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“You have to listen very hard”:
Contemplative Reading, *Lectio Divina*, and
Social Justice in the Classroom

In a 1963 interview with Jane Howard, James Baldwin observed that reading certain literary texts had affected him in ways beyond the mere in-take of information. Namely, according to Baldwin, reading helped him develop empathetic capacities and to recognize a fundamental connectedness between writer and reader despite any geographic and temporal separation. As Baldwin observed:

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people. (89)

For Baldwin, this peculiar side-effect of reading had implications for the struggles towards social justice on which his life and writing focused. In this sense, reading wasn't something done simply to pass the time or gather information, but served an essential social function—that is, if the reader approached the text as an ethical relation dependent upon an ability to pause and *listen*.

According to Jennifer Trainor in *Rethinking Racism*, many of the tacit values that work to form students' identities are “called forth and misapplied” during discussions of the “confusing and emotionally fraught topic of race” (5). In our own classroom, the tension between the discourse white students most readily accessed and the ideas they tried to articulate was sometimes too much and instead of fostering capacities for empathy, this tension led to the kind of incoherence Baldwin references. For instance, when

responding to possible relationships between the writing of Ta-Nehisi Coates with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, many students evoked the #AllLivesMatter slogan as a way to both criticize BLM and dismiss Coates entirely. We watched some students struggled to meld their views upholding the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy in relation to achieving the American Dream with Ta-Nehisi Coates' critique of the Dream as an idea of freedom and social mobility made available by the destruction of black bodies. The systemic and uneven distribution of resources in the United States could impact one group's ability to "succeed" more or less than another's remained difficult to reconcile. Indeed this is the case outside of first-year writing classrooms, as well. Furthermore, students were sometimes quick to assign relativity to essays like Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" because such essays call upon the experiences McIntosh and others have in recounting instances of white privilege. Specifically, many students diminished her assertions claiming either her argument was dated—that America had progressed beyond white privilege in the last thirty years—or simply brushed it aside as lacking empirical proof.

Clearly, we were not the first to identify the problems of such multicultural models as they have been discussed by literacy scholars for years. Most notably, Keith Gilyard's work has been critical of discussions of race couched in a multicultural agenda in writing classes. Such classes stem from a perhaps naive agenda that we can all get along, but tend to fetishize anti-racist pedagogy by erasing the complicated social webs that create and re-create social identity. Gilyard states:

Although challenges to racism and exclusion launched the multicultural movement, the rhetoric and aims of that movement are not necessarily coterminous with the rhetoric and aims of, say anti-racism. While the former often gestures toward the formulaic polycultural curriculum, the latter insists on unflinching criticism of racist domination and its impact on education, including composition curricula. (47)

The need to rethink not only our curriculum, but our pedagogical approach to race and social justice more broadly, was incredibly clear. In order to move towards an anti-racist classroom space, we not only had to strive to broaden the voices and perspectives available to our students, but to consider ways to move students through the experiences these voices represented. We remained committed to the use of non-fiction texts as the basis for these goals, but had to more deeply consider the pathways we encouraged our students to explore. As Barbara Schneider points out, multiculturalism presents a “grand narrative that celebrates our national unity across difference” (196) in a way that often elides the material realities of racism that should be an urgent pedagogical concern. When the realities of difference are smoothed over or brought into larger hegemonic narratives that fail to critique the social structures that support continued inequalities with the landscape that makes up our culture, we stand the chance of creating complacency around exploitative practices. Although the goal of bringing value to different experiences was something we had hoped to achieve, we were unable to help students find space to question and critique social structures.

