



Listening for silences: Discursive constructions of class within reflections of black male study abroad travelers from the USA

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ABSTRACT

This article features a critical discourse analysis of narratives gathered from Black men reflecting upon their travel experiences. Though the participants consistently referenced their race and gender through explicit mention and self-naming, ideas concerning the identity marker of class were most often communicated through silence characterized by imprecise, obfuscating language and indirect, euphemistic word choices. Using the tools of critical discourse studies, I explored the nature of these silences and the understandings they revealed in spite of being only indirectly spoken. The implications of this work are both conceptual and applied in nature. Conceptually, the analysis offers a model for considering, grappling with and ultimately mobilizing a data corpus' instances of silence. The insights gained about the self-understandings of this underrepresented subgroup of study abroad travelers provide helpful information for student affairs and international education practitioners seeking to attract and better serve Black male students.

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1. Introduction

The existence or impact of an object, idea, experience or perspective is not made any less real because it is not verbally acknowledged. There can be many reasons a concept is not explicitly identified or addressed, some of them intentional, others more subconsciously motivated. Regardless of the reasoning, however, the importance of the silenced idea is not necessarily diluted by its being unspoken. Employing a critical discourse studies (CDS) approach with a narrative framing, I inquire into how the construct of class is silenced by Black male interviewees sharing reflections on their time spent participating in study abroad programs. Though they do not typically address issues of class with the same directness that they tackle ideas related to race and gender, I argue that their conceptualizations of class are important parts of their stories and their self-understandings. As researchers and practitioners, we must attune our listening ears to messages that those we seek to serve may be sending in packages wrapped in silence. Using the CDS tools of systematic linguistic analysis and self-reflection, I interpret transcriptions of exchanges between myself and eight Black men who traveled abroad as part of their higher educational studies. I offer conclusions with hopes that my findings will serve as helpful insights for other equity-minded educational practitioners who wish to increase or to reflect upon the effectiveness of their

communication with all students and those who are marginalized and underrepresented in higher education spaces in particular. My analysis focused on the discourse patterns indicating their understandings of their relationships to the construct of class and to notions of equitable higher education learning spaces. This study is guided by the following research question: how do Black male study abroad travelers use discourse to reveal self-understandings as related to class? The contribution of this work to the educational research field is a provision of an approach for listening beyond what is said aloud to seek the messages shared by, in particular, Black male participants. This interpretative work need be undertaken if, as researchers, we hope to avoid missing valuable information because it was not supplied in an anticipated form.

1.1. Defining class

A number of critically-oriented studies take up the three-fold identity markers of race, gender and class in an attempt to uncover nuanced insights about the ways individuals are seen by and exist within societal structures (Acker, 2006; Elliott & Aseltine, 2012; Fine, 2012; Gillborn, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Kvasny, Trauth & Morgan, 2008; Morales, 2014; Wright, 2011). This intersectional treatment of identity markers (Crenshaw, 1991) is meant to ensure that individuals are not reduced to any one of the many features that comprise their identity. Such a reduction ignores the important, complex, elucidating ways that oppressive contexts trigger and exacerbate how the intersection of *specific* identity markers

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creates *specific* outcomes that cannot be generalized to individuals who share some but not all of the same identity features. The simultaneous consideration of multiple identity markers is vital for understanding their compounded impact on an individual's social experiences.

While racial groups such as Black, White and Latinx and gender categories such as 'man,' 'woman' and 'non-binary' are generally agreed upon (even as they continue to evolve), categories of class are much more difficult to name, likely because the construct itself is abstruse in ways that race and gender are not. While class is often defined by researchers using various descriptors (e.g. household income, long-term measures of income, educational attainment of an individual or one's parents, status of occupation, home ownership, access to resources, eligibility for receipt of federal financial assistance, family background or makeup, exhibit of a particular set of values, ways of speaking, etc.), no single proxy effectively captures the diffusiveness of the construct. Gillborn (2010) points out that the term class is regularly used without a firmly established definition and Dewan (2012) notes that the nature of class is more than the sum of its many parts. Taking such critical observations into account, Ferri and Connor (2014) invite educational researchers to acknowledge social class as a "floating signifier" (i.e. a term whose meaning is interpreted in many ways by many individuals) that cannot be overly simplified or considered separately from other identity markers such as race and gender (p. 476). For this study, I follow their suggestion and will end this section with my own offer of a contextualized working definition of class.

Among many examples of educational and sociological research highlighting a three-way intersection of identity markers, a working definition of class was not explicitly stated. Often the construct of class is developed through the juxtaposition of category labels such as "low-income" and "higher-income" or "upper-income" (Elliott & Aseltine, 2012; Meanes, 2016; Wright, 2011) that the reader is to assume are exclusive of one another. Using similar language, Sweeney (2014) speaks of "more privileged men" in comparison to "men from disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 805). In other instances, authors described the components of class they considered during analysis without defining the term outright. Following this pattern, Iceland and Wilkes (2006) stated: "We use several measures of class, including income, poverty status, education, and occupation" (p. 249). While the descriptors being conglomerated to signal class were identified, a statement defining what class is was not.

Critical researchers Kvasny et al. (2008) take on a similar tactic in their examination of the impact of the nexus of gender, race and class identities on Black women within the IT workforce. In this article, the authors did not provide a working definition of class, but rather presented a chart featuring contextual participant information in a column titled "socioeconomic class (background)" (p. 102). Some descriptions included phrases providing information about the employment of the participants' parents such as, "Middle class – mother was a nurse; father was a musician/music minister," and "Working class – mother was a dressmaker, father was a machinist" (p. 102). Other descriptions captured information about the participant's current living situation including, "Poor – living on social security," or "Working class – seeking IT skills for a job promotion" (p. 102). While a general explanation of what was meant by the various class levels was not given, there was also no indication that the authors thought this would be problematic for the reader or would limit the interpretative value of their conclusions. Inclusion of parents' professions makes a nod to the importance of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as an important component of class, though this is not overtly stated. As in other examples, class seemed to be a notion considered to be pervasive and obvi-

ous while at the same time difficult to contain in a concisely stated definition.

