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# Tracing silences: Towards an anthropology of the unspoken and unspeakable

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**ABSTRACT**

Silence is crucial to our social world. Responding to the growing scholarly interest among anthropologists and historians in more in-depth engagements with social silence, in this special issue we argue for a theorization of silences that is at once more robust and open to the particular; a theorization, we suggest, that embraces multivocality, unintelligibility, and uncertainty of interpretation. We ask what it means to trace silences, and to include traces of silence in our ethnographic representations. What qualifies as silence, and how does it relate to articulation; to voice, visibility and representation? How can silences be sensed and experienced viscerally as well as narratively? And how do we think with and start interpreting silences in the face of potential unknowability? The contributions to this special issue suggest that tracing silences, through a range of modes and methods, and in the historical, social and political ways in which they emerge and are enacted in the particularities of people's lives, is a crucial task for historians and anthropologists alike.

**KEYWORDS**

Silence; traces; articulation; haunting

Silence is crucial to our social world. It can be almost tangibly present, or go entirely unnoticed. It can harbour a range of affects, meanings and unspoken stories, and can touch those for whom it matters in wildly different ways. Silence can signal a form of oppression, produced by the forces that exclude certain ideas, people and words from being spoken, visible, attended to, or even thought about. Similarly, silence can be a haunting or lingering ghost from the past that is uncannily present in the narratives and modes of life that constitute people's imaginative possibilities and horizons of expectation. In contrast, silence can be strategic. It can be gentle; a form of protection against painful thoughts; a form of respect; a quiet empathy; letting the other be; caring; silently being together. It can create a world in a non-narrative form.

To the ethnographer and historian, silence can be meaningful, multivocal, ambiguous and/or opaque. We can be affected by silence when listening to a narrative painfully shaped by untold histories (Das 2007) and when working in a society that is haunted by ghosts (Good 2019). In this special issue, we suggest that the work of listening to

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silence – to the unspeakable and the unspoken – demands special attention within anthropology. In particular, we point to what it means to *trace* silences, and to include traces of silence in our ethnographic representations. What qualifies as silence, and how does it relate to articulation, to voice, visibility and representation? How can silences be sensed and experienced viscerally as well as narratively? And how do we think with and start interpreting silences in the face of potential unknowability?

The articles in this issue forcefully argue that social silence is not merely the absence of communication. They also assert that potential unknowability should not stop anthropologists and historians from attending to silences – indeed, if anything, it may increase the ethical demand that anthropologists engage with it, even if our conclusions may be to not probe further and to not write about or otherwise represent the silences we encounter. The work of 'tracing silences' offers a modality for such engagement, by suggesting that we neither turn elsewhere when encountering silence nor fill in the moments that we, as scholars, dub 'silence' with univocal explanations that support a particular discursive framework.[1] Instead, tracing silences demands that we raise more questions, invoke more possibilities and start considering silence as a presence on 'a continuum between articulation and non-articulation' (Samuels, this issue).

Our discussions on tracing silences took off in the form of an AAA panel at the 2017 Annual Meetings in Washington DC. Contributors to this special issue Evi Chatzipanagiotidou, Ana Dragojlovic and Annemarie Samuels presented on the original panel.[2] Robert Weller was an active participant in the audience and, together with Carol Kidron and Fiona Murphy, later joined in to collaborate on this special issue. Our lively discussions during the AAA panel, however, were also marked by absence. Mary Steedly, who would have been the discussant on the panel, was unable to attend due to illness. We were deeply saddened by her passing five weeks later. In the shadow of Mary's absence in Washington DC, we were very grateful and honoured when her friend, fellow Indonesianist and long-term Faculty colleague at Harvard University, Byron Good, spontaneously offered to act as on-the-spot discussant. Traces of her work infused his excellent comments, as well as the afterword he kindly agreed to contribute to this issue, and continue to shape our present efforts to think through an anthropology of silence.

In her work on the Sumatran Karoland, Mary Steedly (1993, 2013) focuses on stories at the margins of dominant narrative frameworks, teasing out the ways in which women's experiences did not quite fit with narrative conventions in what she called the 'social production of ephemerality' (1993, 29).[3] For example, the Karo women's stories of everyday struggles during the Indonesian revolution that feature in her 2013 book *Rifle Reports* unsettle a heroic and male-centered historical narrative from the gendered margins of the nation, rarely heard in dominant historiography yet fundamental to the Indonesian imagining of modernity (2013). In *Hanging without a rope* (1993), she urges us – among other things – to attend to the politics and practices of storytelling ('not least of all our own'), to illuminate what stories come to count as story, and to find ways of listening to unofficial histories. As she suggests, 'We can look beyond the silencing toward the site where silence lapses, toward the 'misfit' in the scripts of dominion; and we can look for other ways of telling a woman's story' (1993, 177).