Baldwin discusses the importance of listening closely to one another for the historically and culturally loaded nuances always present in language use whether written or spoken. For Baldwin, most Americans “lead lives they deny” and find it difficult to say anything coherent because they are “trapped between language imposed on them, which is not theirs, and what they really want to say, which they don’t trust” (89). This space in between intent and articulation is one that many of us fumble with as we engage in social justice work and feel even more so when we work with students, who are often still grappling with moving into academic discourses and experiencing new ideological frameworks. For teachers of reading and writing, then, the impact of Baldwin’s words are as apparent as they are difficult to implement in the classroom. Many of us believe, like Sven Birkerts, that reading “pushes continually against the solipsism” as it urges us to engage with the work and lives of others, but teaching towards these particular capacities in our courses is a challenge to say the least. Struggling with this in our own classrooms, we found that

implementing specific reading practices for social justice in our first-year composition courses led us, ultimately to incorporate contemplative reading practices of nonfiction essays for this purpose. Such practices, we argue, not only enable the kinds of empathetic response discussed by Baldwin, but also to lay bare the continued systems of racial oppression operating socially.

We used the metaphor of sight as a source of invention in writing, using chapters from the textbook *Habits of the Creative Mind* in conjunction with readings like Annie Dillard's "Seeing" to guide students to think about what they encounter on a daily basis and where they have *ethos*, or authority, as writers. In rooting authority in experience, we hoped to both frame students as writers and enforce the power of narrative non-fiction as a venue for exploring difficult concepts like racism through texts we believed would be more accessible to students. After a few weeks of this approach, and a narrative essay assignment, we shifted to the idea of *listening* as a trope for making-meaning, drawing again on work from *Habits* as well as the theoretical and pedagogical work of Krista Ratcliffe, Jacqueline Royster, Gesa Kirsch, and others, who pose listening as a means towards community. If our goal is to teach students, among other things, the ability to use schooled discourses and to communicate across discourses, the concept of listening serves as a useful tool. How might a contemplative practice like deep listening allow students to read in ways that open up texts to move past their initial, often emotional, reactions and towards more thoughtful encounters with the words and experiences of others?

In June 2015, Dylann Roof shot and killed nine people during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopalian Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This is the context in which our classrooms are located, geographically and emotionally. As two college writing instructors who identify as white, living and teaching in a state that, at the time of the Charleston tragedy, still had a Confederate flag flying on its state house lawn, we felt compelled by the mandate that "White Silence is Violence" and worked to restructure the curriculums of our first year courses to make them more actively anti-racist and reflect the

urgency surrounding conversations about racism and race in our state. While racism is in no way isolated to the Deep South, our University, Coastal Carolina University, is located close to several recent sites of nationally reported racial violence, which layers on the accumulated history of racial violence in the area. As JLove Calderon and Tim Wise note in “Code of Ethics for Antiracist White Allies”:

Because many white people have tuned out or written off the observations of people of color, when another white person speaks about social and racial injustice it can be a huge “aha!” moment for the previously inattentive white listener. The speaker may be put on a pedestal. We should make sure people know that whatever wisdom we possess on the matter is only partially our own: it is also the collective wisdom of people of color, shared with us directly or indirectly.

While we had been teaching a variety of texts from a diverse set of authors, our classes were never pointedly directed towards antiracist action in the way they became following the tragedy in Charleston. And it was clear in our first iteration of our writing course that our standard pedagogical methods were not enough to encourage our students to think in the critical ways we envisioned, nor did we see the empathic reaction to texts we hoped. While the difficulties of teaching critical and thoughtful engagement in writing classes are central for anyone teaching the subject and addressed throughout the history of composition scholarship, the ethical dimensions are heightened when working with nonfiction texts that address matters of race and justice. This is perhaps even more urgent as recent political and cultural events have proven that we are in a social landscape that demands a clearer understanding of the ways in which we—as a classroom, as a nation, as a world—are unified. It was clear that we have stopped listening to each other.

