Our Voices: Navigating the Silences in Refugee and Immigrant Women's Narratives

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Abstract
Reflecting on over 20 years of collaborative story circle work with newcomer women, this paper examines silence as capital in sharing one's life experiences. In a field that seeks to amplify narrative, we often forget it is in silence that women find agency. From fieldwork to the co-curatorial process of designing public events, I explore one woman's migration story and the choices she made to organize her silences. With the benefit of a longitudinal association, I began to understand how and why her silences have shifted over time. Rather than amplifying her voice, I have learned to amplify her silences.

Keywords: Silence, refugees, immigrants, women, public folklore research and programming, migration narratives

Silence as Wealth

> …the trick to living … away from all agitating entanglements, allurements, and expectations, apart from one's own intensity, is to organize the silence, to think of its mountaintop as capital, silence as wealth exponentially increasing. The encircling silence your chosen source of advantage and your only intimate (Roth 2000, 44).

An unlikely group of women sits comfortably in chairs around the rehearsal studio of a local theater. Remnants of Indian, Vietnamese, and Colombian snacks clutter the side table; half-full bottles of water stand within reach, ready to quench thirsty throats. They have been coming together once or twice a week for a few months to share stories and create a performance piece about their experiences coming to America. Originally from Vietnam, Colombia, China, India, Ecuador, Guinea, Cambodia, Turkey, and Trinidad, what brings them together is their struggle to make a new life and their desire to share their stories with new neighbors. The atmosphere is one of camaraderie, but they are feeling stalled. They know each other's stories and are committed to sharing them with others, but are struggling to find the starting point; where to begin.

Suddenly, the artistic director jumps up and says, "Okay, I am going to give you one word. Then I am going to leave the room and give you five minutes to create a freeze-frame scene with your bodies that illustrates that word." She explains that a freeze-frame is like a frozen picture, a silent image. The word she gives them is *freedom*. With that, she leaves the room. For three minutes, the women discuss what the word

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means to them and how to depict such a significant concept in silence. Then someone suggests they replicate the Statue of Liberty. They all agree and use the remaining two minutes to figure out how. Should they stand side by side, each one in the pose of the Lady? Should they each take a different pose to represent the sculpture's various components, use props, or mime their roles? Or, can they create a single living statue using all of their bodies together? After short deliberations and a few practices, they take their positions and call the director back into the room. She walks through the door and stops still in her tracks, hand to her mouth, a single breath caught in her throat. Tears fill her eyes as she gazes at the single "statue" made of so many diverse bodies. She begins to understand what Lady Liberty means to these women who came to the shores of America in search of freedom. For many, their first sighting of the statue was evidence they had arrived safely. This silent pose, representing their perception of a land of freedom and inclusion, became the closing scene in a one-hour theater production called *Story Circle: Coming to America in the 21st Century.*

This camaraderie between the women was not always there. While they created and staged the play in a mere six months, the feeling of trust and community that made the play so successful was four years in the making. By combining narrated stories with moments of mimed silence, the play enabled the women to express their migration experiences on their terms, using voice to move the narrative along but using silence when language failed to represent the significance of critical moments. Silence requires deeper audience engagement. By its very nature, the ambiguity of silence involves the audience interpreting the narrative from their perspective. As Nancy Gates-Madsen notes in her study of silences in post-dictatorship Argentina, "it is this very ambiguity that gives silence its power" (Gates-Madsen 2016, 8).

Setting the Scene

I began working with refugee and immigrant women in my community in 2001. According to the state's Refugee Resettlement Program, Pennsylvania has welcomed over 60,000 refugees in the last 25 years. The result has been dramatic demographic shifts; in some cities increasing diversity by as much as 40%. Unfortunately, these changes have given rise to unprecedented levels of prejudice and hate crimes. It is challenging to hear newcomers talk about the prejudice, misunderstandings, and stereotypes they face in our country after traveling so far to escape that very experience in their homelands. In my role as state folklorist, I wondered if we could create some public programming to counter what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the "single story"—the one-dimensional narrative that fuels stereotypes and fosters prejudice (Adichie 2009).

