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Unintelligible silence: Challenging academic authority in a new socio-dialogic politics of the real for collective justice and transformation

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Abstract

What is silence? Is it a loss, an omission? Is it a stopping of the mouth, of the voice? An empty place where no meaning has come forward…or perhaps at times quite the opposite, an absence-as-presence (Deleuze, 1990; Derrida, 1976)? Might silence evoke much more about what we assume is our monological, unitary reality, indexing possibilities yet unseen? This paper outlines the ways in which silence is typically understood according to scholarly orthodoxy: as omission in human communication or a silencing of minoritized individuals or communities by those in power. It then moves to critique the preeminence of whitestream (Grande, 2003) Western-centric academic authority, which self-perpetuates via the exclusion of outsider ways of doing, being and knowing such as those brought forward by silence, constituting a loss of meaning and knowledge from the social imaginary. This paper suggests that the pursuit of an articulate unknowing (Zembylas, 2005) regarding silence as a creative, disruptive force beyond the control of rationality is a means of engaging with radical possibilities for a different, juster world. It proposes a socio-dialogic politics of the real that welcomes silence as an unsettling of our current thinking about what is and will be possible, as well as who does and does not matter. It concludes by illustrating the ingenious force of silence in examples of subversive art that expose the hegemonizing, rational(ized) version of reality sold by academics and powerholders, bringing forward into the imagination what prospects for change, justice, and social transformation yet await.

Keywords: academic authority, absence as presence, decolonizing, imagination, intelligibility, politics of reality, silence, rationalism, Western-centric

On Saturday, March 24th, 2018, Emma González spoke at the March for Our Lives, a student-driven protest against gun violence in Washington, DC led by survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida earlier that spring. Their cause echoed in sister demonstrations across the country and around the world, where protestors demanded justice for those whose lives are lost or permanently changed by the gun violence that penetrates schools. González, a high school senior and survivor of the shooting that killed seventeen of her schoolmates and teachers, stood on stage for six minutes and twenty seconds, the exact duration of the attack, and communed with the crowd in front of her. While her clear, simple words echoed her community's collective outcry, many agree that the most forceful part of her speech occupied the four minutes and twenty-six seconds in which she said...nothing. González breathed, wept silently, and held her position until a timer went off. She then finished her speech and left the stage. On Twitter an observer called this action the "[l]oudest silence in the history of US social protest." (Corn, 2018)

This visibilization of silence is unusual in public discourse and brings forward an important question: *what is silence?* Is it a loss, an omission? Is it a stopping of the mouth, of the voice? An empty place where no meaning has come forward…or perhaps at times quite the opposite, an absence-as-presence (Deleuze, 1990; Derrida, 1976)? Might silence even evoke much more—voluminous, multiplex, pluripotent, uncontained, raucous, mischievous, breaching, breathing, meaningful realities-in-the-making? Can it inform the world about what is, what may become, possible?

Silence within traditional academic thinking

It is first helpful to consider how academic orthodoxy generally defines silence. In linguistics, silence is the absence of words and indicates either an error or a pause in speech. It is rarely included in phonetics and phonology as more than a break in the flow of sounds and seldom comes up in morphology, syntax, or semantics. The study of prosody—the ways in which language is "chunked" into phrases via rhythm and intonation—involves pausing to express boundaries between phrases and other stretches of text. Silence in a speaker's oral production may also occur due to hesitation, a moment of reflection, or a need for extra processing time. In second language learning, silence is thought to indicate that a speaker is pausing to reflect on what they have said so as to speak "correctly," or, alternately, an indication that a speaker is in "the silent period," a months-long phase during which learners organize their internal grammar before beginning to speak (Krashen, 1995). In sociolinguistics, the discussion of silence includes cultural and interpersonal dynamics such as submission, respect, agreement, displeasure, complicity, rejection, consternation, approval, or desire. It can mark sacred reflection, a communion with one's ancestors or the divine, or a moment of remembrance of a loved one who has passed. In most of these cases, silence occurs in a shared social space where what a speaker says is shaped by who hears it, when and where it is said, and the histories that inform all of this. Importantly, silence in this view contributes meaning as a reinforcement of the power of speech, the center and force[1] of human communication.

