we are open to understanding more deeply about various communities of practice and the layers of actors within them. As educational researchers, we must strive toward such open understanding that can serve as a new foundation for the development of culturally responsive and critically sensitive curricula, assessments, and policies. Perhaps our children, if we let them, can guide us toward this goal.

<sup>1</sup> Transcription aligns with how the assertions are uttered according to message units (Bloome et al., 2004). Nonverbal cues are included within parenthetical markers. Phatic displays were captured in bold text and indications of questioning were marked with an upwardly directed arrow ("↑") with the opposite indicating definitive intention.

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