

Silence and its Many Forms: A Reflective Response

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What people say, write, reveal, or represent has traditionally been the primary source of information for understanding how individuals and groups deal with their past and present. However, an emerging field of scholarship suggests that silence and silencing are equally rich and promising research areas (Biguenet 2015; Hrobat Virloget, Gousseff & Corni 2015; Kidron 2009; Rosoux & Ypersele 2011; Sue 2015; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger 2010). There are many different types of silence, and this heterogeneity of silence, or “silences,” is what this special issue examines and explores. The seven presented articles cover topics as varied as the power dynamics of silencing within dissonant heritagisation processes, the problem of silence in ethnographic research, and silence as a consequence of the loss of communication due to the loss of language with dementia. Faced with the myriad of in-depth case studies, one inevitably asks how we can understand and conceptualize the phenomenon of silence in our everyday social lives? While reading the articles, three fundamental questions come to mind; the question of the use of silence, of the meaning of silence, and of silence as alienation.

How can we understand the *use of silence*? Does silence always relate to forgetting, as common sense would have it,

or can it also be a means to remember? How, why, and by whom is silence used? In Skillman’s article, one can see the incredible array of how silence can be employed by different social actors. On the one hand, the portrait of an abusive husband silencing his wife, and on the other, migrant women using silence as a choice of self-expression, poignantly shows us how silence can be used in strikingly distinct ways; Silence can be a means of subjugation as well as a source of empowerment and agency. Power dynamics play an essential role in Belaj’s study of how the Catholic Church in Croatia uses silencing. Is it possible that neither silence nor speaking is more potent on their own, and instead, that power resides with those choosing to be, or those making others, silent or vocal?

Secondly, how is *the meaning of silence* being constructed? Commemorative silence is a deliberate act designed to show respect and keep memories alive. That said, silence is also used as a means to forget and to move on. Not only that, but there are also uncomfortable or unintended silences. Therefore, it needs to be narratively created and meaningfully framed. How do we imbue meaning into silence, and why is it important? In Hrobat Virloget’s article, the author reflects on the different meanings of silences that she encountered during her diverse ethnographic research experience. Silence can indicate a secret, but its meaning can also be the result of “incompatible memories, trauma, or relations between winners and the defeated” (in this volume). Further, rather than merely being an absence of sound, figurative silence is symptomatic of a loss of meaning and communication, as McKean illustrates in his contribution to dementia-related silencing.

The third theme that emerges from this collection of articles is *silence as alienation*. As much as silence can bring people together, it can also divide them. In some cases, silence can refer to a profoundly traumatic subject deemed “unspeakable.” As such, silence can also be revealing of broken communication, divisions, contestations, and alienation. For example, as Bianchi’s article demonstrates, remembering the Yugoslav war is highly problematic and marked by what the author calls “institutional knowledge of denial” (in this volume). The struggle to publicly articulate past violent memories indicates the friction and divisions between different ethno-national groups. Hamm and Schemmer evocatively demonstrate how a dominant national master narrative is silencing local practices and vernacular understandings of the Alps-Adriatic border region. However, the authors also remind us of the possibilities of “un-silencing” as a form of resistance.

Silence is a complex, multifaceted, and somewhat paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, silence is a conspicuous absence of sound, drawing attention to a void. For instance, during commemorative events, silence is often used to draw our attention to something or someone missing, as if what is commemorated should be present but is not. In this way, silence represents not only the absence of sounds but also absence in general. Hamlet’s dying words “the rest is silence” feel inherently existential and anti-religious, as it suggests that there is nothing after death. To defy silence is, in a way, to defy death by remembering what would have been forgotten otherwise. On the other hand, as many articles in this special issue remind us, silence can be just as immense-

ly powerful an instrument of expression as sound. One might even argue that in music, for example, a rest, an interval of silence in a piece of music, can be even more expressive than any accompanying notes. The untold and/or the unspeakable can be viewed as an absence of presence as well as it can be explored as an expression in its own right. In this way, silence can be loud and seen as “presence” in and of itself.

Works Cited

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