



Silence: A Politics

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This article investigates the unfamiliar political implications of silence. Generally regarded as simply a lack of speech imposed upon the powerless, silence is thereby positioned as inimical to politics. In a normatively constituted lingual politics, silence's role can never be more than that of absence. The subsequent understanding that silence can operate as resistance to domination has opened original and ground-breaking treatments of its role in political practice. However, the argument here moves beyond this simple dualism, examining how silence does not merely reinforce or resist power, but can be used to constitute selves and even communities. That silence can operate in such diverse ways, as oppression, resistance, and/or community formation, leads to the recognition that its ultimate politics cannot be fixed and determined.

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Introduction

Political conflicts, identities, and ideologies are negotiated linguistically, language being both the instrument by which humans interact and the means of constructing what it means to be human. That voice and speech are central to the construction of community and political action is practically a truism within political theory. The assumption that language is deployed unproblematically and ubiquitously — that is, that language ‘just is’ and that all people use language identically and constantly — is, unfortunately, just as much a truism.

For example, take what has served as the archetypal community for political theorists from Aristotle to Locke to present-day philosophers: the family. A family is made up of disparate individuals, with often conflicting values, commitments, interests, even affections, and yet still (generally) consider themselves a close-knit community. Usually, when family is used as metaphor for a larger community, however, commonality and unanimity is assumed, which essentially fails to even approximate the experience of most actual families. Contrary to the assumptions of such cultural commentators, close relatives no more necessitate unanimity than does national origin; indeed, some of the most brutal and unforgiving conflicts emerge within family structures.



Families, instead, use a variety of mechanisms to persevere. Of interest here is one particular strategy, often used in situations of profound disagreement (religion, politics, sexuality): that of silence. One important though not exclusive way to negotiate such differences is not to speak of them; to allow other, more uncomplicated, topics of discussion to form the linguistic medium in which the family exists (Tannen, 1990). These silences need not be total or universal, but they are often a useful strategy to enable domestic continuity in the face of radical discontinuity. This tactic is exemplary, too, for larger communities. Thus, commonalities, both real and imagined, are already based on lack of speech: political, ethical, and epistemological silences which are necessarily backgrounded to establish other, overlapping connections.

Yet those who wish to build and reinforce community mention silence only as a threat to community, as failure and malfunction. Silence is that which is imposed upon marginalized groups, for example, so it is easily assumed that silence must be overcome. Silence is indicative of miscommunication, so a model of community based on an image of language as transparent communication must eliminate silence.

Even if silence is recognized as an appropriate response, it may still be represented as absence. When Wittgenstein famously concluded his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with the aphorism ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’ he supposed that since we cannot achieve truth in non-logical matters, for example ethics or aesthetics, they therefore have no place in philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1922, Section 7; Ferguson, 1999, 22–34). Wittgenstein recognized a place for silence (he certainly does not think such issues unimportant merely because they cannot be reduced to syllogistic demonstration), but this silence remains that of lack. Issues that cannot be adequately addressed should not be addressed at all; they are outside the realm of the proper and therefore rightfully languish.

This essay begins by examining these common conceptions of silence’s role through the lenses of communication theory, feminist criticism, and political theory. In contrast, it then turns to those fields that recognize the power inherent in silence, whether as a form of subjugation, resistance, or motivation. Finally, I point to the ways in which silence itself establishes private and public commonality, where it is not merely an impediment to community. That silence resists any reductionistic political role, in other words, denotes a sweeping truth about both language and its lack: similarity in form is not equivalent to similarity in function.

Denigrated Silence

‘Silence is weird’ read the tagline for a 2001 advertising campaign in the United States for cellular phone service. It is perhaps less surprising that



such an approach to silence prevails in contemporary society than that the aphorism declaring silence golden still has wide enough provenance to be thus transposed. There exist, it seems, few states less desirable than silence. Silence is linked to the horror of absence, of aporia; Pascal held that the silence of space ‘strikes terror’ (Steiner, 1976, 32). Insofar as communication between people is popularly considered, the acme of human endeavors and silence is seen as the failure of communication, to be silent means to betray the goals and hopes of humanity, to renounce ties with fellow citizens.

If in popular discourse the idea of silence is denigrated, its fate is hardly better in academe. As the concepts of identity and activity have become increasingly connected to a lingual politics, the existence of silence has in turn been increasingly seen as the subjugation of these identities and activities. If language, in other words, is identity, then lack of language can only be the demise of identity.

Perhaps the most overt treatments of silence within academic discourse have been recognized by sociolinguistics and ‘communication studies.’ In examining the role that language plays in the construction of community, ethnicity, society, relationships, ideology, and personality, linguistic approaches have identified many of the vital ways in which language creates and structures human relationships to the world, to others, and to selves. Yet studies of language and society commonly address silence merely as a lack of communication. With a few important exceptions, linguistic theory and studies of communication take silence as their unstated antithesis. Communication is presumed to reside within, or be constituted by, language; words might be demarcated by the lacuna between them, but the words remain the elementary objects of analysis.