The “exposure” model of our original custom reader, one that operated on the principle that if students were simply *exposed* to a polyphony of voices about race they would, naturally, adopt actively anti-racist stances was misguided at best, and at worst, potentially harmful as it worked to further solidify racist

attitudes and beliefs. While the same text may be used for both pedagogical outcomes, we found the difference was not necessarily in *what* we read, but *how* we approached the activity of reading itself. The “multicultural” approach did little to defamiliarize students enough from tacit forms of racism into awareness. What was needed were ways to bring dysconscious forms of racism into conscious awareness in ways that student couldn’t so easily respond to. The work of Joyce E. King, Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young consider dysconscious racism as “tacit subscription to white supremacy, domination, and/or norms that distorts one’s ability and willingness to recognize or acknowledge racism or race matters” (14). Largely because students are well-versed in multicultural/diversity programs long before they reach the first-year English classroom, they have prepared responses to such agendas and can easily contextualize them within conventional agendas of education. Further, such easy contextualization ensures that dysconscious racism stays tacit and unavailable for critique. Contemplative pedagogies, on the other hand, work to defamiliarize the classroom in productive ways. In engaging with reading and writing through unfamiliar methods, students may encounter different angles to white privilege and the embodied experiences of race and racism that push past the often knee-jerk reactions to difference (color-blind ideologies, the persistence of meritocracy to explain economic status, or an inability to understand racism as systemic versus individual). We hoped that slowing down, finding value in experience, and listening to reach past one’s own experiences would be useful tools for students to engage more fully with identity in the classroom space.

There are many ways that we integrate contemplative practices in our pedagogical work already as critical reading and writing are premised upon abilities to reflect, but at the Summer Session of Contemplative Higher Education at Smith College in 2016, we were introduced to additional approaches, including *lectio divina*, presented in a break-out session by Rose Sackey-Milligan. Using Frederick Douglass’s famous speech to the Rochester Anti Slavery Sewing Society, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” Sackey-

Milligan's session allowed participants an opportunity to pay attention to the ways their own attention oscillated from the text at hand to other concerns as is apparent in meditation. Arthur Zajonc has noted that paying attention to this oscillation is key to both contemplative practice in the classroom and allows for the kind of insight towards empathy that our own writing courses hoped for. According to Zajonc,

In meditation we move between focused and open attention. We give our full attention to the individual words of our chosen text, and to their associated images and meanings. Then we move to their relationship to each other so that a living organism of thought is experienced. We allow this experience to intensify by holding the complex of meanings inwardly before us. (39)

Holding Douglass's words before us during Sackey-Milligan's session in August of 2016 was a pertinent experience given the racially charged rhetoric surrounding presidential campaign up to that point:

The practice of *lectio divina* is an effective, accessible way to bring contemplative practice into the writing classroom as it introduces built-in time for reflection as well as the scaffolding of reactions to complex—often emotionally charged—texts. As detailed below in the explanation of the assignment, students are asked to pause between readings, making the classroom a place for silence and meditation, even if only in short bursts. During these moments, students may think about the text, though their minds may also wander to other things. For this reason, the texts we have used for this exercise are ones where the ideas presented are complicated and rich for students to unpack. The required moments of contemplation also make this exercise especially potent for working with non-fiction accounts, as it allows students to hear the words aloud and listen to the narrator in ways that they may not find on their own. We strove to foster moments that a faster reading practice might have made difficult to access; we sought places where pause might open the reading for critical thinking and rhetorical listening.

As Jennifer Seibel Trainor notes in *Rethinking Racism*, when dealing with issues of race and social justice, students often react out of “emotioned” beliefs that are not even about race necessarily, but rather are about the “nonlinear dynamics of lived affective experiences, emotional regulation taking place through institutional and cultural practices, and language” (3). After a year long ethnographic study involving students enrolled in English classes at the primarily white Laurel Canyon High School, Trainor argued that many school discourses and practices inadvertently provide the kinds of ideological support necessary for racist assumptions and attitudes. We have come to believe that slowing down our reading practices through *lectio divina* is one antidote.