To that end, I began to seek out refugee and immigrant women who might be interested in exploring a project together. Every person I asked mentioned Ho-Thanh Nguyen and her work with refugee and immigrant women. Finally, I gave her a call, and we had lunch. A refugee herself from Vietnam, Ho-Thanh worked for six years as the domestic violence and sexual assault advocate for immigrants and refugees at the local YWCA. Concerned that standard domestic violence services were not enough to

help women get out of the cycle of violence, she gathered a group of women from diverse backgrounds to discuss ways to improve those services. The idea they all gravitated toward was to assist one another in developing leadership skills, self-confidence, and fellowship, while also educating the local community about the contributions they bring. Within three months, we had launched the Pennsylvania Immigrant and Refugee Women's Network (PAIRWN). As word of PAIRWN spread, so did its membership. Thus, not all of its members come out of the domestic violence program, nor has domestic violence been a common topic of conversation, though it does come up.

Working Together

Since that first meeting in 2001, we have worked closely together on many projects, including an oral history initiative to gather women's resettlement stories in central Pennsylvania. My work with this group of women has drawn on Elaine Lawless's theory of reciprocal ethnography, a collaborative methodology for fieldwork and knowledge-sharing that allows for dialogue and which serves to "privilege no one voice over any other" (Lawless 1991, 35). In her work with women ministers, Lawless sought to establish a polyphonic dimension to both the research and the presentation of the work. I was inspired by this approach to folklore work and consciously implemented it in this new project. I am also mindful, however, of the potential for public presentations of migration stories and narratives of trauma to reinforce stereotypes of refugees as marginalized, helpless, and powerless (Kisiara 2015). Reciprocal ethnography offers an approach that democratizes the process and ensures that no story surfaces to become the single story of refugee women.

With over 30 participating women representing a diverse range of experiences, histories, and cultures, the process would be challenging. Shared authority requires more attention and time. It also requires the folklorist to be willing to recognize and let go of her assumptions and expectations—to become vulnerable to the needs, fears, ideas, and expectations of others (Behar 1997). This vulnerable approach may be even more true when working with women who have faced trauma in their lives. The stories told and the relationships created by sharing those stories prohibit any semblance of objectivity.

Working together, we designed an interview protocol to explore the role of women in community life and the changing roles of women in diaspora; the ways they recreate their material culture and artistic traditions in a new world; their experiences of emigration and resettlement; adaptation, and change; and their perspectives on diversity in Pennsylvania. Many also attended monthly Story Circles (which continue today), where they have the opportunity to practice their English and share everyday experiences. The format for the Story Circles is simple. We pick a topic for the month and begin by throwing out a question. As one story precipitates another in this circle of women, they have drawn closer in friendship and understanding.

We recorded all the interviews and story circles and had them transcribed to share among the group. Everyone read each other's interviews, and then we brought an exhibit designer, a theater director, and a filmmaker to a Story Circle where they shared

their ideas about how they might work with the stories in their particular medium: exhibitions, theater, and film. The women listened and decided among themselves how to share the stories publically. They wanted to do all three, so we did. My job was to gather the resources to make all three happen: an exhibition, a short film, and a theater production.

The heart of the exhibition, entitled *Our Voices: Refugee and Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories*, combined black and white portrait photographs with short stories chosen by the women from among several excerpted from their interviews. The play took five of those stories and dramatized them through imagery, mime, dance, music, and narrative. The short film documented an afternoon at the museum when 12 immigrant women from as many countries painted wooden kitchen chairs. We included these chairs in the exhibition to replicate the story circle concept. The film captures their conversations while spending the afternoon together, painting chairs.