At once, class is both centered and silenced in that researchers often invoke it while speaking around it rather than of it directly. Such a paradox has led to an extensive collection of empirical and theoretical pieces that inadvertently perpetuate silence on the conceptual matters and complexities of class. Given this, I refrain from attempting to collapse this inarguably profuse, elusive concept into one singular or static definition that must mean all things to all readers and to each of my study participants. Instead I offer this: within the confines of this research project, I invite the reader to think of class as a set of ideas related to how one knows the ways in which they are positioned in relation to others within their given multifaceted social structure. With this broad understanding, I invite the reader to resist focusing on the *what* of class in deference to attending to the *how* of class, how we come to understand our unfixed, contextualized and relative social positions, how we use a range of (often slippery) descriptors to both bound and expand the boundaries of those understandings. What becomes important as a result of this approach are the ways individuals' varied and variable understandings of class are operationalized and thus become influential of one's experiences and subsequent conceptualizations.

1.2. Defining the discourse of silence through the foggy lens of class

From a discourse perspective, an array of conceptualizations of silence and silencing exist. Given this range, I centered my analytic lens on occasions in which specific ideas (here, ideas about class) are silenced in that they are left unsaid, addressed indirectly or spoken around. This working definition of silence is in keeping with Blommaert and Dong's (2010) insistence that silence cannot be considered a void, but rather must be understood as something we produce as speakers "when we need to think, when we hesitate (i.e. when we find something sensitive, controversial or emotional), when we do not wish to say anything" (p. 47).

Several scholars have considered the narratives that exist at the intersection of Black maleness and education. Dominant public discourses are imbued with a power to shape the ways in which a certain group of individuals are perceived by others; the subtleties of the ways in which discourse is propagated can mean that members of society often hold a certain belief without a matching active consciousness explaining the origin of said belief (Foucault, 1972, 1980). A common scholarly discovery has been that the voices of Black men (both learners and educators) are often absent from common discourse and that void is consequently supplanted with popularized assumptions or conclusions drawn from the others' observations (Bass, 2019; Dhunpath, 2010; Everett, 2018; Woodson & Pabon, 2016;). In response, Johnson, Brown and Harrison (2020) call for researchers to include Black men's own perspectives about their educational experiences instead of relying on commonly proclaimed narratives. Public discourses are driven by those in power and, for Black men in the US, some of the earliest and most enduring narratives are tied to their period of enslavement (Johnson & Bryan, 2017). Silence around the perspectives of Black men lead to "educational lore" that fills in the blanks of those ideas left unsaid, unshared or uninterpreted (Thomas & Warren, 2017, p. 97). Strategic discursive moves can be a Black man's option for interrupting these otherwise dominating narratives used to inaccurately or incompletely describe his lived experiences. These discursive moves may include the employment of silence as defined above to do so. I endeavor to apply an analytical frame which will allow for the transformation of silence, characterized as the absence of explicit perspectival input, into something that can be listened for, heard, and

thus elucidating of my participants' own constructions of their self-understandings, specifically about class status.

In a return to the conundrum that surrounds the presentation of a sufficiently encompassing definition of class, I have offered a guide as to how I take on class as a part of this project, but my belief remains that the lack of a universally agreed upon definition of class in some ways drives the silencing I observed in my participants' commentaries. Rather than offering a rigidly bound working definition of class, I take on a notion of class as a collection of observable, measurable markers that signal one's societal position in relation to others. Though they do not state it explicitly, my participants' discursive moves indicate that they are enacting a similar perspective of class as a concept that gains the most clarity when described in terms of relationship to those with whom one shares social space. I see class as a conglomerate of markers that work in conjunction with one another to signal who has more power or less power than the others with whom one shares a society. Hence, aforementioned ideas such as household income, long-term measures of income, educational attainment of an individual or one's parents, status of occupation, access to resources, family background or make-up and ways of speaking among others collectively provide a beacon for understanding how participants position themselves in relation to class. In higher education settings in particular, measurable markers of class may include some observable characteristics such as ready access to spending money for non-essential activities as well as other more hidden distinctions such as familiarity with navigating the nuanced ins and outs of a college campus.

1.3. The role of narrative

The data from which I draw insights are a series of stories participants told about their experiences studying abroad in response to interview questions that guided the process. Some questions were more open-ended, for instance, participants were asked, "Tell me about the time you studied abroad...best parts? Worst parts?" or "What do you miss about your study abroad experience?" Other questions more directly addressed the project's inquiry goals including, "Do you notice any changes in yourself that are directly related to your travel experience?" and "How did the makeup of your travel group impact your experience?" The anecdotes shared not only paint pictures of the events that took place, but also illustrate the participants' understandings of how they move through the world, how they see themselves as they do so and perceptions of how others view such movement (Butler, 2016). While CDS provides me a systematic method for exploring discursive patterns across participants, I use Clendenin and Connelly's (2000) conception of narrative as a complementary conceptual lens for comparing and contrasting the stories told by my participants.

Narrative inquiry is the examination of individuals' life experiences as told through stories (Clendenin & Connelly, 2000). A researcher engaged in narrative inquiry prioritizes several methodological and epistemological standpoints including the following: understanding that the researcher works in relationship with their participants and both learn in the process; valuing of words as representations of complex data; acknowledgement of the power embedded in reporting on particularities as opposed to seeking generalizability as a standard; and a respect for multiple, varied—and yet valid—ways of knowing (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). I take on these standpoints in pursuing the research efforts reported here and offer the transcribed data in storied form as a means by which to analyze the units of information, the anecdotes participants chose to share as they recounted their study abroad experiences.

Though a critical stance is not necessarily embedded in a narrative inquiry approach, a critical perspective like the one I use when seeking to understand the stories my participants told can be lay-

ered onto the approach (Butler, 2016; Rivera Maulucci, 2010). In offering suggestions for ways to ensure that racialized contexts influencing the educational experiences of Black boys and men are not unduly silenced during analysis, Howard and Flennaugh (2011) focus on narrative as a way to gain "critical insight into how Black males understand their realities" (p. 115). They also note that such a focus helps to "recognize the ways in which race, language, culture, literacy, lived experiences, and historical context influence the way that knowledge is constructed and maintained over time" (p. 115). In examining the stories told by Black males who studied abroad for references—however explicit or indirect—to their understandings about class, I attempt to uncover the ways these many factors contribute to the knowledges the participants rely upon as they navigate the world.

