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ESSAY

Special Section: Silent Reverberations: Potentialities of Attuned Listening

Introduction: Silent Reverberations: Potentialities of Attuned Listening

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This collection of essays invites thinking about silences as forces of affective reverberation that resonate through, within, and across social, political, and intersubjective relations of turbulent pasts and uncertain futures, as well as forms of care and layers of structural oppression. It builds on scholarship from philosophy (Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1978) and linguistic (Basso, 1970; Saville-Troike, 1982), psychological (Good, 2012; Throop, 2010), political (Pipyrrou, 2020; Warren, 1993), and cultural anthropology (Dragojlovic and Samuels, 2021; Jackson, 2004; Kidron, 2009; Navaro-Yashin, 2012) that has noted how silences are regular occurrences that feature prominently in many spheres of social life. Collectively, we suggest that transforming silence into speech is not necessarily always positive, while at the same time silences need not be a priori embraced as emancipatory either.

At first sight, “silent reverberations” might suggest a contradiction in terms—a juxtaposition of that which stands for the complete absence of sound with that which implies a prolongation of a sound, a resonance that has a long or continuing effect. As our ethnographic accounts in this collection reveal, however, silences often travel in the modes of prolongation and resonance that the term “reverberation” captures. We show how they do so through practices of affective communication that precede and/or exceed verbal articulation, resonating across time and space through individual and collective experiences of everyday life.

Silent reverberations permeate everyday lifeworlds as a relational presence of unspoken feelings of intimacy, solidarity, love, desire, sadness, longing, grief, loss, hope, and imagination. As such, they correspond with what Kathleen Stewart (2007) refers to as “ordinary affects” that pervade experiences of everyday life. Silent reverberations can haunt. They can demand attention and insist on modes of communication that facilitate a gratifying sense of being heard, understood, and accepted (Dragojlovic, this collection). They can be a stain of the shame of unspeakable violence, or of broken loyalties to normative ways of being that might be both liberating and exclusionary (Dragojlovic, this collection). Silent reverberations can also occur as enduring, puzzling presences of discomfort, anxiety, and worry, as well as expressing themselves as acts of care (Dragojlovic, Shohet, Samuels, Cassaniti, this collection; Shohet, 2021). They often feature as knowable traces of collective pasts (Dragojlovic, Shohet, this collection), or they may be relations of potentiality for re-creating, shifting, and reimagining present and future lifeworlds (Samuels, Cassaniti, this collection).

The essays in this collection explore how silences do things, like speech does, and how they open up and foreclose intersubjective relations and political possibilities. We suggest that making space for silences that do not necessarily need to be turned into speech or voice requires what we may think of as “attuned listening” to silent reverberations. Drawing on recent anthropological work that foregrounds “attunement” as the mode in which humans are always in a process of affectively relating to each other and their social worlds (see e.g., Zigon, 2014), we think of attuned listening as an attitude and practice of affectively attending to others. We consider “listening” both literally and metaphorically, including embodied attention to verbal and nonverbal communication. Taking a cue from recent calls to approach ethnographic research as intersubjective exchanges that necessitate an understanding of bodies as having a capacity to affect and be affected (Blackman, 2012; Borneman, 2011) and extending Pérez’s

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(2013, 300) approach to silence as “a point of entry into deep listening,” this collection shows how “attuned listening” is particularly crucial to the ethnographic study of silences.

Attuned listening occurs through ethnographers’ intersubjective engagements, of being with and paying attention to what resonates through and within silences, wherein resonance has a potential to constitute another story¹ or overlapping stories that might both align and diverge from established discourse. Throughout this collection, we highlight how silences are constituted relationally and how attuned listening reveals the social and political potentialities and foreclosures of silent reverberations.

