

Dialogue as Black Contemplative Practice

M'Balia Thomas

University of Kansas

Across space, time, and texts, I have engaged in contemplative dialogue with the writings of four writers—Black feminist poet Audre Lorde; Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa; artist, activist, and community healer Tricia Hersey; and novelist Andrea Lee. In doing so, I have participated in a contemplative practice that is culturally attuned to me as an African American woman as their writings—in different ways—are in dialogue with Black feminist thought, womanism, and Afrofuturism. Through these authors and their works, I have found the wisdom, comfort, othermothering, and language I have needed to make sense of my journey as an early career scholar on the tenure track and to become a more authentic, compassionate, and whole teacher-scholar.

Over the past five years, I have engaged in an ongoing dialogue with Black feminist poet Audre Lorde, Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Nap Ministry's* Tricia Hersey, and novelist Andrea Lee. In dialogue with these writers, I have engaged in a social, diachronic, and dynamic exchange of knowledge, thought, and speech practices that have become the foundation of my contemplative practice. The writings of these *othermothers* (James, 1993) have provided me with the wisdom, comfort, language, and sisterhood I have needed to heal from the professional stresses of being Black, female, and pre-tenure in a Midwestern college town. Through my practice, I have learned to turn my face toward the light (Goler, 2019 referencing Jones, 1965) and take pride in and recognize the beauty in my experiences and the ways in which I and my teaching have been transformed.

My dialogic engagement with Lorde, Anzaldúa, Hersey, and Lee is an act steeped in Black feminist thought, womanist theology, and Afrofuturism. As such, my practice is culturally attuned as an expressly Black

Contemplative Practice. Through their writings, my dialogue partners offer insight into ways of thriving in the face of perfectionism, paternalism, defensiveness, individualism, quantity over quality, and worship of the written word—characteristics that mark white supremacy culture (Okun, 1998), but also academic life. Through their lived and textual examples of real and imagined spaces traversed by other women of color, these authors bring me face to face with my past, present, and Afro-futuristic self. From their words, I am quieted and stilled of my anxiety, while simultaneously being fed the language needed to express myself and my needs and to care for myself and others during this journey for tenure.

In the sections that follow, I describe my contemplative practice, beginning with a definition of dialogue. I then discuss my dialogue partners and the ways in which the writings have centered and transformed me as a scholar.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a literary and philosophical concept associated with Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). The term depicts the metaphysical border along which the call (addressivity) and response (answerability) of words and utterances “ente[r] into the dialogic fabric of human life, [and] into the world symposium” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). This call-and-response nature of words and utterances, Bakhtin posits, reveals three things about how we human beings experience language (and thus ourselves) in its spoken, written, and signed forms.

In dialogue with the words and utterances of others, we experience language as *social*. Language is a reinvestment in humanity; a bequest as an inheritance for others (Holquist, 2002). Thus, the language we draw upon is simultaneously ours and not ours as we take up words and utterances and give them our unique stamp. In dialogue with the speech and writings of others, we experience language as *dynamic*. In reflecting on the act of communicating, Bakhtin writes that “when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it, he either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially),

augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution ... sometimes literally from the speaker's first word" (1986, p. 68). In turn, the listener speaks with the knowledge that their words will be met with a similarly active response and adjusts their speech in anticipation. Finally, in dialogue with the text and talk of others, we experience language as *diachronic*. Language is propelled across time and geography by forces that mark its place, moment in history, and occasion of usage. Propelled by material means—text, tablet, fiber optic cables, and Wi-Fi—language arrives across time and digital space stamped with the evidence of the people and places with which it has interacted.

To approach language from the perspective of dialogue is to acknowledge that words and utterances never simply mean; instead, they have meaning for individuals, in specific times, places, and contexts of use. Words and utterances have meaning for the author who writes with some future reader in mind and the reader who takes up that discourse in their current context. This social, diachronic, and dynamic aspect of language reflects "a continuous process, an unceasing creativity ..." (Vološinov, 1929/1973, p. 48) as language passes from generation to generation and bends to our context and needs of the moment. While language exists in its current uses, there is always the possibility for new and different experiences with language in the future. Thus, the words written by others across space and time hold important potential for our present and future, as well as our practice.