The following is the breakdown that we used; the sequence is based on traditional practices and the exercise presented by Sackey-Milligan, but has been modified a bit for our classroom space:

- To prepare, students are asked to read a text for class the night before. We selected a portion of the text to read out loud together during our class meeting and several shorter quotes or passages for students to read after the passage has been shared as a whole. These quotes are typed up on small slips of paper and distributed before the activity began to students who volunteered for “extra reading.” The passages are ones that emphasize particular points within the text where we want students to pause and linger.
- The class begins with a minute of silence. After the minute, a student volunteer is selected to begin reading aloud the passage selected from our homework. To accommodate readers, students are allowed to decide when they want to stop reading out loud; when one student stops, the next picks up. This results in some students reading large portions of text, while others may only read a sentence. The goal is for as many voices to be heard as possible, but to acknowledge comfort and ability, which fluctuates within the classroom. For a longer text, you might chose to go around the

room in a formulated manner, but students can also self-select from the group at large.

- Once we reach the predetermined end of the selection, the class sits together for another minute of silence. Students are prompted to respond with one word to the reading and given some time to linger here. Once the class has finished sharing, the three or four pre-selected quotes from the reading are re-read out loud by student volunteers. We sit for one more minute, then students are prompted to respond to the reading with a single sentence.

After those who chose to share have done so, we take one last full minute of silence, then open the floor to full discussion, encouraging students to talk about the reading. One of our goals in implementing this practice in our classrooms was to encourage students to move past initial, often emotional reactions to a selection, slowly building into a discussion about a text. By expressing a single-word response, the outlet is created for affectual readings and participants are asked to be concise in what they share. Students are encouraged to build their reactions and each stage of that construction is honored within the classroom space.

The execution of *lectio divina* has been both productive and difficult within the classroom. In informal student reflections on the activity using a portion of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, members of four different first-year writing classrooms illustrated a spectrum of reactions, including students who both enjoyed and resisted listening to the text read out loud. Learning styles and preferences are certainly a part of this range of reactions, as well as the possibility that students are not always accustomed to the act of listening—or the stillness required of the minutes of silence in between. Further, while some classes responded very vocally to all steps of the sequence, others struggled moving towards full class discussions. The process of slowing down required students to interact with the text in ways that countered the quick-paced reading they often experience when completing work for class. Instead of quantity, we intentionally

moved towards quality; students encountered pause between the intake of text and their articulation of response. Finally, there is also a sense of accountability that this activity requests of participants. When the common text is read aloud, students are on a level ground for responding; this perhaps both relieves and creates pressure in participation.

One of the primary challenges we came up against in working with the non-fiction accounts of the writers was the difficulty many students experienced with slowing down in their encounters with text and finding value in ideas that did not always immediately resonate with their own. To counter these responses, we reflected on the benefits of students reading in a different way; to understand beyond their immediate experiences and to respond to text in a way that found value in the writers they encountered. To do so, we first turned to the pedagogical and theoretical work of Krista Ratcliffe, whose concept of *rhetorical listening* offers a method for cultivating cross-cultural communication in classroom and research spaces. Ratcliffe guides us towards this end by conceptualizing *understanding*, a word often used uncritically as a learning outcome in teaching, to:

[mean] more than simply listening for our own self-interested intent, which may range from appropriation (employing a text for one's own ends), to Burkean identification (smoothing over differences), to agreement (only affirming one's own view of reality). Instead, understanding means listening to discourse not for intent but with intent—with the intent to understand not just the claims, not just the cultural logics within which the claims function, but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well. (205)

For Ratcliffe, to employ rhetorical listening requires us to consider where our own cultural logics and discourse cloud what we read or hear. To achieve these goals, students, teachers, and researchers more broadly must stand back from their immediate responses, practicing a pause in between encountering a text and responding to it. As we read less *for intent* and more *with intent*, we might push past argumentative practices and towards ones that acknowledge the multiple discourses that may be at play in literacy events.

Reading comprehension becomes less about summary and more about purpose; we may encourage students to cultivate a much deeper understanding of a text that moves past single-narrative ways of thinking about the social world and instead strives to contextualize non-fiction accounts as impacted by larger social mechanisms.