Those that do recognize silence as a constitutive aspect of language often regard it as merely the lack of sound — perhaps between utterances or as an individual response to certain behaviors. For example, silence may be defined as referring to pauses between words (Crown and Feldstein, 1985), or ‘to the failure of one addressee to produce a response to a request’ (Dendrinos and Pedro, 1997, 216), or as an initial reluctance and delay in reaction (Rochester, 1973). In its most extreme form, the total disappearance of a particular language is metonymically the disappearance of a people, the extinction of a culture (Crystal, 2000).

The sociolinguist Wardhaugh (1985, 198–201), for example, attends to the use of silence in response to questions that are morally or personally difficult to answer. Silence in such a situation, he argues, comprises a kind of response (and thus is a proper subject for linguistics), but ultimately remains an avoidance. The appropriate response to rhetorical questions is no response, which is itself a kind of response.



A second analysis of silence has emerged in recent decades from feminist theorists, who embarked on the project of discovering how, when, and why women's voices have been silenced by a patriarchal culture. In some important ways, this approach has overlapped with the linguists'; they criticize silence as a failure or denial of communication, and examine the social and political causes of this aphonia. However, a critical difference in the feminist analyses remains: silence is politicized. That some people (women) are encouraged or forced to remain silent can be traced to cultural norms which use silence to deny them agency.

This approach has caused a central ambivalence in recent feminist theory: how to both explicate the abusive power relationships that have historically kept women's voices from being heard while also celebrating the work that women have done within the spheres allowed to them. Olsen's work epitomizes this. In her book *Silences* (Olsen, 1978), she described and critiqued myriad silencings that occur in contemporary American society and the history of literature, ways and times that the voices of women are defamed, ignored, stilled, or precluded. Olsen called for a rediscovery of women's work that had been purged from literary history, while also advancing a cultural critique of those who attacked (and continue, she argued, to attack) women's voices. If the most talented and original voices among us are stifled, then such systems must impact upon the less resistant even more severely. 'What,' she asks, do such destructions 'explain to the rest of us of possible causes — outside ourselves — of our foundering, failings, unnatural silencings?' (Olsen, 1978, 141).

Similarly, Rich, perhaps the best-known feminist critic to connect women's experience to silence, argues that women as women have been repeatedly and forcefully obstructed from entering the public realm of speech. 'The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination,' she argues, 'has been muffled in silence over and over' (Rich, 1979, 11). Rich has seen it her duty to overcome this silence, giving women the voice that has so long been taken from them. Rich, in her refusal/acceptance of the 1974 National Book Award, dedicated it in part to 'the silent women whose voices have been denied us' (Olsen, 1978, 174).

For Rich (1997, 13), language not only stands closely related to action, it is the way in which action happens, and the modern world — filled with television and pornography — steadily replaces action with passivity. Hers is a combined critique of sexual subjugation and modernity, which celebrates action and speech as the exclusive modes of political practice, and conflates passivity and silence into the realm of powerlessness.

This interpretation of silence as connected to forced absence and suppression transcends Rich's and Olsen's work, of course; it has long permeated the vast majority of feminist readings of silence. One of its strongest manifestations appears in anti-pornography feminism, where it is often argued that the



creation, distribution, and even existence of pornographic materials inherently silences not only those who are depicted within them, but all people (women, children) who are objectified by it (Langton, 1993; MacKinnon, 1993). Brownmiller (1975) suggests that rape is a crime not only of sexual violence, but of silences: the publicity and formal categories surrounding rape make the communication and reporting of rape incompatible with societal definitions of femininity as pristine and honorable.

Nor is this reading limited to feminist theory. Silence *qua* absence/powerlessness appears in a variety of political contexts. See it used as absence within history: the lacunae in official archives are termed ‘silences’ in the historical record (e.g., Allen, 1986). See it used as vulnerability in political science: Noelle-Neumann (1984) describes the inability to express one’s political preferences in the face of contrary public opinion, however slight, as the ‘spiral of silence.’ See it used as the opposite of organized political contention: Act Up’s famed anti-AIDS slogan ‘Silence = Death’ intrinsically calls for political speech as action.

Underlying each of these critical conceptions of silence is a model which conflates community, communication, and speech. Silence, whether that of a subaltern group or as perpetuated by institutional mechanisms, represents a threat to that nexus, and by extension a threat to politics. If silence is that which means the lack of articulation, and such an articulation is the primary — even sole — means of creating and continuing community, then silence is incompatible with community and society.