Dialogue as Contemplative Practice

Engagement with texts is a readily recognized form of contemplative practice, not only as devotion with or meditation upon a higher power, but also as dialogue with the ongoing discourses in which our ancestors, and especially our foremothers, were engaged.

For example, in dialogue with the words and utterances of my textual othermothers, I am able to engage the social aspects of my being even though I am alone or feeling lonely. I do this, usually at night, through texts where I ponder and radically question the words (the memories, experiences, imaginings, and deep reflections) of my dialogue partners. The deepest and often unvoiced queries of my heart

enter into dialogue with the heteroglossia, multivoicedness, and polyphony of their intellectual voices. At times, this dialogue unfolds by my highlighting or underlining sections of texts that speak to me; or I read and then write down their words in my journal, attempting to commit them to memory. Other times, I repeat their words continuously voicing and double-voicing until the utterances bend to my intentions (Bakhtin, 1986) and offer up their meaning. This opens up possibilities for new, potentially transgressive, linguistic ways for me to engage with the wor(l)d. As I learn to enter into the experiences of another, I am reminded that in the midst of my loneliness that I am not alone; there are others who have taken this journey before.

In dialogue with the speech and writings of these sister souljahs, I am dynamically engaged in embodied and ritualistic practice, but internally still—centered and grounded. I enter into this practice through the way in which I, a lover of material text rather than mechanical tablet, select a book to read. This selection tends to happen at the same time many nights. In my bed, once the TV is off, I take five to ten minutes to reflect on my day. I quietly consider what topics I wish to address that night and whose words might be lying in anticipation of answering me. I head to my living room bookshelves and select a text. Occasionally, I know the book, story, or passage I wish to revisit in advance of heading to the living room; sometimes I wait to see who calls out to me from the shelves. I select a text, walk back to my bed, and read. As I do so, the words of my textual guides do not go unaddressed. I may write or weep, talk to or talk back to the text, shout “amen” or whisper a silent “yaas!” I may keep the moment to myself or share it with my spouse next to me. The goal is to still myself in the wisdom being dynamically revealed to me through the texts.

In dialogue with the text and talk of these women warriors, I retreat across time and through space into imagined and fictional places, and yet I am present in the moment. Before bed, when I pick up a text and dialogue with the words of another, I revisit times in my life when things were different. I remember the people and places I have known, the versions of myself I have loved, and dreams of my future self I once held dear. I remember and I call them back to me—I call them home.

These moments allow me to center and ground myself in the present; they provide me with an opportunity to recall and reflect on what was most meaningful to me, to gain compassion for myself and others and our overlapping journeys, and to dream of a just world. In these moments, in the still space between wakefulness and sleep, I engage in a creative dreamscape (Hersey, 2021) of analogies and metaphors that soothe and guide my heart and mind as I ponder the wisdom of my sister guides and draw upon their experiences to dream a (the) world anew (Conwill, 2016).

My Dialogue Partners

Over the course of five years, I have engaged in an ongoing dialogue with four writers. The first is **Audre Lorde**, the “Black, Lesbian, Feminist, warrior, poet, mother, woman ...” (Rowell, 1991) who I call Mother Lorde (Thomas, 2018). In a paper titled, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Mother Lorde revoices the wisdom of her daughter, writing that one is “never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside” (Lorde, 1980, p. 22). Mother Lorde continues, addressing our fears about speaking up, adding that this transformation of silence into language and action “is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (Lorde, 1980, p. 22).