In Mary Steedly's work, we find the scholarly work of tracing silences through listening to ephemeral narratives, attending to unseen forces as well as lustrous imaginings, and situating 'narrative experience' within the plurality of (hi)stories that shape the limits of

the narratable. It is in this spirit of tracing silences across the interpersonal, social and historical realms of multivocal articulation and non-articulation that we start our anthropological exploration of the unspoken and the unspeakable.

## New directions

The social presence and meaning of silence is, as Keith Basso (1970) famously found among the Western Apache, thoroughly cultural. Describing cultural norms for 'refraining from speech' that are different from his own, he notes that, 'Traditionally, ethnographers and linguists have paid little attention to cultural interpretations given to silence or, equally important, to the types of social contexts in which it regularly occurs' (Basso 1970, 214). While his analysis of Apache silences as 'giving up on words' portrays silence in the first place as a – for him unexpected – *absence*, his ethnographic descriptions suggest otherwise: silence, here, is a powerful form of communication and sociality. It is in the absence of silence that breaches of norms occur.

Since the publication of Basso's seminal essay, a wide range of social scientists have paid close analytical attention to the presence of silences as cultural and communal formations (for example, Sheriff 2000; Van Tilburg 1998), sociolinguistic phenomena (for example, Saville-Troike 1982) and as occurring through oppressive power relations or residing in psychological trauma (for example, Achino-Loeb 2005; Foucault 1978; Antze and Lambek 1996; Danieli 2010; Argenti and Schramm 2012). In what has become one of the most influential analyses of silence in the fields of history and anthropology, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) shows how power worked in silencing the Haitian Revolution in societal memory as well as official historical narratives, and how it always produced a 'bundle of silences' that formed over time and across multiple tellings and genres. Methodologically and epistemologically, anthropologists have made a case for ethnographers to go 'beyond the words' by attending to 'resonance' (Wikan 1992), to tease out the complex psychological and linguistic negotiations of 'revealing and concealing' in interviews (Ewing 2006; see also Gammeltoft 2016), and to reflect on the often unspoken multimodal media they use and leave behind during and after fieldwork (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017).

Recently, anthropologists have taken the analysis of silence in yet other directions. They have done so, for example, by demonstrating how silence can be a form of care or respect (Han 2012; Jackson 2004; Shohet 2021), and a meaningfully embodied communication of the past (Kidron 2009). Others draw inspiration from Derrida's concept of 'haunting' to make sense of the appearance of ghosts, or the 'spectral' that harbours what is unspeakable and unspoken, in the lives of individuals and societies (Good 2012, 2019). Another approach to the analysis of silences is offered by the burgeoning literature on affect, especially for anthropologists who are interested in tracing the affective forces of silences across time and space (Dragojlovic 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2012). Finally, in a recent essay, Robert Weller (2017) has proposed an anthropology of the unknowable, arguing that silence is 'not the opposite of speech but rather the far end of the continuum of uninterpretability that affects every kind of communication'. Silence, he shows, may beg or refuse interpretation as much as speech may do. It is, as he puts it in this issue, 'never simply the absence of speech, as if speech was the normal, healthy expectation and silence constituted its lack' (Weller, this issue).

We discern a growing scholarly need to bring the above-mentioned lines of thought into productive conversation and to expand the anthropology of silence more visibly as a subject in its own right. This surge of interest in silence, we suggest, arises from the increased academic engagement with socially urgent themes such as migration, conflict, human rights, disaster, gender inequality, violence, and care – all of which are imbued with conditions at or beyond the limits of articulation, and all of which sit squarely at the intersection of anthropology and history. This current momentum necessitates a theorization of silences that is at once more robust and open to the particular; a theorization, we suggest, that embraces multivocality, unintelligibility, and uncertainty of interpretation.