The transition from Ratcliffe's work on listening to broader goals in contemplative pedagogy is not a difficult one to make. In the hopes of instilling in the literacy practices of our students a more thoughtful, intentional tone, we turned to pedagogical approaches that encourage students to step back and develop a stronger ability to contextualize how their own uses of language and ideological positions are in conversation with others. The multicultural approach to race and anti-racism where we began our journey moved quickly through the narratives of a wide array of individuals. But in this movement, our classes rarely found space to engage with the experiences they encountered and when they did, they exhibited the behaviors outlined by Ratcliffe above, either appropriating stories, identifying with them in ways that fetishized the Other, or agreed with them to reinforce their previous positions. Contemplative practices like slow reading, reflection, journaling, and bearing witness became outlets for us to try to avoid these pitfalls. In particular, the practice of *lectio divina* has been an especially useful tool for encouraging students to encounter text intentionally and practice the art of listening as described above.

There is nothing new about the concept of contemplation as a method of reading and writing, but in recent years, the act of slowing down itself has taken on a social and political charge. Indeed, we are obligated to provide opportunities for students to learn to pause, to listen with intention and care, and resist the urge to react immediately from their own experiences and investments. For us, contemplative reading practices—specifically the reading of nonfiction texts like Baldwin's *Fire Next Time*, Te-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, and others—invites students to practice reading in way that affords such moments. Encouraging this time can be difficult for some students, and we try to make alternative

assignments available when appropriate. The embodied nature of literacy work is important to recognize when we ask students to sit silently or in stillness. Also, we must keep in mind that the content sometimes impacts students' abilities to participate, as the power of narrative to bring empathy can sometimes be, perhaps, too effective.

Contemplative practices have perhaps always been a part of education and in some ways were part of the work we had both been leading in a Critical Reading and Composition class we both teach as the second semester in a two-course first-year writing sequence at our university. In this course, we implemented processes of slow-reading, spending about a month to move through difficult essays. The work of slowing down, examining moments in the text together as a class as well as individually, was an attempt to access the proverbial trees as well as the forest. In Richard Miller's "Reading in Slow Motion," he notes that reading is now a fundamentally different experience due to increasingly mobile social technologies and the effort necessary to keep such distractions at bay. While Miller rightfully concedes that such technologies are here to stay and resistance to them *in toto* is a bit like resisting gravity or the passing of time, we, as teachers are obligated to find ways to respond in thoughtful ways. As Miller notes, "Content is everywhere; information is ubiquitous; the ability to focus, to follow a long argument, to know in depth are all on the table" (4). For Miller, the answer was to develop a curriculum that allowed for the slow reading of one entire work over the course of the semester and to have students practice reading as an opportunity for reflection and meditation.

Miller's "slow reading" can be seen as a form of contemplative practice, but slowing down in the ways discussed by Miller and others was only useful, for us, if it could serve the purposes of social justice and further the outcomes of an anti-racist curriculum. This is where the lens of contemplative practices comes into play. It is not just the move of slowing down that we hoped to impart on students; we wanted our classrooms to slow down *with intention*. Gesa Kirsch advocates for the implementation of mindful practices in reading and writing classrooms, stating that they "can enhance creativity, listening, and

expression of meaning—key goals of most writing courses. They do so by inviting students and teachers to practice mindfulness, to become introspective, to listen to the voices of others—and our own—and to the sounds of silence” (W2). If slowing down when we read creates an opportunity for students (and teachers) to increase their mindfulness when interacting with text, we hoped it could also help students (and teachers) access a different kind of response to the non-fiction texts we presented in our classrooms. We were eager to find out how increased attention and focus might facilitate our pedagogical shift from an exposure model towards an actively-anti-racist classroom that contextualized social identities instead of fetishizing them.

As educators and scholars, we believe the social justice work contemplative practices have allowed us to conduct in our classrooms is worth the sometimes difficult experiences of opening conversations around race and identity. We are admittedly at the beginning of this journey ourselves and are grateful for institutions like The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society that have allowed us to learn and connect with others who share this mission. In moving forward, though, we continue to explore the ways non-fiction and contemplative practices can create a space where students can enter into new discourses with a sharper understanding of self and other, moving them—and ourselves—towards greater compassion and more ethical ways of being in the world.

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