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Silence

ANA DRAGOJLOVIC, *University of Melbourne*

ANNEMARIE SAMUELS, *Leiden University*

Silence is a common occurrence in everyday social interactions, yet anthropological research, like most research in the social sciences and humanities, has mostly focused on what people say and do. Over the last couple of decades, however, there has been an increased attention to how the unsaid, the unspeakable, and the invisible shape social, political, and subjective worlds. In particular, anthropologists have theorised silence as more than just the opposite of speech. They have started to think of silence as a complex moral, affective, and social force. Anthropological rethinking of silence and voice has been particularly prominent in feminist traditions, in the study of care, and in decolonial scholarship that often studies silence as refusal and resistance. Attending to histories of silence and silencing has a potential to provide insights into different forms of structural oppression under which individual and collective strategies of survival might be falsely interpreted as mere compliance. Silence has also been important in research on ritual activity, where it is a prerequisite for communicating with ancestors, spirits, ghosts, and other apparitions. Here, silence can co-create a sense of hauntings as a response to repressed past and present forms of violence and harm. By attending closely to the unspoken and unspeakable aspects of language and art, anthropologists increasingly find new ways to include silences in their research and modes of representation. In these and other ways, the study of silence can greatly enrich our understanding of the social world.

Introduction

Like most research in the social sciences and humanities, anthropological research often focuses on what people say and do. Much less obvious are the unsaid, unspeakable, or invisible, and how these silences shape social, political, and subjective worlds. Nonetheless, explicit [ethnographic](#) attention to and theorisation of silence has been growing over the last decades, strongly influenced by feminist and [decolonial](#) scholarship and advances in narrative analysis—i.e. in the study of how stories, storytelling, and their silences and absences shape everyday life. Attention to silence has moreover been incited by anthropology's reflexive turn, which since the 1980s has caused scholars to increasingly reflect on their own role in the production of knowledge and their decisions about what to [write](#) about and what to leave unspoken. Ruth Behar was one of the authors who developed experimental, self-reflective, and collaborative forms of writing that criticised prevalent silences about gendered and [racialised](#) dynamics in mainstream anthropology (Behar 1996, Behar and Gordon 1995).

A key tenet of anthropological work on silence is that it is often a presence in social life, rather than a mere absence of sound and [voice](#). It can be a culturally specific form of experience (Basso 1970; Hastrup 1990). As a social, affective, and sensorial presence, silence can even become a moral and an active [relational](#)

force. It enables or limits people's ability to relate to each other in particular ways. When, for example, marginalisation and stigma loom, silence can be a vital strategy to create liveable lifeworlds. The non-disclosure of information can be crucial for people living with HIV, for instance, as in the face of severe discrimination their secrecy may allow them to keep leading their lives as much as possible as they did prior to their diagnosis (Black 2015; Moyer 2012; Samuels 2021). Similarly, sex workers may resolutely decide to not speak at all when state and non-state [surveillance](#) bodies question them about their past in interviews that, due to anti-trafficking measures, might foreclose their only possible source of income (Dasgupta 2014). People with a cancer diagnosis also sometimes use subtle, yet vital forms of concealment as they navigate imposing social and psychological demands. They may live 'as if' there were no diagnosis in order to continue to endure the already [precarious](#) conditions of everyday life for as long as possible (Banerjee 2020). Alternatively, silence may protect those who want to 'elude' a biomedical diagnosis, as may be the case for some people with symptoms of eating disorders (Shohet 2018).

Silence can also be shelter for those who want to avoid being absorbed into discourses of the state. Israeli youth who evade military service, for example, may not just do so by public refusal. Instead, they may resort to a 'calculated passivity' that allows them to altogether stay away from the public discussion on normative Israeli [citizenship](#) (Weiss 2016). Silence can also be suffocating, violent, and painful (Aretxaga 1997; Dragojlovic 2011; Warren 1993). At the same time, the silences that enable rhythm and ritual can be crucial ways of dealing with traumatic loss, as they entangle and evoke the entirely unspeakable or unspoken stories of longing that underlie such loss (Weller 2021). What all of these examples show is that silence is not a mere residue or background to supposedly real social action. Instead, it is an affective and relational activity (or the result thereof) that fundamentally shapes social worlds. Studying silence thus offers tremendous potential for critical engagement with people's histories, the social structures that shape their lives, and with their personal experiences of inequality and exclusion (Dragojlovic 2021).