Lately, Mother Lorde has been teaching me how to travel through the dominions of my anger (Lorde, 2017). I have never been comfortable with anger, but in dialogue with Mother Lorde I am learning to sit with my anger—to “examin[e] and refram[e] my own understanding of it” without judgement (Bailey, 2019, p. 48). The wisdom of her own experiences with anger transcends space and time to show me that “[a]nger is loaded with information and energy” and when “expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have

grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies” (Lorde, 2017, p. 111). Mother Lorde’s words are clarifying and healing; and through them I am learning to “orchestrate [my] furies so that they do not tear [me] apart” (Lorde, 2017, p. 113).

My second dialogue partner is Chicana poet **Gloria Anzaldúa**. In the acknowledgement to her seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Sister Gloria anticipated my arrival when she wrote, “to you whom I never chanced to meet but who inhabit borderlands similar to mine” (Anzaldúa, 1987, n.p.). These borderlands Sister Gloria writes about involve spaces “wherever two or more cultures edge each other” (Anzaldúa, 1987, n.p.). The borderlands are a place of “contradictions,” “hatred,” “anger,” and “exploitation”—where the national languages and speech practices of the Other are problematized and made the object of linguistic terrorism (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 57). Sister Gloria’s words reach out to me across space, time, race, and culture to guide me in confrontations with linguistic terrorism that I face in my professional life.

As a transdisciplinary scholar, I exist within the borderlands of several disciplinary boundaries—applied linguistics, rhetoric and stylistics, and education. At first glance, these disciplinary spaces do not share a common language, and at times, their ideologies appear incommensurable. However, from Sister Gloria I have developed a greater capacity to *translanguage* (Li, 2018)—to draw upon the multitude of national, ethnic, professional, and social languages that mark my linguistic being and refract my unique view on the world. In translanguaging, I am learning to speak with fluency and authenticity, to create my own border language and seek out those individuals with whom I can speak naturally and freely. More importantly, I am learning to exist in the borderlands and to “process the emotional residue” of the “unnatural boundaries” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3) that persist between those within my professional spaces and me.

My third dialogue partner is performance artist, theater maker, activist, theologian, and community healer **Tricia Hersey** (Hersey, 2021). Hersey is the founder of *The Nap Ministry*, an organization through which she advocates on social media and via public and private community art installations for “rest as a form of social justice” (McCammon, 2020).

Drawing from womanism, Black liberation theology, and Afrofuturistic literature, Hersey's public talks, interviews, and social media posts aim to wake us up to the ways in which grind culture, capitalism, and white supremacy have enslaved our time, relationships, and bodies and to help us reimagine ourselves and our society anew. The foundational origins of her work make hers a polyvocal and heteroglossic call to resist, repair, and rest our way to wholeness, healing, and community. Her motto is two-fold—"rest is resistance" and "rest as reparations" (Hersey, 2021). With these calls, Hersey invites her audience and followers into a "dreamscape ... a generative space of freedom ... for day dreaming and preparing for the future we want to see" (Hersey, 2020).

Hersey's calls of rest is resistance and rest as reparations resonate with me deeply. During these years on the tenure track, I have "abdicated ... the care and nurture of my body" (Thomas, 2019, n.p.). I do not sleep enough, I am constantly working, overworking, and I have done this in response to ongoing challenges to prove to others my knowledge, ability, and commitment. The challenge to prove one's self is partly the nature of being on the tenure track. However, the call to prove myself feels particularly loaded as an African American and as a woman. In dialogue with Hersey's tweets and artistic installations, I am learning to pay myself first through rest, to resist the neoliberal push to go faster and do more, and to combat the pressures to perform that the academy nurtures in order to restore the spiritual balance between myself, nature, and those around me.

My fourth dialogue partner is novelist **Andrea Lee**. An American expatriate living in Italy, Lee has written short stories and books, mostly about expat women of African descent living abroad. Her stories of the diaspora of Black women remind me of the adventures and the fullness of life I lived before I entered the professional world of higher education. Moreover, her writings remind me of the fullness of life I have been missing since arriving in the Midwest college town that is presently my academic home.

