

# Ethnographies of Silence

## Introductory Notes

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**S**ilence. A topic that has not been sufficiently problematized in ethnological, anthropological, and folklorist research. When ethnologists deal with people as the main subjects of their studies, the focus is mainly on what they say or express through verbal and non-verbal communication. We are rarely trained to identify how much of the unspoken is hidden behind the words and gestures of their interview partners, how they can become aware of it, and analyze the meanings they inscribe to the world around them through silence. The unspoken, on the other hand, is the basis for psychotherapy. For psychotherapists, the right silence is a medium for entering the intrapsychic world of a person, where changes can be conducted (Bohak 2012, 40–51; Tojnko 2014, 72–75; Hrobat Virloget and Logar 2020). For ethnologists and folklorists, the questions of how, why, and on which occasions people choose—or are forced—to be silent and what they are silent about can lead to a deeper understanding of strategies and tactics of everyday life. Although the combination of those two gazes can open up a fruitful discussion on the causes, practices, and consequences of silence, both on an individual and collective level, so far, there are to date few interdisciplinary interactions between ethnology/folklore studies and psychotherapy in this respect.

The collection of articles gathered in this special issue of *Cultural Analysis* under the title *Ethnographies of Silence* aims to critically analyze the topic of silence.<sup>1</sup> Their editors and authors approach silence as a cultural phenomenon, viewed as a means of communication and interaction of individuals and groups with other human and non-human agents (cf. Jurić Pahor 2004, 53). In the current Western ethnological and anthropological literature, silence is mostly viewed negatively: as a lack of interest or communication; as the expression of secrecy that stems from the power relations between the researcher and the researched; as a result of repression, avoidance of specific topics seen as undesirable within the given socio-political framework; as unuttered and suppressed individual or collective traumatic memories (Kawabata, Denise Gastaldo 2015; Kidron 2009; Lovell 2007, 56–57). These and other diverse perspectives on silence are presented and analyzed in this volume. However, rather than treating

the production of silence as a void or a lack (of narratives, experiences, performances and so on), the authors and editors focus on its potential to reflect and trigger specific cultural, social, and political processes. We view silence as an affectively charged *action* purposefully stimulated and maintained to achieve—or avoid—specific effects. The silence in this volume is a dimension immanent to many cultural and social phenomena and processes. The articles discuss silencing processes from different points of view and in different spheres: in periods of social changes, in everyday life, in the production of heritage, in nation-building processes and in home-making practices.

We cannot observe silence in the same manner in different cultural settings. Makie Kawabata and Denise Gastaldo (2015) have shown that the Western perspective on silence from the so-called individualistic cultures, which use direct and explicit messages to convey meaning, is not appropriate for the study of the so-called non-Western cultures based on indirect and implicit expressions, where silence presents the usual part of a communication strategy. Such conclusions indicate the heterogeneity and multilayeredness of silence. At the same time, they remind us of the importance for its contextualization in each research setting.

There is another dimension of silence we would like to highlight in this special issue, and that is its intertwinement with the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting. Although silence is a constitutive part of remembering, it is surprising to note how little attention it has received in the ethnological reflections on what and how people remember. Silence encountered in fieldwork, as well as the one that occurs in the process of producing ethnological knowledge (Corin 2007, 23), has not been the object of systematic and extensive discussions in its own right (with a few exceptions, some of them mentioned in the present volume). As Kathy Charmaz argues, in the ethnographic work, it is not sufficient to focus on what people say; other sources, such as silence, observational data, and research context, must also be carefully considered (Charmaz 2002, 2004; Kawabata, Denise Gastaldo 2015). Furthermore, Carol A. Kidron showed that silence does not mean only the absence of speech or voice, as the Western logocentric paradigm would claim (Kidron 2009, 6). Silence can be perceived and grasped through the embodied memory or bodily memory practices (Kidron 2009), but it can also be full of sound and covered with words (see **Hrobat Virloget and McKean**).

In the field of memory, we observe how individuals and social groups move from silence to voice their memories and vice versa and the outcomes of those shifts. Silence is immanent in the processes of establishing a consensual collective memory, which includes the contests between different groups for the hegemony of their memory and the obliteration of the other. Already Maurice Halbwachs, one of the pioneers in memory studies, argued that the dominant collective memory rejects and censures individual memories that do not fit into the dominant image of the past (1925; 1980). The silencing of memories is frequent in nation-building processes that sustain dominant patterns of remembrance and produce the silenced “others,” in defeated alternative political ideologies, religions, in colonial or other contested pasts and presents. Silence can be a consequence of disciplining memories and traumatic experiences, signalling

vulnerability. It can also be a way of rewriting the past by omission, but also a mechanism of maintaining power in an (unbalanced) personal or collective relationship.

The scope of the selected articles goes beyond collective silences and suppressed memories in the dominant political discourses usually accentuated in the memory studies. Our goal was also to gain an insight into silence as encountered by researchers in their ethnographic practice, which is usually a reflection of broader socio-cultural processes. In that way, we aim to present and analyze situations and processes that we often treat as side effects and backstage narratives of ethnographic research. As those factors influence the construction of ethnological knowledge, silence has to be taken as a relevant medium just or sometimes even more than words are.

This issue of *Cultural Analysis* gathers six research articles from the fields of migrations, ethnic conflicts and identities, religious heritage, monument studies, and language communication. Some authors focus on the individual silences in the ethnographic fieldwork, while others reflect more on silence in a broader socio-political and cultural frame, although they are aware of those spheres' intertwinement. They discuss the reasons, characteristics, transformations and effects of these diverse silences.