Within the burgeoning literature on silence, three themes are highlighted in this entry: the opposition of silence and voice; the haunting nature and effect of silence; and the importance of silence for narrative and representation. These topics stand out for their inspiring legacies and promising potential of contemporary anthropology of silence. Other themes in the anthropology of silence are equally important, yet not considered in depth in this entry due to limited space. Noteworthy, for example, is the extensive literature in the anthropology of music and sound studies on the relationship between silence and sound (or noise) (see, for example, Novak and Sakakeeny 2015; Robinson 2020; Voegelin 2010). Similarly, modern [art](#) has been assessed as having become a pursuit of the 'aesthetics of silence', driven to focus on negation, emptiness, and undoing yet continuously finding that the production of such silence itself entails a form of speech (Sontag [1967] 1969).

Silence and voice

Silence has long been theorised in relation to [‘voice’](#). The two terms are frequently opposed by arguing that voice actively ‘fills’ silence, while silence is a mere absence of voice. Anthropology has problematised this opposition by rethinking silence as a complex moral, affective, and social force. [Ethnographic](#) accounts of Holocaust descendants, for example, have shown that silent embodied practices can make the Holocaust present in everyday life so as to sustain its memory. This questions a simplistic opposition of silence and voice (see, for example, Kidron 2021). Three domains in which this rethinking of silence and voice is particularly prominent are Western feminist traditions, anthropologies of [care](#), and [decolonial](#) approaches to silence as refusal and [resistance](#).

Feminist traditions

The contention between ‘silence’ and ‘voice’ has a long and complex [history](#) in feminist traditions. Feminist academics, public intellectuals, and activists have continually argued that [speech](#) is the foremost means of achieving equality and empowerment (Ahmed 2017). Particularly significant for feminist discussions about ‘silence’ and ‘voice’ has been intersectional feminism, which understands individual identities as combinations of different modes of discrimination and privilege. The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), an American civil rights advocate and critical race theorist who developed the term in the context of unjust legal treatment of African American women. US antidiscrimination laws tended to look at gender and race separately, meaning that a person could only be discriminated against based on either gender or race. Consequently, the law did not capture overlapping forms of discrimination that African-American women and other women of colour experienced. Given that these women were left with no adequate justice, Crenshaw developed a theory of intersectionality to show that different axes of inequality, discrimination, and privilege inform individual identities. These axes might be, but are not limited to, gender, [race](#), [ethnicity](#), sexuality, religion, ability, and nationality.

This notion of intersectionality fundamentally influenced feminist discussions on silence. For example, scholars who speak of the ‘racialization of silence’ (Ferrari 2020) challenge the assumption that ‘silence’ is associated with patriarchal domination. This assumption reflects the common experience of white middle class women, who led the second wave feminist movement in Euro-American contexts. However, it also falsely normalises their experience as that of all women. Against it, African American feminists have argued that African American women do in fact have a prominent voice in communal spaces such as church and the [home](#) (Lorde 1978; hooks 1989). They thereby highlight that the notions of ‘having a voice’, of ‘breaking the silence’, or of ‘speaking up’ may be insufficient as instruments of liberation. This leads them to call for a more nuanced analysis of multiplicity of silences (Ferrari 2020). We need to be aware that more often than not ‘the “voice,” “speech,” or “languages” of the colonized do not conform to Eurocentered, capitalist, colonial modern criteria’ in which ‘speaking up’ is associated with liberatory movements (Ferrari 2020, 134). Most people are simply not heard or recognised as being able to have a voice in the first place. Their forms of expression are reduced to the modes or voice of the colonised, and

their ways of communicating ideas are misrecognised as nonsense. This misrecognition of voice is part of stripping racialised people of their humanity and dignity, to what Frantz Fanon has called ‘a zone of non-being’ ([1952] 2012, xii).