Cora's Story

With that background for the overall project, I want to focus on one woman's story as a way for us to consider the complexity of silence in women's migration narratives, especially in our work as ethnographers and cultural advocates. Her stories appear in both the exhibition and the play, but in very different and, I believe, iterative ways.

Cora (not her real name) came to the US as a "mail order bride"—a modern form of human trafficking. Over several months, she communicated by phone and letter with an American man and eventually felt like she knew him reasonably well. When he asked her to come to the US to become his bride, she accepted. It was an opportunity to find a better life. At first, things went well. Soon, however, small constraints began to define her relationship with him. He prevented her from calling home to her sisters, saying he wanted her to forget Spanish and learn English. She did not see it at the time, but this was his first attempt to constrain her voice, to silence her. Then he began forcing her to stay home and prohibiting her from going out to meet with friends she had made in this community. Eventually, he locked her in the house, essentially jailing her. The final blow that woke her up was when he handcuffed her to the bathroom pipes while he was away. She ran away to the YWCA's domestic violence shelter at her next opportunity where she met Ho-Thanh Nguyen. She filed a restraining order, but his last egregious act was to withhold her mail, including an official letter with the dates for her immigration hearing. Thus, she missed that meeting and was sentenced to a real prison for three months. Ho-Thanh found her an effective attorney (after two ineffective ones), and she was finally released. She is now a thriving, active member of the community, remarried, and raising a son who is the apple of her eye (Personal Interview, 2004).

When I scheduled my interview with Cora, I had only met her once or twice and knew very little of this story. I did know that Cora has a fantastic sense of humor and an incredible capacity for love and resilience. We talked for an hour about her life growing up in her home country; how her family's home was the thriving center for all children in the neighborhood, how her sisters played together all day long, how

she climbed the mango tree in her back yard to eat the delectable fruit in the sunny warmth of a tropical summer afternoon. I prompted, I listened, and I asked probing questions as any good ethnographer will do. We nibbled on cookies as she transported us to her childhood home. Her face was open; her eyes were bright.

When the conversation shifted to her migration story, the light faded. I expected her to share some of the stories, but I also expected her to gloss over the details. We were, after all, doing a recorded interview and I was not a close acquaintance. I expected silences. Cora saw it differently. This moment was her opportunity to get the story out. I am sure she had told the story in court. I am sure her attorneys and support team had coached her about how to tell the story. But I did not expect this to be what she wanted to share with me. As she began to share the details of those experiences, I thought to myself, Oh no. What do I do? I am not a counselor. I'm a folklorist. How do I respond? Do I turn the recorder off and just listen as a friend? Would that essentially silence her again? This is the field worker's dilemma, especially when gathering stories of vulnerable moments in people's lives. As Ruth Behar asks in her powerful study of the anthropologist as *The Vulnerable Observer*,

> …do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, turn on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits—of respect, piety, pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? But if you can't stop the horror shouldn't you at least document it? (Behar 1997, 2)

Ultimately, Behar (1997) concludes that fieldwork is a lived experience; we are in relationship with each other in this process, and to deny our own reactions and connections to the experiences of our collaborators is to deny the power of the narratives themselves. In the end, I had to trust that Cora knew what she was doing. I kept the tape recorder running and shared Cora's goal to make her story known, perhaps to prevent others from having the same experience.

Embodied Silence

Cora's story was one of 23 featured in the exhibition. As a group, we were interested in presenting a full range of migration stories, and Cora was willing to share a crucial part of her trafficking and imprisonment story. She agreed that it was an essential part of today's immigration experience, so we worked on the language to ensure it was succinct and in her words. However, when it came to the play, she was interested in participating but did not want her story to be part of the script. Instead, she wanted to share the delightful stories of her childhood and the often hilarious encounters she had with Americans in her first several months here. I was a little surprised and even disappointed because I thought she had decided that people needed to hear her story. But none of us questioned her decision. We had known each other as a circle of women long enough that everyone knew her story. Everyone in the group had their own silent memories. It was something they shared—unspeakable stories that defined them. In some way, those silent memories nurtured a sense of community even more than their stories did.