## Traces

A trace can be an indication, a sign, a clue, a remnant, a ghost, a trail; or footprints associated with inclination, desires, and/or compulsions to unearth, find out, or perhaps rescue from oblivion. In her discussion of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak astutely suggests that 'trace [erasure] is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present' (Spivak 1976, xvii). All contributors to this special issue discuss *traces* of silences not in an attempt to represent the entirety of that which seems absent, evacuated and might escape verbal expression, but rather to engage with the social, political and interpersonal dynamics that silences generate. In line with Valentina Napolitano's argument for 'a renewed centrality of the trace in an anthropological study of materialities and historicities' we follow her approach to 'tracing' as 'at once an analytical tool and an ethnographic site for inquiry' (2015, 47).

Traces of past violence can emanate as an affective presence that haunts verbal articulations across generations (Dragojlovic 2018). While testimonial voice has often been associated with liberatory speech that has a capacity to release traumatic memories (Caruth 1995), an astute argument has been made for the importance of the haunting presence of past injustices that escapes verbal articulation (Gordon 2008). Building on the work of Jacques Derrida, Avery Gordon delineates hauntings as an important sociological phenomenon through which abusive systems of power make themselves known (Gordon 2008, xvi). Furthermore, Gordon argues, '[Haunting] always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing something-to-be-done' (Gordon 2008, xvi). Ana Dragojlovic (this issue) explores how traces of intergenerational violence manifest themselves as spectral absences/presences in descendants' lifeworlds. She ethnographically explores how the grandchildren of the Indisch diaspora engage in tracing intergenerational silences in their genealogies by focusing on the analysis of an interactive art project that aims to unsettle intergenerational silences by affectively triggering the un-speakable in personal and collective histories of violence and loss. Dragojlovic argues that such practices are central to the subjective becomings of those whose lifeworlds are embedded in hauntological structures (Csordas 2019, 519) that emanate out of unequal systems of power produced by imperialism, racism, heteropatriarchy and their ongoing iterations. The practice of tracing silence in this context manifests as an act of haunted speakability, which Dragojlovic suggests has been shaped by intergenerational aspirations to visibilize personal and collective injuries.

Yet, individual aspirations to give voice to and visibilize past injustices often reproduce the very structures they wish to dismantle.

Drawing on the work of Derrida to reflect on rhythm and ritual, Robert Weller (this issue) draws attention to the ways in which stories told are always haunted by those that could have been told. The unspoken is part of every utterance, 'as the words we did not choose lurk behind the ones we spoke', and silence and telling conjure each other. This is a rhythm that is always at risk to be broken by horrific trauma, disaster and death, as Weller shows with his ethnographic exploration of a resettlement project in Suzhou (China), where over the last decades a rural population of about 100,000 people was resettled into urban apartment complexes, as their entire villages, including temples, houses and cemeteries, were flattened to the ground. Attending to the ways in which the relocated villagers turned apartment garages into spaces for private altars where they gathered at the appropriate times following the lunar calendar, he points out how people attempt to reclaim the rhythm, and thus the silences that belong to the rhythm, resisting the silence of complete annihilation. In this space where spirits of the dead that had long been silent suddenly came to haunt as bulldozers had destroyed their graves, people attempted to incorporate them in the remaking of rituals and thereby new rhythms of their social world – 'learning to live together with loss' even if traces of the demolished village life keep infusing this new rhythm of silence and speech with the silence of longing.

## Silence and articulation

The articles in this issue show that writing with and about silences as anthropologists and historians means questioning what counts as silence and articulation, and unsettling prevalent ideas on the morality and direction of silence work. For example, in her paper on the dialectic between silence and voice in Holocaust descendants' accounts, Carol Kidron (this issue) problematizes the unidirectional assertion that giving voice and telling a story is needed in order to heal from a previously silenced past. Through closely studying notions of silence in the stories of grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, she shows how, while these grandchildren often reject their parents' silences, they also emphasize that the quality of their public voice is dependent on a prior exposure to silent and affective transmission of memory in their youth. Some even come to feel that the silent, lived memories were more authentic than the public, logocentric voices that 'flatten' this affective transmission. Her paper, therefore, calls for an anthropology of silence that studies the ways in which people make meaning through silences, by examining 'the intersubjective embodied and emotive media of silence' and shows how silence comes to figure in a metanarrative of authenticity.