[1] It should be noted that in communication contexts outside dominant Eurocentric perspectives, silence may carry more complex meanings than speech. Nonetheless, silence is still contained as an alternative to speech

Speech, linguistic theory reasons, is how human beings primarily make themselves understood to others; in contrast, silence is an adjunct, something that surrounds speaking-based forms of communication. There is no possibility left unexplored because silence simply acts to frame what is already confirmed as meaning-full.

Other academic disciplines consider the ways silence can index human relations vis-à-vis historical narrative, political hierarchy and dynamics, and cultural norms. Scholars working in critical subfields of sociology, history, education, political science, geography, and others enquire into silence as a silence-*ing*, theorizing how communicative contexts are shaped by the exertion of power by some over others. In postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory, silence is pluriform and reflects emergent and ongoing structural injustices that draw strength from histories-cum-norms. In "Can the subaltern speak?", Spivak (1988) discusses the subaltern in academia, constructed by dominant forces yet consigned to the margins—"the silent, silenced center" (p. 78)—where she remains unheard and unable to make change within the sociopolitical machineries surrounding her. Freire (1968/2018) describes how nations with colonial histories draw their power from a "culture of silence" (p. 483) which obscures the class-based oppression of the masses. Fanon's (1963) relating of the colonial history of Algeria envisions "the silenced nation" (p. 72) rising up against the oppressor through requisite violent means. Indigenous and non-White female scholars often find their voices subsumed and marginalized by whitestream[2] feminists. (Grande, 2003) The voices of speakers of Chicano Spanish (Anzaldúa, 1999) and of young Black men creating knowledge in the mode of hip hop "beyond the curse of silence" (Kirkland, 2013) become political territories to be controlled and delegitimized by institutionalized racism and linguicism. Educators of color are silenced by ostensibly well-intentioned White colleagues, whose authority draws upon the whitestream dominant discourse in schools and institutions of higher education. (Delpit, 1988) Under the rubrics of heteropatriarchy, female-bodied are silenced in intimate spaces (Towns & Adams, 2016), public discourse (Levey, 2018), and even in internalized forms of self-silencing (London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012; Whiffen, Foot, & Thompson, 2007). Disciplines with roots in critical theory argue that the LGBTQ+ community, communities of color, Indigenous and original peoples, the poor, people with disabilities, workers with precarious employment, immigrants at various points of authorization, survivors of domestic violence, and other minoritized groups experience marginalization as both the cause and the effect of silencing, a robbing of voice through institutional(ized) practices of invisibilization of the Other accompanied often by intersecting geographies of physical, psychological, and symbolic violence. Being silenced means being dehumanized as one's voice—a synecdoche for one's *being-seen-ness* and *being-heard-ness*—is stolen, which in turn thieves away one's possibilities for free, agentive participation in political change. The voicelessness, the *being-silenced*, of the Other is an expression of the power of the status quo and the injustices it exerts to perpetuate itself.

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within the framework of typical human communication, which is predominantly organized around oral production and reception.

2 I employ Grande's (2003) term *whitestream* via her broader critique of *whitestream feminism*, which she defines as a form of feminism which is "principally structured on the basis of white, middle-class experience" (330), to lay out the ideological and discursive orientation of the dominant perspective in U.S.-centric academic thought.

Silencing silence, challenging whitestream Western-centric academic authority

As persuasive and powerful as both terrains of thinking are, one might ask: what other conceptualizations of silence, its sources, meanings, and effects, are possible? If silence is typically juxtaposed with traditional ideas of speech-as-oral-production or conceptualize it as a loss or theft of voice, might other, rangier significations for silence be left out? What about the unreasonable, the undetectable, the undefined, the un-enclosed that remains outside the walls of what has been given and proven? What if scholarly thought were to open up to this unknown territory, where silence could operate as something different than a simple opposite to speech and speaking? I ask: What if silence comprises a force which, in its flexibility and dynamism, indexes possibilities being imagined, directions to be written which are, therefore, differently real?