Other feminist scholars have similarly drawn attention to multiplicities, paradoxes, and possibilities of silence. The demand to speak up against oppression tends to place the burden of action on those least empowered. African-American women, or First Nations or gender diverse people are asked to make major interventions into their conditions of oppression. Here the liberatory idea of ‘speaking up’ obscures the [labour](#) needed for social change, placing expectations on those that historically have been marginalised (Malhotra and Carillo Rowe 2013). Furthermore, the idea of ‘voice’ as the only way of liberation might in fact overly ‘abstract from the concrete situations and lived experiences of those who inhabit silences’ (Ferrari 2020, 124). Take as an example the memoir of writer and academic Ernesto Martínez, in which he speaks of the childhood sexual assault committed against him by his cousin. Martínez’s immediate response to this act of violence was silence and stillness. Under these circumstances, feminist philosopher Martina Ferrari (2020) argues that his response cannot and should not be understood as compliance to oppression. Martínez remembers his silence not as plain passivity, but rather as an expression of what he calls ‘joto passivity’, that is, ‘the seeming nonresponsiveness of queer Chicanos in the face of violence, which contra (colonial) common sense, was also felt as resistant behaviour’ (124). This silence may have been an act of ‘radical meaning making from which Martínez could envision and bring about radically different gendered practices of resistance’ (Ferrari 2020, 125). For Martínez, ‘speaking up’ as a liberatory solution was not an option under the circumstances in which he lived. Instead, adopting ‘joto passivity’ as an embodied negotiation of appropriate modes of resistance allowed him to navigate his circumstances.

Thus, rather than insisting on a sharp division between ‘silence’ and ‘voice’, feminist scholars have been investigating conditions under which movement between speech and silences occur. They broaden our possibilities for a reconfiguring of the ‘silence’ versus ‘voice’ binary, arguing that both ‘silence’ and ‘voice’ can be part of complex strategies of engaging with structures of power (Malhotra and Carillo Rowe 2013; Ferrari 2020; Dragojlovic 2021). In this vein, contributors to the recent edited volume *Silence, feminism, power: Reflections at the edges of sound* (2013) argue that silence may constitute a deeper form of communication than sound: ‘Silence allows us space to breathe. It allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in reaction to what is said...’ (Malhotra and Carillo Rowe 2013, 2). Thereby they stress the liberatory possibilities of inhabiting silence—resisting, in Western discourse, ‘speaking up’ as a go-to form of liberatory practice.

Care

Anthropologists studying care have similarly theorised the complexity of silence, moving away from any clear dichotomy between silence and voice. This work often reveals how silence is a response to the moral

and social demands of everyday life. For example, in her family-centred ethnography of social [relations](#) in post-war and [post-socialist](#) Vietnam, Merav Shohet (2021) points out how everyday sacrifices, such as foregoing one's own wishes and aspirations in order to take care of family members, are socially valued. Yet in order to be valued, those who sacrifice—often women—should not draw attention to their predicaments, bearing their suffering in silence, even though this may be challenging and painful. In these everyday family contexts, muted forms of sacrifice for one another often count as moral care.

In the face of suffering, the effortful work of silence may also help sustain [precarious](#) social relations. For some, silence may be the most virtuous—yet incredibly effortful—way of enduring pain and loss (see, for example, Buch Segal 2016; Livingston 2012; Smørholm 2016). Even where narrative utterances like 'you endure' help to constitute enduring pain as virtuous, people may remain silent about some experiences simply because they are impossible to put into words (Throop 2010). Silence may also be a respectful response to suffering, as it may honour the privacy of suffering and thereby enable rather than obstruct healing after extreme violence (Jackson 2004). It can be part of muted practices of everyday support, for example when neighbours who know about one another's economic hardship bring food without commenting on their reasons for doing so (Han 2012). Or, silence may constitute a deliberate effort to steer away from negative thoughts and emotions, as when people in Thailand make an effort to not discuss terminal illness and rather raise more cheerful topics to lighten up the mood of their interlocutors (Aulino 2019; see also Stonington 2020).