By conceptualizing the practice of attuned listening as affective and relational but also inherently political—due to both the particular positionalities and socio-historical conditions of the ethnographic encounter and the structures of power that reverberate through silence—our collection is indebted to a rich body of anthropological scholarship on the politics of listening. Notably, in her work on refusal, Audra Simpson (2007) draws attention to histories of anthropological representation of Indigenous people, when in some disciplinary iterations anthropologists perceived themselves to be the voice of the colonized. Instead, Simpson, argues for the importance of paying close attention to what matters to people anthropologists work with, rather than listening to what people have to say through the framework of difference. Relatedly, Saiba Varma (2020, 31) has recently argued for a “politics of hearing” that attends to expressions that are not always literally silent and yet remain unheard because they do not fit current public, and politicized, frameworks and discourses. Building on this scholarship, with “attuned listening” we specifically foreground intersubjectivity—“the existential organization, recognition, and constitution of relations between subjects” (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011, 88)—as a vantage point for understanding how silences reverberate and affect larger configurations of social inequality. Drawing on person-centered methodologies, this collection zooms in on the particular and the subjective, to see—and hear—how silences settle in, and ripple through, personal and social worlds, and how they are in the continuous work of becoming in the everyday that socio-political histories may reverberate in and through silence (cf. Das, 2007).

The papers in this collection all do so by exploring two related analytical dimensions in which attuned listening to silent reverberations can take us. First, we consider how silences work through affect. Affect is important because silences are intersubjectively constituted, and attuned listening, as an intersubjective and embodied practice, is a way of being with the other that allows for silence to be communicated affectively. Second, we attend to the relationality of silence with respect to sound and speech, emphasizing how discourse and narrative are co-constituted with and through silences. Here, attuned listening includes ethnographic attention to the unfolding of the narratives through which silences may reverberate. By highlighting these two related dimensions of attuned listening to silent reverberations, we aim to both complement and problematize an anthropological emphasis on discursivity, while opening up new directions for discussing the anthropological engagement with silences.

SILENT REVERBERATIONS AS AFFECTIVE FORCES

As silent reverberations move through verbal and nonverbal communication in embodied intersubjective spaces, it is helpful to think of them as *affective forces*. In recent years affect has been theorized as autonomous, nonrepresentational, trans-subjective, immaterial, or nonconscious (Massumi, 2002; Mazzarella, 2009; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; Stewart, 2007), referring to processes that circulate among human and more-than-human bodies (Navaro, 2017). We similarly approach affect as ambiguous, arising “in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon . . . in those intensities that pass body to body” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, 1). Here, we are primarily interested in what affect *does* in moving silences and thereby moving people. We contend that while it is important to take into account affects’ presubjective and non-intentional qualities, it is equally important to engage with the subjective experiences of affect and how such experiences are given meaning in specific contexts. Silent reverberations are modes of affective communication that are socially, politically, and intersubjectively specific (Dragojlovic, 2018; Hemmings, 2005; Navaro-Yashin, 2012), and thus have prominent moral dimensions that are embedded within histories of social inequality. Marginalizing the subject and the subjective from the theorization of affect might perpetuate dichotomies of mind and body, intentional and non-intentional, or cognitive and affective, thus limiting rather than broadening our understanding of the complexities of affective forces that emerge throughout practices of everyday life (Dragojlovic, 2018). Our approach therefore emphasizes how attuned listening to silent reverberations is always an intersubjective and socio-political process.

SILENCE IN NARRATIVE

A second way in which the papers in this collection explore what silence does, and how silent reverberations may open up or foreclose intersubjective and political relations and possibilities, is by attending to the relationality of silence as it analytically emerges as inseparable from sound and speech. As embodied, intersubjective practice, attuned listening to silent reverberations as affective forces does not exclude attention to narrative, sound, and speech. Narratives themselves are affective vehicles, and speech acts travel across bodies and through the intersubjective spaces that they generate in relation to what remains unspoken and unspeakable. This means that attuned listening to silent reverberations will often entail paying more rather than less attention to narrative and discourse and the range of forms of articulation and nonarticulation that constitute them

(see Samuels, 2021; Shohet, 2018; Weller, 2017). As communicative acts, silent reverberations may exceed narrative expression but are also often inherent to the narratives themselves, not only in the pauses between utterances but also as illocutionary acts (Saville-Troike, 1982). Entire stories may articulate silence, constituting a “non-narrative” (Das, 2007) in which the speech act itself is paradoxically a silent reverberation, gesturing to the unspeakable.

