

Contemplative Listening, Contemplative Literacy

Christian Smith—Coastal Carolina University

I live and teach in a state that flew the confederate flag on the statehouse lawn until July of 2015. It was removed only after nine were shot dead in a racially charged hate crime and still, only then, after mounting pressure and one woman, Bree Newsome, scaled the 30' flagpole to take the flag down herself. I used to think that there was something about the Deep South that made every moment in the classroom imbued with a sense of urgency that was somehow unique; I no longer feel this way. The presidential election last year demonstrated that a candidate could encourage racist discourse and court white supremacists and still be voted in by millions outside of the south. So, now that we have an administration that continues to normalize racist and xenophobic discourse many of us—writing teachers, literacy scholars—are wondering what we can do and how we might be uniquely positioned to respond.

At this point, I think the appropriate response is to highlight all the work that has been done on listening in our related fields. Encourage classrooms insistent on the practice of listening to multiple voices for the common places of identification we can build on. Listening not to further validate white supremacist discourse, but to note the ways that our students are often emotionally identified with the cultural logics of racism in ways they wouldn't advocate if questioned explicitly. As Krista Ratcliffe's work on rhetorical listening makes clear, these logics are reactions that play out through emotional identifications and triggered responses. I think of the student who offers the knee-jerk response "all lives matter!" when discussing the #BlackLivesMatter movement, without realizing how such a response works to undermine legitimate concerns and is, above all, an unwillingness to listen to those concerns. Rhetorical listening and an attunement to the relationships between ideology and language, on the other hand, can look for spaces of mutual identification. As James Baldwin mentioned in an interview with *Life* magazine in 1963:

Most Americans lead lives they deny, and they find it almost impossible to be coherent on any level. You have to listen very hard to a college president or an elevator operator to find out what it is he's really saying. They are both trapped between the language imposed on them, which is not theirs, and what they really want to say, which they don't trust. (qtd. in Howard 89)

As literacy researchers and teachers of writing, I would argue attending to these *between* spaces of language is not only always necessary but also currently absolutely vital—but how? And what might this look like in practice? For me, the growing movement of contemplative pedagogy in higher education is an appropriate place to start.

For the past fifteen or so years, many in the academy have worked towards articulating the

relationship between pedagogy and mindfulness. Academics working to incorporate mindful practice in a range of courses and have discovered the ways mindfulness may affect retention, transfer, and metacognitive awareness. More specifically to my concerns here, they have been questioning how such practices may work towards antiracist pedagogies for social justice. According to Arthur Zajonc, one of the most well-known advocates, contemplative pedagogical practices “support the development of student attention, emotional balance, empathetic connection, compassion, and altruistic behavior” (83). Similarly, in writing studies, Gesa E. Kirsch has argued that contemplative practices “can enhance creativity, listening, and expression of meaning—key goals of most writing courses” (W2). More recently, Christy I. Wenger’s landmark book, *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies: Contemplative Writing Pedagogy*, has given literacy workers a framework to think through these issues. As Wenger notes:

Mindful knowing is, by default, connected knowing as it refuses the mindless fragmentation of our scattered lives. Along the way, this contemplative model may help student writers find balance and compassion on and off the page; teaching difference as embodied may lead to stronger and more pragmatic understandings of social justice and personal transformation through the formation of an embodied, feminist-contemplative ethics. (26)

Wegner’s *mindless fragmentation* speaks to the ways that conflicting cultural logics often play out in both our teaching practices and our student’s writing. Further, I would argue, attuning ourselves to this fragmentation may be the central concern of a rhetorical education. If we take Richard Lanham’s definition of rhetoric as the “science of human attention-structures” (134) seriously, then the *composition of* attention itself becomes a literacy worth thinking about. In my own classes, this has been encouraged through mindful practice and contemplative reading.

Contemplative reading practices in the classroom work by inviting students to sit in silence before reading aloud a mutual text together—going from student to student until the text is finished and, again, sitting in silence. Rather than the pressure that comes with an obligation to immediately respond, contemplative reading resists the need to respond by focusing on sitting with the text itself and becoming mindful of the cultural logics the text elicits. In *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush discuss how contemplative reading practices are ways to practice close critical reading but note how the immediate judgments and emotional responses of the reader become folded into the text itself. Such practices, I feel, can work to expose cultural logics without an immediate identification with them. In that moment between, that aporetic pause, is an invitation to practice listening.

Recent research suggests something that many of us have known for a long time: social media reinforces our political and cultural biases. How could it be that, this time last year, so many on the left were elated by what looked like a complete collapse of the GOP only to be shown that something closer to the opposite was true after November 8th? How many of us sat with increasing disbelief until the final results were in? If nothing else, such a disjuncture gestures towards the need for increased listening to genuine grievances to discover mutual identifications. This is not to say that we normalize

white supremacist discourse or that we validate xenophobia—in the classroom or anywhere else—but that we encourage silence, and practice listening to the cultural logics and discourses we are all enacting.

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