In her article "'Better be quiet': Silence in Memories of 'Istrian Exodus,' National Heroes and Beliefs" **Katja Hrobat Virloget** considers the different silences she has encountered in her ethnographic fieldwork, on one side linked to the mass migrations of Italians from the former Yugoslavia ("exodus") and to World War II heroes, and on the other in her research on beliefs and folklore traditions. Diverse silences, including embodied silenced memory, are interpreted as a consequence of incompatible individual and collective memories, traumas, relations between winners and the defeated, power struggles. In contrast, in the context of beliefs, they function as secrets, clashes of different worldviews, and the reflection of power relations between the researcher and the researched.

**Janine Schemmer** and **Marion Hamm** contribute the article on "Silenced Memories and Practices Of Un-Silencing: Mobilities in a Dynamic Alpine Border Landscape," which deals with the contentious silenced heritage, which is based on the plurality of ethnic identities in the Alps-Adriatic border region. They treat silence here as a consequence of wars, nationalization policies, and population exchanges. The hegemonic national discourses in this Austrian-Italian-Slovenian Alpine setting has erased narratives of mobility, migrations across borders, multicultural pasts, and unsolved ethnic conflicts. Instead of transnational commemorations, nationalistic rhetoric prevails in the strategies of remembrance, which are based on the victimhood of the dominant nation and the exclusion of the "others." The authors reveal the potential of artistic performance as a tool against silence since they can serve as effective resistance against the hegemonic discourses and the media for un-silencing the marginalized and suppressed memories.

Post-war ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the consequential silences and denials, are at the core of interest of the article entitled "'Nothing Much Has Happened Here': Memory, Denial and Identity Among Postwar Youth in Republika Srpska" by **Michele Bianchi**. By analyzing critical statements from his eth-

nographic notes such as “We do not talk about it” and “Nothing much has happened here,” the author argues that the collective memory in Republika Srpska has been trapped “between the massive culture of silence and the various practices of denial.” The broader system of genocide denial, silence, and omission influence the everyday practices of the Bosnian Serb youth in their post-war strategies of self-representation, re-codification of the past, the avoidance of the dichotomy victims/perpetrators and post-war nationalisms. Silence thus has an impact on the public and private spheres of sociability, different moral economies, and practices of resisting global narratives about the war in Bosnia.

**Marijana Belaj’s** article, “The Dissonant Heritage of the Blessed Alojzije Stepinac: The Case of the Silencing of a Religious Tourist Route,” looks at complex relations of power in terms of political, religious, and economic discourses. Belaj argues that the reason for silencing the religious heritage route connected with Stepinac derives from the conflicting perspectives on both it and the figure of this martyr. The Croatian Catholic Church’s view of the blessed as a symbol and generator of religious and national unity and values differs significantly from the tourist perspective, tied to European processes of economic integration and the idea of “unity and diversity.” Grounded in Stepinac’s religious and spiritual legacy, the Church opposes the transformation of the national martyr into an object of commercial industry, resulting in a weakening and silencing of dissonant religious, national heritage.

In “Our Voices: Navigating the Silences between Refugee and Immigrant Women’s Narratives,” **Amy Skillman** reflects on silence in her ethnographic encounters with refugee and immigrant women in Pennsylvania. She reflects how they articulate silence in their biographical narratives. Her approach is original because she perceives silence as an active presence in social life, as a way to find agency rather than as a means of disempowerment. Her reflection focuses on a single woman’s autobiographical migration story with the question of how she organizes silence around it and how silences have shifted through time concerning different personal psychological states and social contexts.

The volume concludes with a different kind of perceiving silence—the one created by speaking. In this case, being voiceless and silent emerges from the absence of communication, due to the loss of superimposed languages that have replaced people’s native tongues. In the moving article “The Sound of Silence—Dementia, Language Loss, and Being Heard,” **Thomas McKean** draws our attention to “the sounds of silence” produced by an increasing number of people living with bilingual dementia in second-language environments. They become silenced after they lose their later-acquired hegemonic languages and revert to their first languages of Gaelic and Scots. “Crying out in a linguistic wilderness, in a language [they] do not understand,” they lose the medium of communication and interaction, which results in a loss of identity and humanity itself.

All the contributions to this volume reflect dilemmas that researchers face while analysing silence. When we turn silence into a topic of ethnological or folklorist research, we start asking ourselves whether we have the proper methodological tools

and knowledge to understand the layers of meaning, the worldviews, and attitudes that frequently lie behind the silence. Some of the contributors to this special issue thus stress a need to enrich the existing disciplinary approaches to silence through collaboration with other fields, like psychotherapy, the discipline that centers on silence, its manifestations, and embodiments (ex. Corin 2007; Hrobat Virloget, Logar 2020). The articles in this issue are thus also a call for revisiting and developing the theoretical and methodological strategies that can allow us to enter and analyze moments, episodes, spaces, and communities built around silence. They are all grounded on the authors' own fieldwork experiences, their encounters with silence in their research, limitations they became aware of in the attempt to make silence an integral part of their studies, and analytical potentials that emerge from their ethnographies of silence.

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### **Notes**

- 1 This special issue derives from the panel *Silencing Memories: Routes, Monuments and Heritages*, which was organized in the frame of the 14<sup>th</sup> congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 2019.

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