The play and the collaborative curatorial process of creating an exhibit provided a safe place for these women to practice their English and grapple with ways to present their feelings. They understood the challenges of expressing essential ideas in a second language and often helped each other find the right words. They also knew when silence was more powerful than speaking, silences that kept the unspeakable at bay. Writing a story for the wall of a museum, or sharing it in the confines of a small group of friends, is far different from enacting it in a community theater. They had seen how their silent freeze-frame of Lady Liberty had been a more powerful statement than their attempts to verbally describe "freedom." They all respected Cora and enjoyed her delightful personality. So, no one pushed her.

In her study of silence among Holocaust survivors, Carol Kidron notes that our logocentric society views the absence of voice as signaling an unhealthy avoidance and repression of personal trauma. Silence is often seen as socially suspect, while "well-being is thought to be contingent on the liberation of voice" (Kidron 2009, 6). Kidron's study found that silence is, in fact, a tool we use to carry past trauma into the present, to hold it as part of our identity, without the need to vocalize. In this context, Cora's physical embodiment of light-hearted stories allowed her to participate in the narratives of migration without the need to enact her own story.

The script presented five migration stories, told by five different women who worked together to fine-tune the script, participate in diction and improvisation workshops with a theater educator, and gather props, fabrics, and images to help tell their stories. Those who chose not to be actors learned sound, lighting, and stage management. One woman made colorful oversized bags for each woman to carry. They served as both "cultural baggage" and a quick way to change scenes with props and clothing. In total, ten women were involved in the production. The piece re-creates the Story Circle setting with women sitting or standing around a room telling stories. Through music, movement, mime, visual art, and the spoken word, *Story Circle* dramatizes the courage, heartbreak, and dreams of immigrant and refugee women. Created and performed by the women themselves, the play depicts the challenges and triumphs that newcomers to America have conquered and celebrated.

Cora served as the comic relief between each of the five migration stories. As one story ended, she would saunter on stage and begin talking to the audience with the ease of a standup comedian. She drew on stories that most refugee and immigrant women experience and that become quite funny once the pain or embarrassment of the original experience has faded. These were stories they had all shared in their Story Circles. Challenges with the pronunciation of some English words, misperceptions of cultural norms of behavior, and cultural collisions around constructs of beauty were all fodder for her scenes. These are the stories she chose to share, remaining silent about her own migration experience and preventing that from being the story that defines her.

Silence and Truth-Telling

For Cora, silence is not just the opposite of vocal. Being silent is a choice, just as being vocal is a choice. Silence is as much a part of what Gates-Madsen calls the memory phenomenon as is voice. Silence is "an integral part of the fullness of expression, not just secondary to the spoken word" (Mazzei in Kawabata and Gastaldo 2015, 2). While the standard perception is that speech is about remembering and silence is a kind of emptiness, Gates-Madsen argues that the ambiguous, even expressive, nature of silence gives it its power. She says, "Silence obliges the audience to stake a claim to an interpretation and define his or her position" (Gates-Madsen 2016, 14). Thus, through *Story Circle*, with its use of mime and freeze-frame scenes, the women engaged the audience in their form of truth-telling.

The omission of Cora's migration story is the space left undefined for the audience to interpret. While all the other "actors" told their stories of coming to America, Cora filled the space between (as we often do with silences) with more benign stories, which, for a time, allow the audience only a little discomfort as they see themselves as complicit in the minor mishaps she describes. Through these funny stories, she lets them, and perhaps herself, believe her migration story was uneventful. Through these vocal narratives, she chose to be silent.