Before answering these core questions, an important point to consider is the following: *who has the right to claim to know what silence is and means*? Is it the role of academics to chart silence's meanings? When these powerful pundits fit silence into one of several established categories from academic disciplines like those mentioned above, they draw upon existing modes of thought and their concomitant typologies of meaning (Foucault, 1970, 1972; Grzanka, 2016), which may circumscribe their ability to take in alternative, outsider visions of the world. This is to say, in staking such discipline-based claims as to the meanings of silence, academics unwittingly speak for silence; *they silence silence*.

Should this be a concern, given the litany of tangible injustices that march visibly across the world? Frankly, the cost of misinterpreting the significance and significations of silence is not readily apparent, or at least does not immediately emerge as a material question. Yet I follow Fricker, a feminist philosopher and social ethicist who admonishes us that the misinterpretation and dismissal of non-standard forms of expression as "unintelligible" can result in the exclusion of potential knowledge contributed by this expression. According to Fricker, this loss in turn abridges the shared epistemic resources available to society which might otherwise benefit the social imaginary. (Fricker, 2007, 2013) That is to say, when we as hearers ignore, leave out, or misinterpret silence, we lose out on meanings and knowledge that could provide new ways of addressing continuing questions and problems in our shared world. On both epistemological as well as ethical levels, academics would thus do well to pause in their work of labelling and proving to critically reflect on this very issue: the processes of silencing embedded in the very construction of scholarly authority.

This is no small request, and would certainly be met with consternation, if not outright suspicion, by many academic "experts." This is because the onto-epistemological stifling of non-mainstream perspectives in academic orthodoxy is not without precedent. Whitestream Western scholars perennially self-authorize as light bearers, drawing upon the imperialistic regime of Eurocentric thinking, which has rightly received substantial critique as a colonizing force in intellectual activity. (Bhatia, 2017; Mignolo, 2009; Nadler, 2015; Spivak, 1988) In attempting to speak for others who experience oppression and marginalization, the academic elite ratify their ongoing jurisdiction over the discursive construction of and response to social problems. (Go, 2017; Mignolo, 2009) This becomes

a social performance of a Baudrillardian type, as this small but powerful group periodically adopts a "new" critique of unjust social institutions and practices, ostensibly to improve the lives of minoritized people but in reality leaving these individuals and communities out of the conversation. The search for "what is possible" is in reality directed solely by academic elites who benefit from the exclusion of other ways of doing, being and knowing. Hence, there is nothing truly imagined, only extensions of what has already been seen and said.

Thus, while this project is not primarily a decolonizing one, it nonetheless addresses not only Eurocentrism but also the traces of coloniality (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000) that suppress knowledges and contributions from outsider quarters, some of which may be ushered in by silence. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), divisions between Western modern societies and societies subjected to colonization pervade in the ways that the Eurocentric worldview is privileged over others. When certain ways of doing, being and knowing in our world are deemed "irrational" according to Western paradigms, they are invisibilized, made irrelevant, consigned to remain beyond what Santos termed "the abyssal line" of Eurocentric rationalism:

> The other side of the abyssal line is the realm of beyond legality and illegality (lawlessness), of beyond truth and falsehood (incomprehensible beliefs, idolatry, magic). These forms of radical negation together result in a radical absence… (p. 52)

That which is beyond the analytic capacity of Eurocentric rationalism suffers erasure and dismissal. Drawing upon this framework, the "radical absence" of silence thus emerges as the result of an acting-upon, not an omission. Importantly, this is not the same as the sociolinguistic act of silencing an individual or group as earlier discussed; rather, it is a broader onto-epistemological claim about the unseen territorial battle over the inclusion of the futures-in-the-making to which silence refers. By casting off the idea that our co-authored social world can only be written with the rational and visible—and that silence can only indicate something meaningless—we academics may dare to acknowledge not that we have been wrong, but that we were never right in the first place.