2. Methodology

To conduct this analysis, I utilized the tools of critical discourse studies (CDS) (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) as they helped me to identify self-understandings represented in participants' narratives that silently indexed societal-level power structures. According to the CDS framework, the term discourse is considered a social practice that can be defined in a number of ways for a number of different purposes. Such a framework also requires that a working definition of discourse be made transparent if its analysis is to be meaningful. Within this study, I define discourse as follows: the language and language decisions employed in storying one's self-understanding.

A CDS approach to working with the data does not require any particular prescribed theoretical background or set of methods, though the chosen theoretical framing and methods being applied should be well articulated as with any study. While asserting that there are a diverse set of ways discourse can be critically analyzed, Wodak (2013) also notes that there are commonalities among works utilizing CDS tools including "systematic linguistic analysis" and "self-reflection at every point of one's research" (xxxvii-xxxviii). As a 'problem-oriented' (Wodak, 2013) approach, CDS is interested in ways power is discursively created, maintained and propagated. In part because of the fact that such power dynamics affect what is said out loud and what is not, what is identified as discourse must include more than just those words spoken aloud. Further, it must be recognized that discourse is mutually constitutive; it both creates something that contributes to the context within which it exists and is created by a host of elements within that context. Research contexts are not immune to the existence of influential power relationships.

Other researchers have utilized a CDS approach to make inquiries into constructions and operationalizations of the concepts of race, gender and/or class in ways that contributed to my efforts in this study. For instance, Perkins, Chan-Frazier and Roland (2019) used critical discourse analysis to explain how ethnically diverse Black participants within a US setting used discourse to indicate their contextualized social relationship to others. In particular, they uncovered how their participants used language to express their understandings of how their Blackness was positioned within society in both positive and negative ways. Through language choices, the participants revealed how they made sense of their racialized surroundings and of their self-understandings within that space, as do participants within the present study. In another example that featured interrogation of language usage though not presented as a discourse analysis, Paris (2009) presents his considerations of how African American Language (AAL) operates in multiethnic high schools. Paris found that shared language—regardless of the ethno-racial backgrounds of those sharing the space and language—served as a unifying factor and a means by which differences that otherwise served as communicative boundaries were able to be crossed. In the current study, through study of their

Table 1
Study Participants.

Self-Selected Pseudonym	Education Level at Time of Travel	Academic Discipline	First International Travel?	Travel Location(s)	Year(s) of Travel
Omar*	G	Education	No	Brazil	2015
Bruce*	UG	Engineering	No	China	2014, 2015
Dexter	UG	Business	Yes	England, France	2014
Dirk*	UG	Engineering	Yes	Brazil, China*, Costa Rica	2013, 2014, 2015
Anthony	UG	Geology	Yes	England, Morocco	2015, 2016
Fat Kat	UG	Communications	No	Brazil	2014
John Smith	UG	Business	Yes	Mexico, Bahamas, Costa Rica, China	2010, 2012, 2013
Laneer	UG/G	History	Yes	China	2007, 2008, 2012

* indicates participants with whom I traveled internationally.

discourse choices we find that participants' reliance upon shared language traditions served to make space for silence; I argue that some ideas were left unsaid due to a trust in the belief that shared language would yield shared understandings that did not need to be spoken aloud.

2.1. Data

The data corpus for this study was comprised of a selection of interview transcripts collected as a part of a larger project inquiring into the study abroad experiences of minoritized travelers. Between 2015 and 2017, I conducted 33 interviews with historically underrepresented study abroad travelers who were also attendees of historically White institutions of higher education, with hopes to compare and contrast experiences had in predominantly White travel groups with those had in travel groups intentionally composed with the needs of historically underrepresented travelers in mind. The original participant pool was diverse in terms of gender, race, home language and first generation college student status. The majority of the participants who traveled exclusively with predominantly White groups (13 of 33) were recruited via mailing lists managed by the university's diversity and inclusion office as well as its international affairs office. Of the participants who traveled with predominantly underrepresented travel groups (20 of 33, four of whom traveled with both types of groups), most (16 of 33) were invited to participate after we participated together in one of two study abroad trips I took as a graduate student to Brazil and China. For the present study, transcripts from interviews with the eight Black men who participated in the larger project were utilized. The interviews (three in-person and five via phone) lasted for an average of 70 min and were collected between three months and four years after travel was completed. Each interview was transcribed either completely by myself or by myself after a third party service completed the initial pass. The conversations were transcribed verbatim and, in line with the study's focus on narrative, were formatted to mirror narrative prose. Punctuation conventions were included to capture my interpretation of the flow of both participants' speech and their ideas. Distinct pauses in speech were noted, and in the rare instance that a word or phrase was added or a section of speech removed as part of the restroying process, I made note by including the insertion within brackets or marking removed speech with an ellipses. I present the transcriptions included here with acknowledgement that they are a reflection both of the participants chosen utterances and my own biases, worldviews and lived experiences (especially with the esoteric concept of class) which have become inextricably included as a result of the transcription process (Bucholtz, 2000).

When I transcribed, I relied on repeated playback of the recordings and memories of our in-person or phone conversations in helping to make interpretive transcription decisions. In the latter instances, I reviewed the transcripts in conjunction with their audio-recordings before sending all transcripts to participants for them to review as a part of the member checking process. Partic-

ipants were also invited to edit or clarify anything they felt necessary within the transcript though none of them did so. One participant, John Smith (all names are self-chosen pseudonyms), however, did request a copy of the audio-recording of his interview so that he could reflect upon it and use it as a resource when writing narratives for graduate school applications. Participants were also provided a draft copy of this analysis and invited to provide input about my representation of their ideas. This second round of the member checking process was a particularly important means by which to add trustworthiness to the data as a bulk of my analysis was centered upon my interpretations of participants' communication of ideas of class that were not typically explicitly stated. Participant feedback from all eight respondents has been incorporated and re-shared (sometimes across several rounds of this process), though no requested changes or added clarifications substantially altered overall analytical findings. While all attended the same large public university located in the Midwestern US either as undergraduate or graduate students, the participants studied abroad in various locations (e.g. China, Brazil, Morocco and several Caribbean and European countries). Participant demographic data was collected under the auspices of the larger study which did not collect specific information regarding class status. In keeping with Iceland and Wilkes' (2006) endorsement of the use of a range of class-indicating markers, whether or not study abroad was the participant's first international travel is indicated in Table 1 which includes additional information about participants' travel and educational background.