These moral and social dimensions of silence need not be seen apart from the sensorial experience of stillness. Indeed, silences can powerfully index the present absence of both voice and sound. People living with dementia in the Netherlands have described that while they could break the unsettling silence of their homes by 'making some noise' in the sense of making actual sounds, it is only going out for a walk that really helps them to overcome the vicissitudes of 'still' moments that negatively affect their lives (Vermeulen 2020, 200). For them, the sensorial silence that might be broken by making noise is not independent from the silence of solitude, the absence of sociality and care. Or take the ethnographic description of people living and dying in the misery and abandonment of Vita, an asylum for homeless, mentally ill, and dying persons in Porto Alegre, Brazil:

These individuals wandered around in their dusty lots, rolled on the ground, crouched over or under their beds - when there were beds. Each one was alone; most were silent. There was a stillness, a kind of relinquishment that comes with waiting, waiting for the nothingness, a nothingness that is stronger than death. (Biehl 2005, 35)

João Biehl describes this asylum as a 'zone of social abandonment', a place where 'voice can no longer become action' (2005, 11). Here, the silencing of people's social and political voice can be sensed in stillness. While sensorial aspects of silence are here part and parcel of adjusting to an unchangeable and

dehumanising status quo, it can fulfil other functions. Care as well as socio-political change may come from such experiences of silence. The stillness of Thai meditation practices, for example, shows how the practice of silence as the deliberate absence of speech enables a shift of sensory focus toward non-verbal expression, and thereby changes one's embodied experience of the world (Cassaniti forthcoming). As Julia Cassaniti argues, by effecting a new embodied attunement to the world and opening up new interpersonal spaces, silence may have powerful personal and intersubjective effects, leading people to change social relations with the world and others.

Refusal and resistance

Feminist and decolonial anthropologists have for a long time been studying multiple forms of silence and secrecy as a kind of refusal and resistance (Visweswaran 1994). Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran charts multiple and contradictory uses of silence and secrecy as forms of resistance among activist women in Southern India. In her encounter with a woman she calls 'M', Visweswaran charts M's frequent detours into silence, highlighting the importance of anthropological [writing](#) about silence, and how anthropologists give meaning to silences they encounter. Visweswaran also makes a reflexive point about ethnographic writing, as she stresses that, 'the story I give you is not exactly about this woman ... it is rather more about how I negotiate and understand the construction of a silence, how I seek to be accountable to it' (1994, 60). Visweswaran does not only focus on comprehending multiple levels of silence in the contexts she is writing about. Instead, she as an anthropologist takes responsibility and accountability for how her own writing might be implicated in silences of those she is writing about. Anthropological knowledge produced through such careful attention to silences can be considered 'situational knowledge' (Visweswaran 1994, 49). This term emphasises the conviction that all knowledge comes from specific positional perspectives (Haraway 1988). In this case, these perspectives are not just shaped by what is said, but also by what people are silent about.

Understanding the origins, nature, and effects of silence is also crucial to make sense of histories of anthropological representations of Indigenous people. For a long time, 'anthropology has imagined itself to be a voice, and in some disciplinary iterations, the voice of the colonized' (Simpson 2007, 67; also 2014). "This framework had characterised much of earlier anthropological work 'on' Indigenous people (2007, 67-8), and it accorded with Europe's imperialist and colonialist projects. Anthropologist Audra Simpson, a [citizen](#) of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, therefore set to study the Mohawks of Kahnawake in Canada and the United States by developing a critical new take on this tradition. Her goal was to pay attention to what mattered to her interlocutors, rather than focusing on how they were 'different' to anthropologists. What emerged was an 'ethnography of refusal', which focused on the ways in which Kahnawakero:non (i.e. the people of Kahnawake) had refused the authority of the state 'at almost every turn' of their history (2007, 73). Simpson's work demonstrates the methodological and the theoretical productivity of focusing on collaborators' refusals, in order to acknowledge and embrace what has been marginalised, excluded,

and silenced previously. When she tries to address histories of subjugation and dispossession with one interviewee, for example, the person tells her repeatedly that they do not know the answers to her questions. She interprets their silence as a desire not to make a difficult past verbally explicit, given that both she and the interlocutor know what happened and know that each other knows. Silence as refusal of ‘speaking outwardly’ should therefore not be seen as the absence of [agency](#), but as an act of sabotage or ‘an overlooked component of ethico-political thought’ (Kanngieser and Beuret 2017).