We presented *Story Circle* for three nights to sold-out audiences as part of our local community theater's celebration of women playwrights and women-centered theater. Six months later, we restaged the production to accompany the exhibition at the State Museum of Pennsylvania. After each performance, we held a talk-back session so the audience could ask questions of the performers. During one of those talk-back sessions, an audience member asked the women, "Why did you decide to do this play?" I was moderating, and I looked at the women on the stage to see who might want to answer that question first. Cora looked at me and began to raise her hand. My look said, "You don't have to do this," but her silent look back said, "I am ready." Thus, she publicly shared her story with the audience, acknowledging that Ho-Thanh Nguyen was the person who finally believed her and helped her change her life. She was telling her story in honor of all women who never feel heard, and in honor of the one woman who listened. She was voicing the unspeakable so others would know that trafficking still happens.

Silence as Agency

Cora's migration story moves through a series of iterations, from the disembodied text panel on a museum wall to a conscious omission within the context of a theatrical script, and finally to her own unscripted, vocalized public embodiment at the close of the play. Her experience prompts an examination of the complex and multiple ways that we, as ethnographers, might share the stories that are gifted to us. Although the museum text panel was in her own words, she was not always present when people read it. As Kidron notes, "[…] self-narration, allows [the speaker] to transform previously tacit knowledge of the surviving traces of the past into explicit text" (Kidron 2009, 15); texts that are controlled by the teller. Kawabata and Gastaldo expand on this in their study of day laborers in Japan, noting not only that silence may be framed by

one's culture, but that maintaining silence enables the interviewee to "successfully construct his identity […] and control the conversation […]" (Kawabata & Gastaldo 2015, 3).

We did not use surnames on the text panels, so Cora had some anonymity, although her photo is there. The story is in her own words; however, she did not have to engage with anyone directly responding to the story in the exhibition. She was safe; she could remain silent. At the same time, her story was being "heard" in the context of a public, even official, space. On the other hand, the play was too powerful in that it meant enacting and embodying her story once again. She may have known some people in the audience, but this was still too raw, filled with all the emotions women experience when facing gender-based violence. Here she enacts what Kidron calls the silent copresence—an alternative, nonverbal way of being, through which the past is communicated and made actively present in lived daily interaction (Kidron 2009). Yet, when prompted by an attentive and appreciative audience, she found the courage, or perhaps the need, to share her story in her own words, her voice, and her own time. Why then? Had she decided it was time to honor someone else for their belief in her? As Roth (2000) describes above, she saw her silence as capital and the source of her advantage. And she chose to release it. Her silence was no longer necessary and, in fact, impeded a higher purpose. She controlled the narrative elements of her life story and ensured no one would assume a single story.

Concluding Thoughts

As ethnographers and cultural advocates, we often see our role as amplifying the voices of communities and individuals who have important stories to tell. The research (Kidron 2009; Kawabata & Gastaldo 2015) reminds us that silence in qualitative research is often perceived either as a failure on the part of the interviewer or lack of knowledge on the interviewee's part. We value the verbal, the narrative; it is the core of our discipline. But Cora's experience amplifies the importance of recognizing both the positive and negative spaces in a story. As Kidron reminds us, lingering logocentric conceptions of silence as absence and speech as presence could "potentially blind us to the rich world that lies between these two poles" (Kidron 2009, 19). Kawabata and Gastaldo take this a step further, arguing that silence is part of a larger communication strategy that is cultural. To ignore the silences contributes to social inequalities, especially among marginalized groups (Kawabata & Gastaldo 2015, 6). As ethnographers, we must do more than allow the silences to fill the space; we must understand the implications of our own culturally informed notions of silence and create strategies for analyzing those silences (Kawabata & Gastaldo 2015, 7).

If my research had stopped after the first interview, Cora's story would be the single story of her trafficking experience as shared on the museum's public walls. By developing deeper relationships with our collaborators over time, we create the environment for stories to breathe and thrive on their own more powerful terms. We also honor the right for silences to breathe and thrive. More importantly, we honor our collaborators' right to find agency with their silences; to use those silences to construct their own identity, and engage with the community when it serves their higher needs.

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