Thus, as we in academia break with our assumed command of terms, of orthodox notions of silence justified within our disciplinary histories, we reach out to feel for fissures in seemingly solid terrain. We begin to detect a faint stirring, an inkling, a whisper beneath the door of something still unseen, yet not unreal. Key to this posture is acknowledging that what lies beyond is no less real than what has already passed through and come into view. In doing so, we may open up to a new truth: that the ongoing outsider possibilities-in-the-making that are contained in our shared reality are just as legitimate and force-full as that which we validate as studiable. Taking this stance recognizes the limitations of ipso facto self-righteous Eurocentric rationality and demands that we pursue an articulate unknowing of what might be. (Zembylas, 2005) We need new images for silence and a decoupling of borders from around paradigmatic dogmatism. (Go, 2017; Lather, 2006; Scheurich & Young, 1997)

Seeking new perspectives: Silence as formative in creativity, dialogue, rupture

How, then, can we move into, embrace even, terrains and postures of unknowing with regards to silence? New sources may help guide us. Consider how silence operates in creative fields such as music, literature, and poetry. In musical composition, silence is a constituent which includes rests, caesuras, and breath marks. It is the position of non-sound where musicians wait, gather breath, prepare their bodies to merge into musical congress. Silence is also the space into which sound rings as it is modulates through echo and memory in the listener's ear. In these spaces and cases, silence is the ever-present, the fertile terrain of unlimited creativity and possibility. Whole compositions may reflect the ever-present event of silence; for example, the avant garde composition *4'33"* by 20th-century American composer John Cage (1952) instructs the musician(s) performing the piece to remain still without playing their instrument(s). Cage's piece reveals the imbrication of sound and silence in the human experience: we breathe, our blood rushes, our clothes rustle, traffic murmurs, buildings settle, and so on. Moreover, silence is out of control, rhythmic and accidental and excessive, during the process of musical composition. The creative contemplation experienced by composers prior to penning their musical works is a freedom of the not-yet. Scottish composer James MacMillan (2011) speaks about silence before composition as a space

> [t]o find that sort of bedding down time, when ideas can germinate, pollinate, and grow. Silence therefore is a philosophical state that's known to composers. It's not a state of absence when there is no music. It's a period of presence, or it's a period of pregnancy if you like, where ideas may gestate, and come forth naturally, so there's a kind of umbilical relationship between silence and music.

Being expectant in this "period of presence" is in fact an active and relational dimension of the process of composition, a profound dialogue between reflection and creation needed for art to emerge in the hands of the composer.

Similar terms that examine silence-as-presence in human creative expression appear in literature and poetry. *Brave New World* author Aldous Huxley deemed silence to be that which comes nearest to "expressing the inexpressible." (Huxley, 1931) Bohemian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1978) regularly contemplated the limits of human perception and the border territories of artistic potential he traversed in his writings:

> Oh, how often one longs to speak a few degrees more deeply! My prose...lies deeper...but one gets only a minimal layer further down; one's left with a mere intimation of the kind of speech that may be possible *there* where silence reigns. (n.p.)

Here, the spaciousness of silence, with its lush unintelligibilities, its geographies of generativity and genius, lies beyond the boundaries of logic, control, and predictability of human reality. The voices of silence move alongside, around, throughout our creative engagement with the world, always awaiting communion in the exploration of novel visions and freedom from previous modes of expression. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007) From this

perspective, silence is not the absence of sound or voice, but rather a wellspring, a territory of unrestricted, unexplored, to-be-possibilized things.
Philosopher of language and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin perceived silence and speech as dynamic, dialogical, overlapping components of communal meaning making, in which "intelligible sound (a word)...and the pause constitute a special logosphere, a unified and continuous structure, and open (unfinalized) totality." (Bakhtin, 1986) The concept of intelligibility figures powerfully here; it is precisely the *unintelligibility* of non-sound that defies the easy binarism of silence vs. sound, because silence cannot be analyzed for meaning (and thus controlled) and because the two forces are intermutual in the production of pluriform social reality. In this coauthored human text, silence constitutes the unreadable potential of human contribution overlaying and undergirding speech, which is its visible, summoned cousin. It is the outsider force, the event of unknowing.