Joining Kidron's call for scrutinizing the dominant discourse of healing through public voice, Evi Chatzipanagiotidou and Fiona Murphy (this issue) argue that humanitarian and charitable agencies' efforts to empower refugee artists by sponsoring 'refugee art' in fact produce conditions that silence the very artists to whom these agencies aimed to give a voice. In their ethnographic study of Syrian artists in Istanbul, they show how some artists opt not to join in on refugee art projects that aestheticize displacement and loss as these projects can work to limit their identities to a singular subject position and determine who may speak as an 'authentic refugee'. Their aesthetic and sometimes literal silences, when

they choose to stop making art, are a poignant tactical response of 'reclaiming identity and artistic integrity'. Extending their argument to a broader anthropology of silence, Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy suggest that while there have been significant efforts to overcome the fetishization of the refugee voice in anthropological work, ethnographers also often construct 'discursive parameters' in which the life histories and narratives of their interlocutors are expected to fit. Shifting attentions to 'non-linear articulations of experience, art, and creative expression', their paper suggests, offers a promising direction for anthropological efforts of tracing silences to challenge dominant discursive frameworks.

The attention to non-linear and creative forms of expression in Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy's paper, and the powerful dialectic of silence and narrative in Kidron's article, aligns well with the work of scholars of narrative that reveals the non-linearity, ambiguity, and gaps that characterize most narrative acts (see, for example, Mattingly 2010; Pinto 2014; Shohet 2018). The unspoken and unspeakable, here, are integral rather than opposite to narrative experiences. In Annemarie Samuels' contribution to this issue, such silences within narratives emerge in the subjunctive elements of the stories her HIV-positive interlocutors in the Indonesian province of Aceh tell; elements that evoke possibilities of past and present narrative trajectories even if the trajectories themselves remain unarticulated (see also Good and Good 1994; Samuels 2018). Her article draws out not only the historical particularities of silences on/with HIV in Aceh, but also the intersection of silences with anxieties about visibility. Her interlocutors employ verbal and visual tactics to keep the unseen and unspoken unarticulated. The paper asks us to rethink silence, speech and (in)visibility along a continuum of articulation and non-articulation wherein silent visual tactics may be a powerful form of articulation, and speech may be subjunctive, indefinite, and crucial to keeping the unseen and the unspoken.

Like many anthropologists and historians before them, the contributors to this issue explore various modes of engaging silences in their writing by combining analytical attention to silences with stitching gaps and present absences into their ethnographies – in the movements between the visual and the unseen (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy, Samuels); between the affective transmission of memory and public discourses on silence (Dragojlovic, Kidron); and between ritual and silence, the one necessarily invoking the other (Weller). If the papers reveal the necessity of scholarly humility in the face of the unknown and touch on the ethical and epistemological limits of writing, they also argue not to stop there, but to actively listen to and engage with the unspoken and unspeakable, while resisting 'the desire to fill in the narrative gaps and close the loopholes' (Steedly 1993, 180). Together, then, they suggest that tracing silences, through a range of modes and methods, in their multivocality and potential unintelligibility and in the historical, social and political ways in which they emerge and are enacted in the particularities of people's lives, is a crucial task for historians and anthropologists alike.

## Engaging the unspoken and the unspeakable

Building on a long tradition of historical and anthropological inquiry into power and articulation, this special issue calls for further anthropological and historical inquiry into silent traces and for scholarly reflection on the work of tracing silence. Suspending judgment of silence as suspicious, we foreground an openness to the multiple stakes and

meanings of silence in the lifeworlds we study. The unspoken and unspeakable can be powerfully present, and their traces – or their 'haunted speakability' (Dragojlovic, this issue) may travel across generations and modes of verbal, visual and affective expression.

Our own work of tracing silences is necessarily part of the dynamics that silences generate, and therefore requires careful threading of the 'rhythm' (Weller, this issue) that our stories and other modes of representation become part of. We see a rich, and urgent, potential for future explorations of the limits of interpretation and for anthropological and historical writing with such uncertainty and unknowability – attending to silences without filling them in – while at the same time increasing space for the ephemeral or marginalized stories we may hear when tracing silences. Therefore, we hope that beyond being a subject of study in its own right, the work of tracing silences will increasingly become a central part of our scholarly endeavours.

## Notes

1. See Pinto (2008, 163–174) for an elaboration of the ways in which scholarly attempts to fill in silence often come to support dominant discourses.
2. The two other presenters on our panel, Asha Abeyasekera and Stavroula Pipyrou, have pursued publication of their beautiful papers elsewhere (see Abeyasekera n.d.; Pipyrou 2020). We thankfully acknowledge their inspiring partaking in our discussions.
3. For a brilliant and beautiful reflection on Mary Steedly's work and life, see Lahiri, Spyer, and Strassler (2020) and the contributions in their edited collection.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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