Various forms of silence and refusal can be part of reinventing our ways of living and relating (i.e. ‘commoning’) in times of the [Anthropocene](#), as suspending assertions on how the world is, or how it should be, can have productive potential (Kanngieser and Beuret 2017, 364). If we approach the Anthropocene as the outcome of centuries of colonial and neo-colonial capitalist dispossession, silence can constitute an attractive or necessary refusal to participate in the forms of governance that got us into our current situation (including speech-based activism of the contemporary Left).

Haunting silences

Silence and silencing are often associated with experiences of personal or interpersonal violence, and collective experiences of violence and various forms of structural oppression (Dragojlovic 2020). This has been shown by various disciplines, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, including psychoanalysis (Abraham and Torok 1994), philosophy (Derrida 1986; 1993), sociology (Gordon 1997; Cho 2008), gender studies (Rwe and Malhora 2013; Dragojlovic 2018; Ferrari 2020), [history](#) (Trouillot 1995), and anthropology (Good 2019; Kwon 2006; Kidron 2009; Argenti and Schramm 2009). For example, the historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) has explored the complex relationship between historical violence and silence in the history of Haiti. He argues that the interrelated nature between social memory and official historical narratives always produce a ‘bundle of silences’ (1995: 27). Trouillot’s pioneering work demonstrated that the recording of historical events is not a mere collection of details about events, but a process through which some events are completely or partially silenced, either deliberately or unconsciously. This is particularly important when it comes to silencing [resistance](#) to oppression, such as with the Haitian Revolution, which Trouillot demonstrates was one of the most successful and historically relevant slave revolts in history. The importance of silence in the aftermath of historical violence has been studied across different socio-cultural settings. Silence has been transmitted across generations from Holocaust survivors and survivors of Cambodian genocide, to memories of slavery, and the transmission of traumatic loss in Taiwan (Argenti and Schramm 2009). Following the Vietnam War, domestic life in Southern Vietnamese villages was marked by silence in the aftermath of massacres of unarmed civilians. At the same time, villagers kept engaging in intimate—but muted—ritual actions (Kwon 2006). Ghosts, spirits, apparitions, and hauntings have often been associated with silence and silencing as a response to violence (Dragojlovic 2018, 2020).

Work with the [children](#) of Holocaust survivors has led scholars to develop a psychoanalytic theory of intergenerational phantoms (Abraham and Torok 1994). Such phantoms are produced by the ignorance of family secrets, falsifications of the truth, and sheer disregard for the past that create conditions for producing hauntings across generations (1994, 169). Building on a Freudian approach to the unconscious, which treats the unconscious as a repository of unacceptable ideas, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok argued that family secrets can be wrapped in silences and buried in a metaphorical, psychological ‘crypt’. Such secrets are not only stored within those that directly experienced trauma, but also transmitted across subsequent generations: ‘What haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others ... the burial of an unspeakable fact ... like a stranger within’ (Abraham and Torok 1994, 3). Crucially, they argued that such traumatic intergenerational transmissions can be healed once secrets and silences are unpacked and revealed. French philosopher Jacques Derrida brought these psychoanalytic insights to the attention of a wider audience (Davis 2013, 54) and subsequently developed his own theory of ‘hauntology’ (Derrida 1993). He coined the influential term ‘spectrality’ to speak of a persistent return of a range of ideas from the cultural and social past in the manner of a ghost. As he put it,

Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us (cited in Davis 2013, 53-4).