2.2. Researcher positionality

As a researcher aligned with a CDS approach, I prioritize attention to context. A discourse analysis does not rise to the level of critical if the power dynamics set in place by the context within which the discourse is happening are not interrogated. As such, a CDS approach also requires the researcher to be vigilantly aware of the ways they contribute to the data collected and its subsequent analysis. I engage in this work as a Black woman and educator whose childhood and adolescent years were spent in a financially secure two-parent household. I speak both African American English—a dialect popularly spoken among Black Americans—and White Mainstream English—a term offered by Baker-Bell (2020) to signify the power and privilege associated with this English dialect that is inextricably linked to race. I have studied and lived abroad on several occasions since adolescence both with school/university-based programs and on my own. As mentioned, I traveled as a researcher or researcher-participant with three of the study's eight participants (Omar, Bruce and Dirk).

The trip that inspired the broader project was conceived by university faculty committed to providing international education experiences to students who were not likely to have access to them otherwise. The 11-day spring break trip to Salvador, Brazil (with Omar) was attached to a semester-long course that required enrolled students to conduct an inquiry project somehow related to

the trip. In the year following, I was invited by the trip's coordinator to continue the research work by traveling with a group composed almost entirely of Black and Latino men (including Bruce and Dirk) to Wuhan, China. In both cases, I experienced the trip as a fellow traveler and gathered data while abroad primarily in the form of journaled daily reflections. More importantly, though, I got to know well those participants with whom I traveled. We sat on planes and trains and in airport waiting rooms together, we ventured off the beaten path together and contributed to casual conversations that sometimes took a turn toward deep, shared introspection. These shared experiences resurfaced in our subsequent interview sessions and also influenced the ways I thought about the interview conversations I had with individuals with whom I had not traveled. Among others, these lived experiences and aspects of my identity contributed to interactions between myself and my research participants as well as to the conclusions I have drawn from those interactions.

2.3. Analytic process

This project was born out of an earlier study of the same subset of participant narratives. In the first study, my colleagues and I (Patterson et al., 2021) inquired into the ways study abroad travel contributed to the participants' self-understandings. Though it fell outside of the scope of that analysis, a pattern emerged—participants spoke regularly and explicitly about their Black maleness while more often only alluding to their class backgrounds. Because context is such a central component of a CDS approach, noting this encouraged inquiry into the contextual influences that resulted in the observed discourse trends. I feel confident in connecting an explanation of *why* this was happening to the fact that class is a construct not easily defined by society as a whole (or even for experts on the topic). However, as a critical researcher who prioritizes the dismantling of unchallenged, dominant societal notions, I see value in learning more about *how* this happens. As such, the following question guides the present study: how do Black male study abroad travelers use discourse to reveal self-understandings as related to class?

I engaged in systematic, iterative reviews of all transcripts, identifying instances associated with class—a target sometimes difficult to identify because a) the unstated working definition of the construct of class seemed to continually shift and b) the participants often silenced the construct by not talking about it directly. Though the illusiveness of class may have served as a limitation in the study, it was also a driving force behind my inquiry. I took the collection of coded portions of the transcripts and compared within and across individual transcripts to look for patterns and inconsistencies that would lead to insights into how the idea of class was being discursively constructed. In recognizing silence as a potential discursive strategy that could be used in the process of sharing one's own self-understandings while interrupting dominant notions of Black maleness, I sought out moments in particular where the concept of class seemed to be hinted at or whispered, though not explicitly spoken. I noticed following reoccurring patterns which translated into three broad themes that characterized the data sample: participants danced around the idea of class; participants talked about specific ideas that seemed to me to be related to class though they did not explicitly state such a connection; and participants alerted me as their conversational partner to fill in some discursive blanks. As described in the following sections, I then drew upon my own understandings of and reflections on racialized, gendered and class-based notions developed within a US context to theorize the interactions between silence and class, ultimately connecting the insights gained to the broader conversation around Black men and study abroad participation.

3. Findings

Analysis revealed three broad themes that characterized the ways my participants communicated ideas about class. Participants often used one of the three following approaches: 1) talking (or hesitating to talk) around the issue of class without explicit address; 2) invoking ideas related to social capital as a proxy for the broader construct of class; or 3) drawing upon Black cultural references or euphemisms about class to communicate unspoken meanings. In far less common instances, participants used the terms 'class' or 'socioeconomic status.' After illustrating the three representative themes, I also offer counterexamples that assist in understanding lessons offered by the first three. As previously noted, because I am drawing upon the story aspects of their comments, I present excerpts from my participants' interviews in narrative prose.

3.1. Hedging: silencing class by talking around it

In many instances across the data sample, participants either hedged (i.e. used wording that lessened the impact of their statement) or used other coded language in the process of circumventing an explicit mention of class. When hedging, participants often briefly paused or false started as they chose the words they eventually shared aloud. For instance, as Dexter explained that his parents covered the remaining balance of the study abroad cost that he was unable to fundraise on his own, he added, "But also, my parents [pause] so I'm a first generation college student [pause], so it's a different thing." Dexter initially began his statement with "my parents," but does not complete the sentence by saying "did not go to college." Instead, he paused before identifying himself as a first generation college student. With this discourse move, Dexter effectively placed himself at the center of the class-based terminology, "first generation college student," rather than making a value-based judgment statement about his parents and their class status by calling them out as individuals who did not attend college.