Before moving to this college town, my everyday world was broad, outward focused, and global. My daily interactions stretched across disciplinary, national, and linguistic borders. Now, my professional duties

are tasked with the immediate, the local, the here and now—there is less room for tomorrow, imagination, breadth, depth, curiosity, or the novel. Yet, through the short stories and novels of Andrea Lee, I am reminded of times in my life when I had adventures, randomly encountered new and like-minded people, and spent long, unplanned afternoons and evenings with friends. In reading Lee, I am transported to these times, places, and spaces and I feel wholly me.

Dialogue As Black Contemplative Practice

Dialogue has become an important part of my personal contemplative practice as an early career scholar. My ongoing dialogues with the writings of Lorde, Anzaldúa, Hersey, and Lee have transformed me and my teaching, and it is an experience that I readily share with any who care to hear. Yet, while dialogue is an approach to contemplative practice that is open to all, the texts and authors I have centered as my dialogue partners render my practice a uniquely Black, and specifically African American, one.

As Harrell (2018) points out, contemplative practices are culturally nuanced. They reflect a specific cultural orientation in the approach, content, design and implementation of practice. Therefore, the dialogic practice I have described is uniquely a Black one. This practice is steeped in the intellectual activism of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2013). In dialogue with the writings of my textual guides, I am provided the language and encouragement necessary to engage in “truth-telling” and to “speak truth to power” (Collins, 2013, p. xx). Moreover, my dialogue partners provide me with “alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge” (Collins, 1989, p. 746). As a result, I am no longer easily duped or readily complicit in the desires of others to treat me like a prop (Collins, 1989). Instead, under their guidance across space and time, I take a self-directed move on the stage of my existence, producing scholarship that helps me address my anger by writing about the testimonial injustices and linguistic prejudices that silence so many marginalized voices.

Additionally, this practice draws upon a womanist philosophy where “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the

mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, [and] the half dead" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25) can join together to rest and heal in mind, body, and spirit from the collective trauma of capitalism, white supremacy culture, and life in a socially unjust world (Hersey, 2021). This is a world against which we may resist by bravely crossing the borderlands of spaces that we inhabit and recognizing that we belong, that we have always belonged (t)here. This means that I—the authentic me—have begun to assert the right to exist in my academic space. I propose classes and workshops that are authentic to my interests, grounded in my field, and unencumbered by the desires of those responsible for assessing my performance for promotion and tenure to perform diversity, equity, and inclusion at the expense of my belonging.

Finally, this practice is anchored in Afrofuturism (Womack, 2013; Anderson & Jones, 2016). Afrofuturism invites us to imagine and address, not only a future self, but more importantly, a future self not readily "offered by the established social order" (Collins, 1989, p. 750). However, to get there—to imagine this new future self into being—we must cease being busy so that we can reconnect with important aspects of our past and present selves. To reconnect, it is necessary to make time to travel literally and metaphorically to the spaces, places and people who sustain us. Technology—specifically teleconferencing software like Zoom—can aid such travel. Zoom has allowed me to travel freely across space and time (zones). In fact, for the past five years, I have been part of a multiracial/ethnic sisterhood-group of scholars. As we gathered initially on Zoom and later in person and then returned to Zoom due to the pandemic, we have kept each other sane and whole, supporting one another's dreams, losses, and professional growth.

In the end, dialogue is a contemplative practice open to all. In fact, it has its own place on the Tree of Contemplative Practices (CMind, 2021). However, when it is taken up and becomes a part of a social, diachronic, and dynamic engagement with texts and discourses that reflect the hope, beauty, intellectualism, and activism of Black life, it takes on a life as Black Contemplative Practice. Some of us—I—need this culturally attuned and soulful (Harrell, 2018) approach to practice. Through this practice, I have learned to author myself from the outside

in and I have come to realize that I am never alone. I am a descendant of those who have come before and in reconnecting with their wisdom, I am sustained and able to imagine a place for myself “Black in the Future” (Wormsley, 2011-2021).