Influenced by Derrida’s idea that the past is incomplete, sociologist Avery Gordon (2008) argues that hauntings are important sociological phenomena that deserve substantive scholarly attention. Making a direct link between various forms of historical injustice—from slavery to the disappeared in Argentina, and from the recent ‘war on terror’ to torture and deportation—Gordon argues that those who were seemingly forgotten can illuminate the injustices they suffered through the act of haunting. For Gordon (2008, xvi), haunting is an animated state through which unresolved and repressed social violence makes itself known in often unexpected ways, such as through ghostly appearances. In her take on hauntings as social phenomenon, a ghost is not just a person who is missing or dead, but a social figure who is deeply implicated in the social life of the living and is crucial for the continued production of subjectivities and histories (Gordon 2008, x). Gordon’s sociological approach to hauntology has been immensely influential across the humanities and social sciences, in particular for scholars working on histories of epistemic injustice and enforced forgetting. Particularly significant has been a study of the systemic erasure of memory about the *yanggongju*, Korean women who acted as sex workers for US servicemen during the Korean War, many of whom subsequently became war brides and eventually pioneered Korean migration to the United States (Cho 2008). Grace Cho’s careful analysis reveals how the enforced forgetting of the *yanggongju* permeates the consciousness of Koreans. They are now ghostly figures that are at the same

time present and absent, who '[move] in and out of visibility' (Cho 2008, 14).

Intergenerational experiences of silence under ongoing conditions of structural inequalities can manifest as acts of 'haunted speakability' (Dragojlovic 2021). For example, in a performing [arts](#) event in the Netherlands that engages families' complex intergenerational, interracial genealogies, aspirations to make visible past injustices are challenged by the artists' family's embeddedness in long histories of structural violence. These histories do not only inform what can be made visible through speech, but also often [reproduce](#) the structures of the very inequalities they aspire to dismantle (Dragojlovic 2021). Haunted speakability, then, reflects people's feeling of urgency to instigate social justice and points to the limitations of [speech](#) as a means of achieving equality (Dragojlovic 2021). The idea of haunted speakability urges further questions about recovery and [care](#), not only for those who themselves directly experience violence, but also for those for whom the affective afterlives of violence might resonate intergenerationally, under ongoing conditions of inequality (Dragojlovic 2021). The scholarship on haunting silences further contributes to rethinking and theorising silence as a complex relationship between narrative articulation and unspoken, embodied ways of inhabiting the world.

Narrative and representation

Much like as an awareness of haunting requires attunement to the social world rather than a turn away from it, attending to the unspoken in narrative and discourse warrants a close examination of language. It relies on a careful listening to the stories people do and do not tell; the slightly longer pauses, hesitating beginnings, whispers, rumours, gossip, and embodied narration (see Shohet and Samuels forthcoming). Who tells stories to whom, and whose stories are heard, and by whom? The analysis of women's testimonies for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown that on the surface, women's narratives speak mostly of violence against men (Ross 2001). Yet, the anthropologist Fiona Ross (2001) contends, if we listen differently, we hear how by telling these stories, women actually also speak about their own experiences. Women tell about physical violence experienced by men from their own vantage point, in passing referring to police harassment of their families, the shattering of kin over geographical distances, the absence of men, and the silence and secrecy in their politically active families. They hint at even more silent experiences of women's suffering. Similarly, women's stories of the violence of the Partition of India in 1947 are enveloped in a 'zone of silence' (Das 2007). This does not mean that nothing was said about this period, but rather 'that the words had a frozen-slide quality to them, which showed their burned and numbed relation to life' (Das 2007, 11). These narratives suffused by silences destabilise the certainty that language may seem to bring. Silence, then, is only at the far end of a continuum of uninterpretability of which speech and narrative are similarly part (Weller 2017).