In another example of hedging, Laneer discussed the financial struggles his parents encountered during his second year of college, struggles that were mitigated by him moving on campus. He paused before stating, "My parents had actually lost a house in the economic downturn, but they kind of kept that from me. I moved onto campus and it was a really tough time, kind of, finding a way to pay for school." Throughout this revealing statement about his family's finances, Laneer made word choices that lessened the sting of the harsh reality the words embodied. Laneer used the phrase "lost a house" to describe the event instead of some more severe alternative such as "were foreclosed upon" or "had their house taken." Additionally, he used the article "a" instead of a possessive "their" to describe the house, further distancing his parents from the negativity characterizing the situation. He used the superfluous phrases "had actually" and "kind of" in conjunction with explanatory phrases to achieve a similar hedging effect of ameliorating socioeconomic adversities. He paired "had actually" (a note to the listener that an important piece of information follows) with "lost a house" (a softened statement of the economic hardship experienced). After stating "it was a really tough time," he modifies the emphasis provided by the word "really" with the phrase "kind of." Each of these discourse moves served to reduce the severity of the references Laneer made to class. In fact, during the member-checking process, Laneer explained that the phrase "lost a house" was "just how we discussed things like that." In response to my analysis and the meaning read onto this commonplace phrase, Laneer reflected further sharing via email, "I still think you are right, however. It does sound like a way of talking about a difficult issue without being too harsh. To 'lose a house' almost gives me the

impression of an unfortunate accident or something beyond their control.”

In addition to making word choices mitigating otherwise overtly class-based utterances, participants also chose words that represented broader ideas about class. One example of such coded language came from Anthony's assertion that he was the first person in his family to travel abroad. He then added, “I do have extended family members who were in the military, but that is a different aspect of leaving the country.” His inclusion of the sentence clause beginning with “but” alerts the reader to his position that military travel should be understood as a different type of class marker than studying abroad as a part of one's collegiate pursuits. He did not elaborate further upon this idea, but this statement—which does not directly mention class—effectively signaled to the listener that his family members' non-leisurely, non-academic, military-based international travel should not be interpreted as an indicator of higher class status.

John Smith used both hedging and other coded language in describing his class status. Recalling childhood feelings and experiences in order to contextualize his decision to study abroad while in college, John Smith explained,

I had a single Black mom from [a mid-sized urban city] [pause] never had the money to go [abroad]. Never had money to do this, to do that. So I knew that I did not want financial situations to impede from living life. So that kind of made me really sad. I guess, kind of lowered my self-esteem knowing that despite my mind, despite my abilities and my desires, I can't do it because of how much money I had.

Though he eventually directly states that he “never had the money” to do a number of things he otherwise would have liked to do including studying abroad, John Smith opened the statement with reference to his mother as “a single Black mom” from a city known for being home to low-income residents. His brief pause after this introductory statement marked for me a moment of significance and sensitivity. I understood John Smith's intent to be for me, his listener, to interpret contextual meaning based on his brief description of his mom and hometown which alluded to a financially burdened household. Through the member-checking process, he endorsed this interpretation of his purpose. Though not coupled with explanatory facial expressions or other non-verbal communication as we were talking via phone, his pause allowed his message to sink in and served to introduce the next statements which directly referenced limited financial resources. After making these explicit statements, John Smith returned to more indirect mentions of class using a series of hedging phrases. Though he stated without hesitation that he “never had money” for activities he constituted as “living life,” he used the contradictory modifiers “kind of” and “really” in explaining how sad this reality made him. With the introductory phrase, “I guess,” he restricted the level of assertiveness with which he stated the impact of not having money and further lessened the harshness of the effects of his experience by saying that his self-esteem was “*kind of* lowered.” In conjunction with one another, John Smith's many hedges and word choices alert the listener to his class background and its impact on his life, but he does so in a manner that leaves it to the listener to listen beyond the literal meaning of the words spoken to infer the intention of his statements.

3.2. Silence as a lack of directness: using social capital as a proxy for the larger construct of class

As previously mentioned, the concept of social capital is one introduced by Bourdieu (1986) in an attempt to forward an understanding of class that extends beyond a traditional definition bounded by economics alone. He explains social capital as the material and symbolic benefits received as a result of networks and

connections shared with others. The colloquial phrase, “it's not what you know, it's *who* you know,” encompasses the implications of social capital; whether intentionally sought out or passively achieved through familial means, social connections with individuals who have useful social knowledge and status are of value. Participants silenced the broader concept of class by instead talking specifically about aspects of their lived experiences that can be understood as illustrations of social capital. At times participants invoked social capital as something that they were lacking, a way of explaining why they encountered certain problems during the study abroad process. At other times, participants referred to the notion of social capital as a goal they were seeking, something they hoped to gain through studying abroad and the connections they hoped to make as a result. While social capital is just one piece of the class puzzle, in the instances shared below, participants used this component to stand in for broader, more multidimensional ideas about class.

3.2.1. Reference to social capital as something one is missing

In their approximation of class as the more specific construct of social capital, participants often marked aspects of their lives related to social capital as lacking and thus constraining. Speaking in terms of their study abroad experiences, the lacking often related to information or access they did not have. Laneer connected the benefits of social capital and his inability to access those benefits to the fact that his parents had not attended college as traditional undergraduate students. He explained,

A lot of the learning curves and the things that I had to navigate in college, I didn't necessarily have those quick, easy answers that a lot of students, they can look at their parents and say, “Hey Mom, how do I do this? How do I apply for this?” One issue that I found was I tried to find scholarships, but I didn't know the first thing about tracking down scholarships or things like that. It wasn't easy to find some of the answers that I needed.

Laneer described a network of relationships that he saw his peers drawing upon, a network that was not an option for him. He had to identify individuals from whom he could intentionally seek the answers he needed as his own accessible knowledge sources, his parents, were not able to pass this information on to him in a “quick, easy” way. Ironically, one piece of information Laneer needed most was strategies for navigating the scholarship process as a means to mitigate his financial need, an issue he would not likely have if he'd come to college with the type of social capital guaranteeing him access to “quick, easy answers.” Though he was eventually able to find the answers he needed, Laneer asserted that doing so was difficult.