Acknowledgment

With much gratitude to my human dialogue partner and friend, Theresa Catalano, for her generosity of spirit and intellectual guidance—through graduate school and my years on the tenure track.

References

- Anderson, R., & Jones, C. E. (2016). *Afrofuturism 2.0: The rise of astro-Blackness*. Lexington Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). Acknowledgments, preface. In G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Bailey, C. (2019). Teaching in outrageous times: Vipassana practice and the pedagogical power of anger. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 6(1), 47-58.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. University of Texas Press.
- CMind. (2021). *The tree of contemplative practices* [Illustration]. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. <https://www.contemplative-mind.org/practices/tree>
- Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs*, 14(4), 745-773.
- Collins, P. H. (2013). Introduction. In P. H. Collins, *On intellectual activism* (pp. ix-xxii). Temple University Press.
- Conwill, K. (Ed.). (2016). *Dream a world anew: The African American experience and the shaping of America*. Smithsonian Books.

- Goler, V. (2019). If the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves: Contemplative practice and cultural healing. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 6(1), 11-25.
- Harrell, S. P. (2018). Soulfulness as an orientation to contemplative practice: Culture, liberation, and mindful awareness. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 5(1), 9-40.
- Hersey, T. [@The Nap Ministry]. (2020, June 2). [Photograph]. https://www.instagram.com/p/CA9BoVQJGS7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
- Hersey, T. (2021). The Nap Ministry: Rest is Resistance. <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/>
- Holquist, M. (2002). *Dialogism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- James, S. M. (1993). Mothering: A possible Black feminist link to social transformation? In S. M. James & A. P. A. Busia (Eds.), *Theorizing Black feminisms: The visionary pragmatism of Black women* (pp. 44-54). Routledge.
- Jones, L./Baraka, A. (1965, July). The revolutionary theatre. In *Liberator*. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text12/barakatheatre.pdf>
- Lee, A. (2002). *Interesting women: Stories*. Random House.
- Lee, A. (2006). *Lost hearts in Italy: A Novel*. Random House.
- Li, W. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9-30.
- Lorde, A. (1980). *The cancer journals*. Aunt Lute's Books.
- Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister outsider: Essays & speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing Press.
- Lorde, A. (2017). Uses of anger: Women responding to racism. In R. Edo-Lodge (Ed.), *Your silence will not protect you* (pp. 107-118). Silver Press.
- Maparyan, L. (2012). *The womanist idea*. Routledge.

- McCammon, S. (2020, June 4). Atlanta-based organization advocates for rest as a form of social justice. [Radio Broadcast]. *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/04/869952476/atlanta-based-organization-advocates-for-rest-as-a-form-of-social-justice>
- Okun, T. (1998). *White supremacy culture*. Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks). <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/>
- Rowell, C. H. (1991). Above the wind: An interview with Audre Lorde. *Callaloo*, 14(1), 83-95.
- Thomas, M. (2018). The girl who lived: Exploring the liminal spaces of self-study research with textual critical partners. In D. Garbett & A. Owens (Eds.), *Pushing boundaries and crossing borders: Self-study as a means for knowing pedagogy* (pp. 327-333). S-STEP.
- Thomas, M. (2019). My "ritual of pause": How horseback riding taught this woman of color about self-care. *Being Lazy and Slowing Down*. <https://lazyslowdown.com/my-ritual-of-pause-how-horseback-riding-taught-this-woman-of-color-about-self-care/>
- Vološinov, V. N. (1929/1973). *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. Harvard University Press.
- Womack, Y. L. (2013). *Afrofuturism: The world of Black sci-fi and fantasy culture*. Lawrence Hill Books.
- Wormsley, A. B. (2011-2021). *There are Black people in the future*. Alisha B. Wormsley. <https://alishabwormsley.com/#/there-are-Black-people-in-the-future/>