

*Silence, Silenced, Silent: Finding Your Voice*

By Danielle Kwon

Silence. A word that carries such heavy weight in its multi-faceted meaning –complexity. The absence of noise, stillness. Muteness. The omission of mention or comment. The state of being forgotten, oblivion. To put or bring to silence, an interjection.

Although we rarely discussed at length the power of silence during the course of the Border Crossing class, it has been the center of many of my own reflections both inside and outside the classroom. I felt that finding my voice, a challenge that seemed somehow directly tied to the philosophy of border crossing, first required an understanding of my own silence and the silence of others around me. The events of this year regarding racial tensions on this campus and in our nation (Ferguson, the noose incident, and the Baltimore riots among countless others) have in many ways echoed these different nuances of silence: being still, remaining mute, being forgotten/overlooked, or silencing others.

In the reading on *Solitude and Leadership*, Deresiewicz writes that being still in solitude, alone with your thoughts and thinking critically about the world is how you find yourself, find your own reality, and therefore find your voice amidst the noise. He writes that people who are able to think for themselves find *vision* and *courage*, a moral courage to stand up for what they believe. Choosing to be silent in thought allows you to look within systems and question your reality rather than living life on its surface desensitized to injustice. Within this personal dimension of silence, a dimension that I confined myself to for much of my life, is where you would grapple with the facts that a police officer could go untried for shooting an unarmed teen, or that police officers would arrest and kill a man simply for running, or that one in three black males born today will be imprisoned at some point in their lifetime, or even that some of our

black brothers and sisters feel unsafe walking on our campus. It's with these frustrations, lamentations, and confusions that we enter into questioning the systems that spew out these symptoms of a much deeper disease –our culture that preserves and propagates white privilege and racism.

However, I've learned that silence is never all about you. Another perhaps even more important component of silence is the act of listening. Contrary to the selective listening that we often engage in by imposing our own biases on the information we are spoon-fed through social media, listening requires a personal silence that yields space for another person's voice. The process of realizing that "I am my brother/sister" requires first knowing who they are, and having compassion for your brother/sister requires not only stepping in their shoes but also learning where those shoes have walked. In response to the noose incident on campus several weeks ago, amidst all of the other clutter that appeared on my Facebook newsfeed, my friend posted the following,

"Non Black Allies: Listen. That is literally my only request of you right now, and it is likely the most difficult thing that I can ask of you. Because Duke students love to talk, share, and plan. The question I hear most often after these events is "What can I do?" LISTEN. I cannot say it enough. Sit, learn, and validate, but do not speak. The black community has things to say to y'all, but you have to stop talking long enough to hear us."

Listening is the first step in entering into the interpersonal dimension, building relationships within a community that will move you to compassion and to action. After "learning to pause and be present in complex realities" within the personal dimension, listening takes the first step in crossing societally constructed borders by validating humanity over systems and others over

yourself. Border crossing in the context of racial injustice means recognizing that this issue is not an issue of *black versus white* but an issue of *human for human*.

Frankly speaking, both America and our campus have not done a good job at listening. While the noose incident at one point had filled up our newsfeeds and been the subject of many deep conversations, it has largely disappeared from general campus discourse, after a “resolution” on the part of an administration that promotes color-blindness. Furthermore, while the riots in Baltimore have been sensationalized and reduced by mainstream media to the work of “thugs”, an SOS call from a group that has been oppressed by 400 years of violence is being ignored. MLK said, “A riot is the language of the unheard”, and we must realize that black voices are not only unheard but *silenced* each and every day. The question therefore should not be whether riots were “correct” or “wise” but rather we must *listen* to the language of the riot in order to merit black voices at least the same *humanity* that we do the racism in the media coverage by CNN, Fox, MSNBC, and other mainstream news outlets. But where does it go from there?

Listening is and should certainly not be the end. But for me it always has been. As a Korean-American female, speaking up for myself or for others was never a value that was impressed on me. As Liz Lin writes regarding in her post on Asian-Americans and Ferguson, “Asian cultures strongly value harmony and not creating conflict. The American proverb says that the squeaky wheel gets the grease; the Japanese proverb says that the nail that sticks out gets hammered down. Thus, even in the face of controversial events, even when we ourselves are the victims of wrongdoing, many Asian Americans tend to remain silent.” But I have come to realize that in failing to be proactive about fighting injustice, I was quietly perpetuating it. Even beyond going out to a protest, my choice not to speak up in class when I disagree with a classmate or

when I hear a racist comment –my choice to remain mute and omit comment, allows the system to perpetuate. In the public leadership dimension of border crossing, compassion that moves you to walk in the shoes of people who have no choice but to speak up should move you to speak up as well. Neither to “help” people who are “helpless” nor to elevate your own experiences or beliefs, but to show that a threat to justice and humanity crosses borders of all shapes and sizes. The voice that arises here should come with the *vision* and *moral courage* that emanates from silence, but this is where we reach the paradox. While border crossing is deeply personal, it’s never all about you; it’s about humanity, and you are just one jigsaw in a 7 billion-piece puzzle.

Border crossing in some ways is very simple. While I have written this paper on silence as it is the theme that has guided my thinking throughout this semester, border crossing is about finding your voice in the midst of the noise and magnifying it through your different relationships and spheres of influence. It’s about realizing that as real and scary as some of these borders are, simply being aware and awake to them can introduce a new perspective of humanity, as Anne Fadiman wrote, “if you stand at the point of tangency (where edges meet), you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one.” It’s about settling into who you are by recognizing the disparity between “what is” and “what should be” and acting to bridge that gap contrary to the hoop-jumping manual laid out before us by our institutions.

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