Compared to Laneer, Anthony seemed to find individuals whose expertise he could draw upon with less difficulty. He recounted his experience of securing funds for study abroad travel, “I was lucky enough to know a few people who knew my situation who were on the board [of the funding organization]. [I knew] how to write a good essay.” Anthony went on to explain that these connections paved the path toward alleviating some of his financial concerns, “Just having access and knowing different people on campus. Where to apply for certain things.” He added that relationships he had built also facilitated the process, “I ended up knowing a bunch of people who knew the resources. I kinda lucked out versus other people I know.” Anthony utilized connections available to him and knowledge about his social setting to organize rewarding, affordable study abroad travel for himself. He did not characterize the opportunities at his disposal as social capital, however. Rather, he labeled them as instances of luck. Picking up on this at the time of the interview, I queried further, asking him if he thought his successful navigation of the process was simply a matter of luck or if it could be attributed to his proactiveness in making strategic connections. He replied, “I guess, kinda both...If you just don't

know the right people to tell you where to go look, it's kinda hard to be proactive about it because you're confused in a large university." Though the description of the methods he used to ensure he was able to achieve his study abroad travel goal comprise a definition of social capital in action, Anthony declined to 'own' this class marker and instead insisted that his success was due, at least in part, to luck. In doing so, he positioned social capital as something he did not have, or at least something he did not have in enough supply that he could rely upon it alone to facilitate his study abroad pursuits.

Like Anthony and Laneer, Omar identified social capital (in the form of advanced education and the connections made thereby) as something he did not have yet, though he was striving to gain it. Unlike the others, however, Omar problematized the notion that developing one's social networks in order to enjoy increased material and symbolic benefits was something for which it is necessary to strive. In discussing the deepened self-understanding catalyzed by his study abroad travel, Omar explained that being away from the classroom and learning through experiential means had clarified for him the complex feelings he had about the prestige associated with the doctoral degree he was seeking. Nearing the end of his studies, Omar was acutely aware of the social capital gains a PhD would translate into; he was also very much aware of the class distance those gains would put between himself and his family. As he explained, "I know great people who will never have that piece of paper who I love and respect. So I don't value [the PhD distinction] like that, and that makes it tough when that's what you're working for." For Omar, social capital gains came at the expense of family support. He continued, "I'm in a space now where I got my mentors in the university, and I have my family who has always been my foundation who can no longer support me because they don't have these experiences." Later in the interview, Omar clarified his statement to note that, while they could indeed provide non-academic supports he needed, his family was not able to support him in the same way as his university-based mentors. For Omar, the notion of support is complicated and contextual, just as is class advancement as related to social capital, concepts underlying his comments that he does not explicitly name.

3.2.2. Social capital advancement as aspirational

The comments of several participants connected class mobility with increased social capital as a mechanism of change which they indexed through use of colloquial phrases with positive connotations. The experience of study abroad was repeatedly named as an opportunity that would spark anticipated material and symbolic benefits. When recounting hopes he had for his travel, Fat Kat explained, "My hope was definitely just to do something that I knew people in my circle or in my family hadn't done before." He elaborated on his meaning: "You know, something that would make them proud of me. You know, doing what I need to do, and looking like I'm taking care of business at college." Though not directly stated, Fat Kat's characterization of what he's doing at college (a setting unfamiliar to many of the people in his circle) using the positively-oriented phrase "taking care of business" is tied to a class-based understanding of the purpose of higher education. Being in college, Fat Kat is expected to develop skills and social capital (such as those gained through study abroad) that will result in class advancement as marked by his family being proud of him.

Bruce shared a similar sentiment in explaining how study abroad travel had opened up, as he termed it using a colloquial phrase that indicates hopeful positivity, "the whole world of possibilities" he saw for his future: "I'm a lot more open now—cuz, I'm looking at pursuing graduate studies—and I'm a lot more open to studying at, like, a foreign university for a graduate program which would never be something I would ever think of, even, for applying to undergrad." During the member checking process, Bruce clar-

fied that the openness he described had more to do with imagination than access. Instead of seeing study abroad travel as an experience that unlocked a world to which he would not otherwise have had access, rather it just happened to be the means by which he was exposed to possibilities that had not formerly been a part of his knowledge set. Speaking specifically of the college application process, he explained that his parents and the teachers who helped him with the process didn't have connections to or familiarity with universities in the Western US and, as a result, he hadn't applied to such institutions. This was not a consequence of some negative or limited self-assessment of his abilities but instead a matter of a lack of exposure to the full range of opportunities at his disposal. For Bruce, participation in a study abroad experience helped to make visible the "world of possibilities" that were available to him in ways that his social capital network had not been previously able.

Like Fat Kat and Bruce, John Smith and Dirk saw potential social capital benefits in study abroad travel beyond the travel experience itself which they communicated through use of future conditional phrasing (e.g., "would make," "would be") as they imagined positive elements of their future lives. As Dirk stated, "I knew that [studying abroad] would make me more marketable to employers." By engaging in international educational travel, Dirk anticipated setting himself apart from fellow engineering students, thus increasing his likelihood of employment. John Smith made a similar comment, though more related to his overall quality of life than employment specifically. He said, "I knew that if this study abroad goes well—I felt pretty confident it would—that traveling or going abroad would be a part of my lifestyle forever." Having previously mentioned that such opportunities were not available to him in his youth, John Smith framed study abroad participation as a springboard to a lifestyle that his childhood class status would not have afforded him. Though he does not elaborate on what it would mean for the travel to go "well," before this statement John Smith listed the many things he needed to research in preparation for traveling (e.g. how to get a passport, how to behave in a foreign country), information that he had not acquired organically through the social networks to which he had access. He saw the social capital gains that international travel would afford him as something he would be able to bequeath to his future children. Instead of having to toil the same labors to increase their social knowledge and access, he imagined his children beginning from a more advantageous starting point as he stated, "When I have a six-year-old son or daughter, they gonna know the game quick." In both examples, Dirk and John Smith saw study abroad as an investment that would pay dividends in the form of increased social capital.

3.3. Silently framing class via culturally-based euphemisms

At several points across the interviews, I sensed that participants were drawing upon our shared Black cultural knowledge to send messages about class without stating them directly. Participants seemed to trust that some ideas did not require further elaboration when shared between two Black speakers. For instance, Fat Kat discussed the dilemma he initially faced in determining how he was going to fund his international travel saying, "I just knew I had to work to figure out how I was going to pay for it." After sharing the details of his financial need with his family members, he remembered them saying, "Aw man, just let us know what we can do! We can have a fish fry, we can get all that going so you got some money." In Black culture, family and community initiated fundraisers—especially those centered around food and fellowship such as a fish fry—are a common cultural practice undertaken when one has need. Fat Kat did not explain the concept further, nor did he confirm that a fish fry had actually taken place, but its mention communicated information about his family's class

background. He did not mention getting a large check from a single beneficiary. The shared, grassroots nature of the fundraising tactic of choice provided class background information not otherwise explicitly stated.