Close attention to those stories at or beyond the edges of public recognition, moreover, reveals how silences undergird dominant discourses. Experiences hitherto unspoken may still transpire in whispers,

gossip, rumour, song, spirit possession, images, a raised eyebrow, or an offhand remark. What is silenced in public discourse may be invoked in what Merav Shohet (2021) calls ‘sideshadowing narratives’: nonlinear and often ambiguous stories told through gossip and in other more private, sometimes whispered, conversations. Unlike the theological unilinearity and normativity of ‘backshadowing’ and ‘foreshadowing’, these narratives embrace indeterminacy and contradiction, invoking possibilities without providing resolution. In her account of a Vietnamese family caring for their comatose grandmother, Shohet shows how all family members take part in the [caregiving](#), keeping up the image of a harmonious family. Yet, on a private occasion, two relatives tell in ‘sideshadowing’ whispers about their grudges against the near-dying matriarch and her husband, resulting from—in their eyes—moral missteps from the past that may now have caused her pitiful condition as a form of karmic retribution (Shohet 2021, 140-56).

Often, it is not only the story told, but also the context, the unspoken range of experiences and structures that surround narratives, that shape the (im)possibilities of articulation. A striking example can be found in the [ethnographic](#) study of [children](#) living with HIV in Brazil, whose narratives about their illness include the experiences of non-illness. Their silence, nonverbal communication, and multivocal narratives of social worlds shape the children’s stories at least as much as verbal articulation does (Abadía-Barrero 2011). The subjunctive mode of narrative is particularly important here. It allows people to think in multiple ‘what if’ scenarios of the future and the past. It helps them think through multiple possible trajectories of what might happen or might have happened, which they do particularly often at troublesome moments in their lives, such as when struggling with illness (Good and Good 1994). At such moments, the subjunctive mode may similarly allow for not fully thinking through all of these possibilities, sustaining the silent futures or pasts that are barely thinkable, for example because they might include scenarios of [death](#) or social exclusion (Samuels 2018, see also Mattingly 2014).

Aesthetic forms and [visual](#) practices may also articulate that which resists articulation in language. Images, performances, and works of [art](#) can affect people in a way that exceeds discourse. To understand how visual expressions communicate the unspeakable affectively, we need to stop contrasting silence to [voice](#) or speech. Voice, speech, silence, and visual expression intersect in different modes of articulation and non-articulation in that visual expressions may speak in ways that words cannot; for example, in the ways people living with HIV invest in healthy appearances and even makeup to distract from gossip (Samuels 2021). Art can tell stories without words. The discursive framing of art, meanwhile, may amount to new forms of silencing, as in the case of Syrian refugee artists who stop with their artistic work to escape from [humanitarian](#) projects of ‘refugee art’ that seek to aestheticise experiences of loss and displacement (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2021). Such humanitarian projects commission ‘refugee art’ as a commercially attractive genre, while artists feel their placement in a particular category with limited room for selecting their own topic is silencing their artistic creativity. The silence of those refugee artists who decide to withdraw from art for this reason may be seen as a ‘tactic of agentive creativity’

(Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2021, 15).

The potential violence of verbal representation that Audra Simpson (2007) highlights in her work on refusal always raises dilemmas in anthropological [writing](#), and perhaps particularly in writing about silences. For example, a poignant dilemma for ethnographers analysing life stories concerns the [ethics](#) of analysing what people may have chosen to leave unsaid. Addressing this question, Kirin Narayan (2004) proposes the juxtaposition of multiple life stories, as listening to one story may help to recognise the meaningful silences in others. Thereby, ethnographers may find patterns of meaningful silence without necessarily having to interpret all silences of one individual's narrative. At the same time, Narayan cautions that life stories, including silences, are produced in interpersonal processes of which the anthropologist is a part and that as writers we may also want to leave uninterpreted. Struggling with a similar dilemma, Merav Shohet (forthcoming) argues for combining person-centred ethnography with [historical](#) contextualisation, striking a delicate balance between respecting a person's self-chosen silences and avoiding reiterating historical injustice through continuous omissions. As both Narayan and Shohet show, navigating the tension between respecting silence and critically analysing its socio-historical conditions is an integral part of ethnographic engagement with silence.