A careful listening to stories told attunes the ethnographer to stories that are untellable or untold, or, as Shohet writes (this collection): “through contextualized, perplexed and perplexing stories, we attempt to listen beyond the words authorized by master state narratives or even those legitimized by our own interlocutors.” It is perhaps particularly the stories “at the edges of narrative possibility” (Samuels, this collection) that reverberate unspoken and unspeakable histories of exclusion.

Silent reverberations are therefore always entangled with different modes of articulation, including when people actively reflect on silences transmitted by previous generations (Dragojlovic, this collection), or deliberately renounce speech and sound to affect social and intersubjective change (Cassaniti, this collection). It is this relationality that an attuned listening explores, in order to ethnographically trace where and how silent reverberations come to matter, and how these reverberations are always socially and politically situated.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF/WITH SILENT REVERBERATIONS

Directing ethnographic attention to silent reverberations evokes questions about researchers’ positionality in situated attempts of knowing and even about the productive limits of ethnography and intelligibility. Audra Simpson (2007) demonstrates the theoretical and methodological generativity of our collaborators’ refusals (see also McGranahan, 2016). As refusals may reverberate in silence, they may draw us to acknowledge and embrace unintelligibility and unknowability (Butler, 2004). While not all silent reverberations may be refusals, like refusal they may direct us to anthropological limits that are “expansive in what they do not tell us” (Simpson, 2007, 78). Attuned listening to silent reverberations therefore requires that we bring uncertainty into our ethnographies (see Stevenson, 2014). It asks us to situate individuals and silences within historical contexts, as we continuously navigate the tension between inquiring into the social situation of intersubjective silence and letting the other’s silence be.

Writing with silence, the authors in this collection muse, recognizes how silent reverberations may be both ephemeral and persistently recurring, rippling through pasts, opening, and foreclosing future potentialities. They call for an attuned listening in a “gesture of care” (Cubellis, 2020), resisting generalization and narrative closure in their ethnographies. And they argue that embracing the uncertainty and limits of knowability of silent reverberations, co-created in all ethnographic interactions, is productive in its perpetual opening up of more questions. As such, *silent reverberations* gestures towards ethnographic research as attuned listening that might have important repercussions for decolonial work in anthropology. Specifically, we suggest that attuned listening might serve as “the ongoing processes and practices, pedagogies and paths, projects and propositions that build, cultivate, enable, and engender decoloniality” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, 19).

In their own ways, the essays in this collection reflect on the potentialities of attuned listening to silent reverberations. In her contribution on decolonial activists and grandchildren of Indisch (Indo-Dutch) descent in the Netherlands, Dragojlovic illuminates how they find potentiality for becoming otherwise and “unlearning” social inequalities in engaging with intergenerational silences, not by voicing what had been silenced but by protecting certain silences in which their grandparents have found shelter. Shohet, in her essay, analyzes how personal and historical silences reverberate through the narrative interaction with one aging woman living in a kibbutz to draw attention to the potentially productive ethnographic tension in attuned listening between representing such silent reverberations and remaining with the stories that our interlocutors choose to tell us. Both, she suggests, are ethical engagements that may be incommensurable with one another when trying to scale up or down to each other. Similarly drawing attention to the particularities of narrative interactions that reverberate social-historical and subjective silences, Samuels focuses on end-of-life care interactions in the Indonesian province of Aceh. She shows how multivocal expressions that do not (directly) speak of dying reverberate histories of inequality as well as practices of care at the edges of narrative possibility. Finally, in Thailand, Cassaniti shows how silence trained in meditation contributes to an active transformation of subjective attunement, and from this open up possibilities of social and political change.

Geographically ranging from Southeast Asia to Israel and to the Netherlands, these essays grapple with listening to silence within a socio-historical context of violence and inequality. Each essay shows how zooming in on individuals’ engagement with and through silence in intersubjective spaces offers a unique vantage point to studying the ways in which silent reverberations reflect and affect socio-political worlds. Together, these essays bring attention to the potentialities of our attuned listening to affective relationalities through which the unspeakable and unspoken reverberate within structures of inequality.

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ENDNOTE

¹ In her study about UFO captivity narratives in the US, Susan Lepselter (2016) offers a close reading of the ways in which people pay close attention to parallels between stories they tell. This practice she argues produces resonance through which other stories are created.

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