John Smith made a similar discourse move in indirectly describing class through a Black cultural lens. He seemed to operationalize an assumption that I would understand the broader reference he was making as a fellow Black person who'd advanced educationally in a historically White institution. While explaining how he believed others perceived him as a Black man, John Smith inserted an aside (indicated by the change in speaking fluidity and tone) to help contextualize how he had come to understand himself in relationship to his surroundings' demographics. He shared,

Since third grade I was in private school, right? So, the only black person in class, that kind of thing. You gotta be sittin' in the front row and makin' straight A's to be considered slightly above average, you know what I mean?

John Smith rhetorically engaged me in his commentary with, "right?" and, "you know what I mean?" Though he was not actually seeking a verbal response to either inquiry, each communicative gesture indicated a presupposition that I would intimately understand the social context marked by being the only Black person in a predominantly White space. The contextualization John Smith assumed I would gather from his description served to inform the larger point he was making: even though he was accustomed to being around others with whom he could not racially identify, these understandings did not directly map onto his international experiences. Outside of the US and its familiar social contexts, he became again a student of his surroundings.

Laneer also connected ideas of race and class using indirect language whose unspoken nuances he assumed I would understand. In the following example, however, he clarified his indirect communication to ensure that his subtlety was not lost on me as his listener. He told a story in response to my inquiry about whether a more diverse group of travelers would have positively impacted his study abroad experience. He shared,

When I went back for that yearlong trip, certainly if I would've had some friends that we just kind of clicked a little better, it would've been great...When I initially arrived, there were two guys that we just kind of clicked because they were into the same things that I was.

Laneer used the phrase "kind of clicked" to describe the type of relationship he would have preferred to have with his travel mates. Typically, use of such a phrase between two Black speakers in response to a question about diversity would substitute a more specific reference to race, not a reference to class. It became clear that Laneer anticipated this assumption when he clarified his initial comment with the following:

These guys weren't actually Black. These guys weren't Black, but they definitely just were close friends...I think that a big thing for me is just we grew up in the same type of situation. When they left, it was just me. It was just me and what I would call the more academic types, I guess.

Laneer felt it necessary to provide additional context to his euphemistic explanation that he and his travel companions had "clicked." In noting they were not "actually Black," Laneer communicates an understanding that I was likely to have drawn the wrong conclusion about their race based upon his indirect phrasing. While he does not mention class status explicitly, he uses another suggestive phrase—"we grew up in the same type of situation"—to reference that he and the companions with whom he clicked came from a similar class background. Laneer makes one final indication of his class in separating himself and his friends from others in the group he describes as "the more academic types." Though he was a graduate student and thus an academic as well, his use of the phrasing "academic type" served to make

class-based implications about the status of those travel companions with whom he did not click though he does not provide additional layers of explicit specificity to describe them.

3.4. Counterexamples: direct mentions of class

In rare instances, participants used terminology that explicitly referenced class. In all of the eight interviews, only thrice was "class" or "socioeconomic" status mentioned in term. Dexter and Laneer both used explicit language in describing members of their travel group, though neither elaborated on their meaning. Dexter explained that his travel group was predominantly White and "middle- to upper-class" and Laneer mentioned that one travel mate was from "the exact socioeconomic rung that I'm from." While neither Dexter nor Laneer supplemented the terminology usage with additional context, Anthony both mentioned class explicitly and elaborated on his meaning while describing his story abroad experiences.

Anthony told a story about some of the difficulties his group members had in respecting the perspectives and opinions of each other. He attributed at least some of this difficulty to the group's class differences while also insisting upon a definition of class that consisted of more than family income alone. He provided profiles of two of his travel companions to make his point. The first individual, he explained, "came up middle class" and is "upper-middle class now." This travel mate was born to immigrant parents who had not gone to college who "just ended up working hard and getting the right job and actually becoming middle class from there." He clarified the young man's class status, however, stating, "So he had a privilege in wealth, but he didn't have a privilege in the same type of knowledge [as another young woman who was also in the group]." The second travel companion Anthony described was from an "upper-middle class" family, members of which were involved in international politics and had traveled abroad previously. He noted her level of global exposure in qualifying her upper-middle class status as something altogether different from that of the first traveler he described. Though they enjoyed a similar economic station, the two individuals Anthony described did not have parity in class status by measures such as knowledge of otherwise unfamiliar international contexts. Anthony found the perceived class status of the woman to negatively contribute to group conversation in ways it did not for the young man. He recalled her "getting angry" during discussions featuring competing opinions and would say to the group about her own perspective, "Well, this is obvious." Anthony saw this statement as an operationalization of class status that contributed to group disharmony, explaining that his internal response in such instances would be, "It's not obvious to all of us." Though Anthony provided this nuanced treatment of class as a part of his story, his own socioeconomic position remained obfuscated; in using the inclusive pronoun "us" Anthony subtly indicates that he, too, comes from a different class background than the upper-class woman he mentions, but he does not provide explicit confirmation of this inference.

4. Discussion

The guiding question for this work centered on how Black male study abroad travelers use discourse to reveal self-understandings related to class and what discourse patterns reveal about perceptions of race and identity within a higher education context. In attempting to interrogate the interplay between race, gender and class, it is possible to unintentionally conflate Blackness with a lower-class status. Instead of remaining silent and thus perpetuating this potential conflation, I explicitly acknowledge that the anecdotes shared here have clustered around class-related discursive

lences and, in particular, *lower*-socioeconomic positions. I also acknowledge that the experiences captured here are not reflective of all Black men who travel abroad nor all Black men who choose to communicate ideas about their class status. Within this participant pool, multiple illustrations have shown that silence was often involved in the participants' narrative tellings of their travel experiences and in their presentation of themselves to me as their interviewer. Whether by talking around the issue, focusing on aspects of class such as social capital without naming them explicitly, or relying on culturally specific euphemisms, ideas about class were typically invoked through indirect means requiring the listener to engage in interpretive efforts in order to catch the meaning behind the messages.