Anthropological representations take greater liberties than most social sciences. In trying to reflect the concepts and concerns of the people they study, anthropologists may embrace unknowability and present stories from multiple perspectives, without resolution, realising that it may be impossible to construct a univocal narrative. A powerful example is Sarah Pinto's writing and rewriting of the narratives about Lata, a young woman treated in the psychiatric unit of a government hospital in northern India (2012, 2014). In her narration of the many stories told by and about Lata, Pinto includes silences, gaps, and contradictions, concluding that there may simply not be one comprehensive and linear narrative of Lata's illness. Proposing a 'hermeneutic of missing it', she argues for ethnographic writing with the multiple unresolved contradictions in layers of stories, creating an understanding that is 'less illuminating in the strength of its coherence than revealing in the gaps between incompatible ways of telling' (Pinto 2014, 224).

Like visual art, poetry can communicate the unspoken without discursively putting it in place. Several powerful poems by anthropologists have directly addressed the topic of silence, including Nandini Gunawardena's 'Silenced' (2004), which describes the violence in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s, and Renato Rosaldo's 'Silence' (2014), in which he invokes the moment he receives the news of his wife Michelle Rosaldo's death, a moment when suddenly all the ordinary sounds of the Philippine village he stays in seem to abruptly come to an end. Many anthropologists illuminate the unspoken affectively by using poetry in representation and articulation, especially where prose falls short of making space for silence. Anthropological engagement with silence therefore encourages the expansion of our ethnographic tool kit, for example by using 'poetry, disordered speech, embodiment, lamentation, dreams and other elliptical communication' (Varma 2020, 31). At the same time, it means embracing the limits of knowability and our

collaborators' refusals to be known. Writing with silences, then, may entail multiple ways of staying with gaps, contradictions, and unintelligibility.

Conclusion

Silence is a ubiquitous presence in our social world. Sometimes barely noticeable, sometimes strongly sensed, what silence means and does in subjective and social life is not always easy to discern or interpret. An anthropological approach to silence leaves room for uncertainty, unknowability, and multivocality. At the same time, it offers ways to attend to what silence does, as a form of oppression, a refuge, an act of [care](#) or refusal, a haunting ghost or an untold story in the shadow of public discourse. A careful look at silence shows that silence and [voice](#) are not necessarily clear opposites, and neither is voice—or sound—necessarily 'filling' silence. Practices of 'giving' voice may result in other silences. Questioning who and what we see and don't see, who and what is heard and who and what is unheard, unspoken, or unspeakable is vital to critical work on structural and [historical](#) inequalities, and rethinking anthropological practices of research and representation. Even if often opaque, silences demand our attention and analysis as much as speech and sound do. What has been silenced, by whom, and for what reason has much to tell us about social relationships, moral orders, [relations](#) of care, and the complex ways through which people navigate structural forms of oppression, endeavouring to make their lives liveable under multiple forms of social inequalities.

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Note on contributors

Ana Dragojlovic is Associate Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She works at the intersection of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and affect theory and is the author of *Beyond Bali: Subaltern citizens and post-colonial intimacy* (2016, Amsterdam University Press), co-author of *Bodies and suffering: Emotions and relations of care* (2018, Routledge, with Alex Broom), co-editor of *Gender, violence and power in Indonesia across time and space* (2020, Routledge, with Kate McGregor and Hannah Loney) and co-editor of a special issue, *Tracing silences*, in *History and Anthropology* with Annemarie Samuels.

Ana Dragojlovic, School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010 Australia. ana.dragojlovic@unimelb.edu.au.

Annemarie Samuels is Associate Professor at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University. Her current research focuses on narratives and silences of end-of-life care. Her published work focuses on care, disaster, narrative, silence, and HIV/AIDS in Indonesia, and includes the monograph *After the tsunami: Disaster narratives and the remaking of everyday life in Aceh* (2019, University of Hawaii Press) and a special issue in *History and Anthropology* called *Tracing Silences*, co-

edited with Ana Dragojlovic.

*Annemarie Samuels, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University,
Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333AK Leiden, The Netherlands. a.samuels@fsw.leidenuniv.nl*