Silence not only signals what is beyond the control of rationality in our ongoing world-making but also invokes the prospect of creative rupture, of the irruption of futures not-yet-seen into consciousness. By challenging a unitary conception of social reality that refuses to imagine outside its own cycle of self-fulfillment, human society might begin to embrace alternatives brought forth by silence that destabilize false monological realities. In the tugged and twisted textile of collective social reality, silence thus emerges as agentive and ingenious. In the words of Stetsenko (2017, personal communication), acts of silence, like any meaning-making force, become

> powerfully creative and productive...they too participate in and contribute to the production of the real - of what is 'more real than real' [in] the fabric of our lives and our becoming as co-authoring.

When silence is re-envisioned as not simply an unremarkable part of human communication but instead a generative, form-ative force, we may begin to challenge the monological, inevitable version of reality we believe is "the only way." Radical possibilities may emerge for new ways of seeing and co-authoring the unforged paths that await us to pursue justice and collective transformation, as we become more and differently human, together.

Silence and a new socio-dialogic politics of the real

And so what seems like an ineluctable present, one which appears to feed into a similarly unavoidable future, can be confronted. First, it is important to remember that this social world is forged through political, economic and social conflict that determines what is right and real in any age. What if a new *socio-dialogic politics of the real* could be invoked to include the existential strife that silence materializes: the energy of outsider voices-visions beyond rationality and recognizability to erupt from the edges into view? Stetsenko (2017) articulates the visionary, the revolutionary exercised in taking such a stance:

> These contradictions and these struggles...on the fringes of society are actually at the epicenter of what is to come. It is at this epicenter that the world gets unstuck, runs into impasse and incoherence, and thus, being unsettled in the extreme, propels into the future as the process of its realization. (p. 363)

Silence here comes as a challenge, a clarion call from the margins that penetrates the cyclical, cynical fatalism of Western rationalism, whose *anti*-social ideology of exclusion limits not only what may be recognized and known, but also what is possible in the now and possible for the future. Savransky (2017) claims that in standing against this false mandate, this inequitable politics of recognition is exposed in the pursuit "not only cognitive but existential justice–the cry that a different world is possible, and not just a different knowledge" (p. 16). Silence, precisely because it is incomprehensible and thus unassimilable by the machinery of reality production as it currently exists, is this cry. It is a cry that says, *this reality is not all of our reality, this world is not all of our world...yet.* It is a cry of hope for collective self-transformation, "a thin but fabulous hope--of ourselves becoming realer than real in a monstrous contagion of our own making." (Massumi, 1987, n.p.) The edifice that holds sway over all of us will, itself, sway in the waves of possibility surging from the margins. At the core of the matter is *what and who matters*; our social reality is made via agreed-upon ways of doing, being, and knowing that, to date, do not and cannot honor what Kwame Appiah (2015) calls "the principle that everybody matters" (as cited in Yancy, 2017, p. 275). When those in power to say what is true and real become uncertain and unknowing, silence lays bare the omission—and undeniable power—of outsider voices-visions in new collective work in "the pursuit of a fuller humanity." (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 47).

What might this look like? Works of art that include silence as a devious, ingenious force in dialogue with our seemingly unified reality illustrate how the unheard speak from the fringes. Artists like Fiona Foley and Pasha Cas probe silence's excessive, uncontrolled meanings in commentaries on state-led violence and collective trauma, which are all too often obscured and rationalized by Eurocentric thinkers in power. Foley, an Aboriginal artist from Queensland, Australia, created "Witnessing to Silence" (2005), an installation piece that exposes a still-obscured part of the country's history: the enslavement, dispossession, and genocide of Indigenous people by British settlers in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The work features two sets of sculptures, one of bronze lotus lilies and the other of steel columns inlaid with laminated panels containing ashes. Interestingly, both the subject of this piece and its creation and presentation evoke the dialogue of the disruptively differently possible with a white-washed and sedentary status quo. Foley was commissioned in 2004 to create a piece of art to adorn the public walkway outside the Brisbane Magistrates Court. In executing on the commission, she called it a commentary on brush fires and flooding, two well-known environmental issues in the region. However, she unveiled the true purpose of the piece after its installation: to call attention to brutal means by which Queensland's Aboriginal peoples were massacred and disappeared under the British mission to colonize and extirpate: burning and drowning. The plaque describing the piece reads:

> *Witnessing to Silence* takes as its subject matter the history of frontier conflict between the indigenous community and white settlement in Queensland, the first public artwork to tackle this hidden territory on a state wide basis...It provides a potent reminder that we walk on Aboriginal soil and that we know not on what we walk. (n.p.)

Subversive, unflinching, visionary, Foley's work opens up the public space to a dialogue that has in truth always been going on: one held between what has been deemed visible, and therefore "real," by Australia's official telling of history and what exists in the

collective memory of Indigenous communities that have resisted erasure on cultural, cognitive, and existential terms. Foley's representation of silence is a force of reinvention and reinvigoration; in a monological social imaginary that seeks to forget and leave a country's violence in the past, she asserts that Australian society must address the disinclusion of Indigenous voices and visions of justice while recognizing the silence of those who benefit from this forgetting.

Pasha Cas, a Kazakh visual artist, created "This Is Silence" (Cas, 2016) to shed light on the history of nuclear testing by the U.S.S.R. in Kazakhstan from 1949 to 1989 and the ongoing deleterious effects suffered by the Kazakh people and their land. In a video that features his large-scale graffiti work, Cas dons a HAZMAT suit and spray paints red numbers on a wall to mark significant years during the Soviet nuclear testing regime. As the camera pulls back, Cas is revealed to be standing in a room located in an abandoned tower, whose exterior has been spray painted with Edvard Munch's "The Scream," in the middle of a large, barren field. The translation of Cas's narration is as follows:

> "Since 1949, 616 nuclear bombs were detonated at the Semipalatinsk Test Site and 1.5 million people were affected. In the 21st century, Kazakhstan turned into a nuclear waste dump. The state continued to experiment on people. It is Silence. Horror. Despair. Crime." (Dyussembekova, 2016, n.p.)

Cas's work brings to the fore the collective howl of human and nonhuman realities that have been unrecognized and unattended to by "official" national history. Yet silence here does not simply stand for a closed mouth or an absent voice; rather, it embodies the continuing battle to determine environmental, social, and existential justice in the face of policies that deem certain groups of people expendable. The juxtaposition of the soundless image of a horrified shriek and the hushed countryside evince a raucous claim that nascent possibilities for justice are emerging into public discourse, forged by outsider voices for new forms of resistance and change.

Conclusion

We live in an era when state-led surveillance, institutionalized violence, nationalistic terrorism, and the marketization of public goods hegemonize more and more of our social relations and our definitions of being human. The seeming foreclosure of prospects for change and justice belie the devastating loss of hope of millions that anything else might be possible. For those of us whose words and ways of describing this world have always stood at the center of the conversation, let us give way.

Let us look to what seems untenable, unreasonable, barely visible, born of the work of artists and visionaries who can help us begin to embrace a different way of making this world. In their hands, silence gainsays any assumptions that the established way of doing, being and knowing in the world is the only way, and that Eurocentric control over social reality should determine all possibilities available for representation and justice. Taking up this posture in the face of silence will help us cleave through our faith in whitestream Western-centric rationality to foreground the millions of unrealized, unrestrained voices-visions that do not yet matter. By acknowledging that silence foregrounds other futures-in-the-making and opening up to our own un-right(eous)ness, we as academics may commit

to a juster shared human reality. Let us stop our mouths, our knowing knowledge, our reasoned rationality. Let us let in silence, as storyteller, as soothsayer, as Tiresias and as trickster. In this silence is the what-if, the other-lived, the potentials decanted for a world that is waiting to come to be.

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