These findings serve the purposes of equity-minded researchers and educational practitioners alike. For educational practitioners, especially those working with underrepresented study abroad participants, this work impacts the way we imagine the needs of Black males seeking international education opportunities and the social connections they inspire. With intent to make access to such beneficial experiences more equitable, efforts should be informed by constituent groups' contextualized, culturally-grounded knowledge and experiences. Equity-seeking practitioners cannot rest comfortably under an assumption that those whose needs they hope to alleviate will always state those needs plainly. This implication has impact beyond study abroad travelers alone; as equity-minded practitioners seeking to support marginalized, underrepresented students, we need to be making concerted efforts to listen through our students' silences, which may come in a range of forms. As has been shown to be the case with Black males coming from class backgrounds not historically represented among study abroad travelers, practitioners' inability to identify various indirect discourse patterns may unintentionally abstract the needs of the historically underrepresented travelers whom they seek to serve. Again, it is necessary to seek understanding beyond what is available at the surface, superficial level which may be achieved through intentional familiarization with potential participants' cultural backgrounds.

Though I am not myself a Black man as were each of the study participants, I was able to hear some of the messages couched in silence as a function of our shared racial identification and the shared cultural knowledge that comes along with that racial identity. Additionally, my participants felt comfortable packaging some of their messages in silence because of their assumptions that certain ideas could be alluded to and not spoken explicitly. Equity-oriented practitioners cannot, however, exclusively rely upon points of connection and similarity as means by which to effectively listen beyond silences. Critical self-reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Reyes & Zermeño, 2018; Rios, Trent & Castañeda, 2003) was a vital strategy in my ability to listen for messages not directly spoken that I may have otherwise missed. Critical self-reflection is a matter of thinking of oneself and one's worldviews within the context of the power structures that organize our society. It includes examining one's own biases and their implications, humbly taking on the perspectives of others, and repurposing reflection as impetus for action. A stance of critical self-reflection can be used to think more deeply about a range of interactions with a diverse group of individuals because it begins with the practitioner. One might ask themselves after an interaction with a student questions such as: Was there anything shared in this conversation that I might not readily understand? That I might have misinterpreted? How did I express my biases in the conversation and how did my biases contribute to any assumptions I made or conclusions I drew? As a result of these reflections, are there clarifications I need to seek from the source?

It is necessary to continue to investigate the race-gender-class identity marker trifecta with specific groups of participants in or-

der to identify the contours of the relationships between the three, how each impacts and is impacted by the other. When doing so, however, it must be remembered that commentary shared by Black men may not explicitly connect the three ideas. The silencing of ideas related to class is an invitation to listen differently to the words that *are* spoken in order to uncover the messages they carry. Many of the works that simultaneously consider race, gender and class do so with an aim toward critical analysis that will illuminate inequitable institutional conditions (e.g. Acker, 2006; Gillborn, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 1999). Especially as educational researchers who intend to engage in discourse studies with cultural groups who may differ from our own, our responsibilities lie in tuning our tools of interpretation to be able to identify meaning that may otherwise be unduly concluded as insignificant or missed altogether.

Completing this task effectively requires an acknowledgement that intentionally direct speech can be considered a hegemonically dominant (and largely White) form of communication (CSAT, 2014). Author and Black feminist bell hooks (1988) warned against centralizing hegemonic ways of thinking and speaking as the transformation of those dominant patterns into standards of communicative measure often ultimately results in marginalized cultural groups being marked as deficient. As hooks explained, when individuals exist within an oppressive society, those from whom the societal structure withholds power "develop various styles of relating, talking one way to one another, talking another way to those who have power to oppress and dominate, talking in a way that allows one to be understood by someone who does not know your way of speaking, your language" (p. 15). I offer that the Black men in this study displayed communicative patterns that have been adopted over time by a group of people who have been systematically denied a station of power within US society. These ways of relating and talking to one another, which include obfuscating direct address of certain topics such as class, serve as a way to resist the widespread effects of enduring in an inequitable society such as a lack of equal access to a range of higher education including study abroad opportunities. In short, Black people in the US, and Black men in particular, have developed communicative patterns that allow them to circumvent some of the scrutiny levied upon them (scrutiny aimed at their language choices and their bodies alike) by those in positions of power. If we as educational researchers are to contribute to this resistance and not to instigate the oppressive force of marginalizing evaluations of linguistic practice, we should heed hooks' counsel that such an effort "demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way" (p. 15).

5. Conclusion

To end, though it constitutes a break from the conventional conclusionary section, I give the final word to Dexter who captured the need for the application of this work both within research and in international affairs segments of higher education. When explaining one of the circumstances that posed a challenge in turning his study abroad ambitions into a reality, Dexter noted that the "traditional" study abroad candidate is "basically, like, a White person" and, as a result, he "couldn't really see [himself] in that experience" because "you can't be what you can't see." The ties between race, gender and class become clear upon examination of this statement. While he is readily identifiable by his race and gender, Dexter's class status—and thus his lack of exposure to similar others reaching the goal he'd set for himself—also contributed to his experience. Though he did eventually study abroad, Dexter noticed that many other Black males succumbed to obstacles preventing them from persisting with collegiate study altogether. He explained:

The feelings [of isolation] I was experiencing at the study abroad, I could understand if somebody here [at the University] was experiencing those same things day-to-day and didn't have the support or resources or a mentor or an organization or whatever the case may be to help them get through class, make it semester-to-semester. So, it gave me a better sense from a retention standpoint—especially for African American males or any person of color going to a predominately White institution—of how having that sense of belonging or connectedness, how that goes hand-in-hand.

Dexter's comment is a plea for himself and those who look like him to not only be included, but to be centered within inquiries around study abroad travel. Making serious inquiry into specific components of the Black male college experience has the potential to contribute more broadly to collegiate success for this and similar populations. As those who endeavor to facilitate such successes, we must attune our ears to listen for vital information that might otherwise be lost in silence.

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