

## The Challenge of Interpreting Silence in Public Spaces

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Huey-li Li offers a rich and remarkably thorough treatment of how silence is understood across numerous educational, cultural, and critical theoretical frameworks. Li's essay considers how "both intentional and unintentional silences have multiple meanings that are open to varied interpretations." Li makes two primary invocations to philosophers of education and to educators: "a critical inquiry into silence," she argues, "should focus on how silence works in different communicative contexts." Further, she reiterates that "instead of compelling students to perform verbal participation, a reflective teacher ought to be more attentive to the silent interaction in the classroom, which reveals human desires, interests, and power relationships." Li defines "silencing silence" as a kind of enforced speaking, a privileging of speech which at minimum bears the mark of Western cultural values — and, I would add, the illusory notion that speech automatically represents democratic participation.

Li argues that silencing silence has several potentially harmful effects in educational contexts. First, it devalues the multiple meanings of silence: that is, silence is not merely "absence" or a pathological lack of meaning; rather, silence is full of meanings; as she provocatively suggests, "in effect, silence is both the signified and the signifier." A second harmful effect is that silencing silence ignores the fact that requiring marginalized persons, for instance, to speak, does nothing to ensure that these once-silent, now-spoken voices are heard. Third, to privilege speech ignores the inherent value of silence as a reflective practice that can be meaningful and rich to the one who is silent.

The meanings of silence vary, of course, given cultural values and interpretations. In educational discourse, there is extensive recognition over the past decade or so of how silences can function as modes of resistance to the dominant culture. More commonly, as Li discusses, especially in elementary and secondary schooling, silence signifies either punishment or the mark of "good" disciplinary behavior. As we enter "adulthood," higher education ostensibly represents the "public sphere" of democracy where "free speech" becomes privileged. As she points out, nowhere in any of these spheres is there a systematic education in the art of listening.

The breadth of Li's essay makes it difficult to choose which provocative direction to address, as her reflections raise profound questions about silence's place in the communicative acts that define cultural values and practices in education. As a general remark, it may be conceptually helpful to characterize three dimensions to Li's arguments about silence: the political, the educational, and the spiritual. These three arenas overlap — but, it is interesting to witness how the spiritual aspects of silence in particular are anathema to education and to politics.

My immediate response upon reading this essay was to embrace her thesis, and agree wholeheartedly that education needs to be vastly more cautious about

privileging speech. I firmly agree that we have not been taught to listen well, at least in cultural contexts in which I have lived and worked. Further, how many of us surely, and often, would have preferred silence to the vacuous and less-than-thoughtful words that are spoken? Third, I strongly share her view that there is an inherent value to silence as a reflective practice. Yet, the more I considered how I would enact the ideal of “silence as a source of pedagogical knowledge,” the more I wondered how, in fact, education can challenge the privileging of speech. The academy is built on language and words, spoken and written, built upon the play of contesting meanings. Here Li would argue that such “structured communication” rests equally upon silence as it does upon speech. In practical terms, I am left to exclaim, “If only the academy, or the school, were more like a monastery where greater care and thought were given to what is spoken!” I thought of the recent Virginia legislation that public schools hold a daily “moment of silence,” which was in fact an agenda of the Christian Right. I recall viewing this news headline and thinking to myself that such a moment of silence could be transgressively used by a teacher to teach children the practice of Buddhist mindfulness. Mindfulness is in part the spiritual practice of noticing how our “monkey minds” produce a constant chatter of discursive thought. On the Buddhist account, language, thought, and discourse represent such things as our fear of impermanence and death and our clinging attachment to the ego. The silence of mindfulness is a practice which, if cultivated, would greatly enhance the quality of interaction and thought that takes place in education.

However, I believe I get stuck in the binary split between the spiritual, interior value of silence as such, and the fact that education is a public and politically charged context which does privilege speech. What does it look like to actually enact the pedagogical inquiry into silence that Li calls for?

An interesting “case study” of silence is the film *Doing Vipassana, Doing Time* which documents the introduction of a Buddhist Vipassana retreat as a “treatment” instituted within a prison in India. The inmates participate in a ten-day silent retreat. This use of silence is a fascinating example of a “disciplinary” measure which has the effect, in many instances, of creating a meaningful space in which the “guilty” reflect upon their actions and undergo significant personal and social transformation.

However, short of introducing Vipassana meditation into education, I believe that in the public context of educational classrooms what would be required, ironically, are “verbalized” interpretations of the meanings of silences that occur in the classroom. Let me explain. After reading Li’s essay numerous times, reflecting on the implications of her argument, I pushed myself to consider the silences occurring just this semester in my own classrooms. Frankly, I cannot get past the political significance of silences that indeed represent the culturally stratified hierarchy of voices and entitlement in nearly every classroom I have inhabited. In my classes this semester, five out of seven of the students of color are silent almost all of the time. To me, no matter how I slice that pie, those silences are political. I read these silences as a systematic, political effect of marginalization.

There is always the possibility that some of these silences merely reflect (a) a shy person's silence; (b) a silence that is intentionally resisting the dominant WASP culture of the classroom and my institution; or (c) a reflective and engaged silence. In fact, I am certain of the last — each of these silent students is highly engaged and reflecting on material, an assessment I make by interpreting their their body language, written expression, and one-on-one discussions with these individuals. But these students' silences are a significant loss to the others in the community first of all; and secondly, the silences at least in this semester do not represent "resistances" to the dominant culture; and thirdly, if they do represent meaningful modes of resistance, or other equally significant meanings, such meanings are not being recognized by the others in the classroom who "hear" (or do not even notice) the silences.

Now, for these students to speak is also highly problematic. It risks what Li indicates: being tokenized, and forced to represent the voices of ALL (Koreans, mixed race young adults, African-American women). Second, to speak does not assure that one will be heard. But as the educator in some sense responsible to these particular silences, I cannot dismiss the fact that the preponderance of silence issues from historically marginalized communities, who have systematically been denied voice in this culture.

Reading Li's essay made me take seriously her admonition: that educators should not silence silences, because to privilege speech ignores, denigrates, and overlooks the complex meanings of silences. This leads me to reiterate what I said above: if we are to take seriously a valuing of silence, then in a political and educational context where speech is privileged, where silence is automatically feared, pathologized, and has no currency, then there must — ironically — be a spoken and publicly-shared interpretation and discussion of the meanings of these silences. Specifically, if I am to allow these students of color to remain silent, I need to name and identify, call attention to the silences in the public context of the classroom. The classroom participants need to understand and interpret these silences collectively. It would not be sufficient to meet individually with the silent student and agree, "Okay, your silence means x." Because this privatized interpretation of the silence ends up representing the predictable, systematic political silencing of marginalized voices.

Li's argument also made me think about how profoundly difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, it is to interpret silence in text-based, computer mediated educational environments. How, in the absence of co-presence, is a teacher to "listen with the 'third ear' to what is often left unsaid" in on-line, text-based education? Li's analyses of silence's important and varied meanings cause me further misgivings about the narrowing bandwidth of educational communication.

In sum, I find it ironic that despite my wholehearted agreement with Li that education needs to attend to the rich, multiple, and culturally varied meanings of silences, that I have trouble envisioning how to enact this ideal in the imperfect world of classrooms where speech is thoroughly privileged. This challenge reflects no shortcoming of Li's invaluable analysis. Rather, the challenge underscores the

enduring Western, phallogocentric values that construct public educational spaces as if these were opposed to the material realities of bodies, emotions, and lived dynamics — including silence — that actually characterize human social relations and transformation.