This implicit and explicit denigration infects not just those who decry silence, but also theoretical perspectives that presume the mutuality of community/communication/speech. Theorists using this model generally either decry a disempowered group’s lack of authority within a society (such as the feminist denunciation of silence described above) who are ‘silenced,’ or suggest new strategies to promote equality and democracy by encouraging speech.

Habermas’s conceptual approach to social power and equality exemplifies this latter approach. Having developed and deployed over the years an ambitious and meticulous critique of the privileging of enlightenment subjectivity, Habermas later began to champion speech as the formulation for democratic practice. Beginning with a rather simplified ‘ideal speech situation’ and moving to more complex conceptions of discursive social space, Habermas’s solution to the dilemmas of difference and inequality is resolutely verbal. For example, in his thorough treatment of law and equality *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1998), he champions, in turn, ‘discourse theory,’ ‘communicative reason,’ ‘communicative action,’ ‘communicative power,’ ‘communicative freedom,’ ‘discourse principles,’ and his previous stepping-off point, ‘speech act theory.’



Habermas's ideal, a nomologically neutral realm of power, is certainly a valid and laudable ambition. Nor is he wrong in his understanding that speech comprises a constitutive part of law and fair access to law remains partially dependent on discourse equality. He is certainly not the only political or social theorist to reduce freedom and the very possibility of justice to the availability of speech; the vast majority share this approach. But in reinforcing a normative communicative theory as the ideal formulation of political democracy, he positions silence exclusively on the side of partiality, inequality, and oppression. If linguism is the sole site of community and connection, then fragmentation is inevitable. In other words, Habermas's theoretical approach not only ignores the ways in which silence figures within people's lives, it makes the grounds of community (which he ostensibly defends) insupportable and implausible.

The idea of the public as normatively locutionary extends to legal and social theorists far beyond Habermas's orbit. That civic political action must be linguistic, for example, is entrenched firmly in US jurisprudence. The shorthand for the First Amendment to the US Constitution is 'freedom of speech,' and indeed many justices have argued that alternative forms of expression (e.g., flag burning) are constitutionally unprotected by not literally being speech (Rehnquist *et al.*, 1989). Without words, of course, law does not exist.

These various assumptions of words as axiomatic for communication, identity, and politics are popular, widespread, and deeply ingrained. Each serves to make speech/noise normative, and silence deviant; as the sociolinguist Scallon (1985, 26) puts it, 'hesitation or silences' are thought to indicate 'trouble, difficulty, missing cogs.' But positioning silence exclusively as absence, and speech as the substantive aspect of these powerful concepts, makes possible a striking set of possibilities. As Foucault (1980, 101) has argued, 'silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions, but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.' The very existence of silence thereby becomes a form of resistance, of non-participation in these practices of community building, identity formation, and norm setting. Silence, in other words, betokens a rejection of these practices of power.

Resistant Silence

In its most moderate understanding, silence is seen as basic withdrawal, whether from a conversation or from the business of modern life. Silence is a ceasing of participation, a discovery of self by cutting off external stimuli, whether the creation of 'a time for quiet,' a spatial or temporal retreat, or



particular venue in which to read, think or relax. Silence, in this conception, is as much metaphorical as literal. The ‘silence’ of the wilderness, for example, is not really a literal quiet, as anyone who has spent a night camping there well knows. Instead, it is a figurative slowing-down, an escape from the quotidian pressures of its imagined opposite, city or suburban life. Yet this metaphorical quality prevails precisely because silence is seen as a rejection, however temporary, of those metaphorically noisy practice is that are being escaped.

Contrary to popular assumption, silence is not the pre-condition of sleep, of thought, of meditation, of artistic appreciation; a great number of the world’s people do all these things without absolute quiet. However, silence is perpetually posited as their prerequisite. ‘Of course,’ it could be argued, ‘one *can* sleep next to noisy streets, farm animals, elevated trains, or church bells, but one does sleep better without those distractions.’ And yet those who sleep near these noises often find it difficult, or worrisome, to sleep without them. Similarly, those noises that would keep yet other people awake by their very absence, sounds such as ticking clocks, bullfrogs, or another person’s breathing, are essential for others’ slumber.

If silence is not privileged as imperative for personal growth, then, why does it have this reputation? One answer may lie in this metaphorical position it holds: if silence is a form of withdrawal, then those aspects of life that require a degree of withdrawal from the assumptions and involvements of that life are metonymically linked to silence. Silence, in other words, functions as a representation of withdrawal; the assumed tranquility of silence bars the non-tranquil involvements of the outside world.

This does not, however, constitute a particularly overt power of resistance, even if it implies a form of disavowal. Linked to the withdrawal conception of silence is a more overt refusal to participate in the normative linguistic practices of a state or society. Silence can prove to be powerful not only as isolation, but for the social function of self- or group-withdrawal as a resistance.

The sociolinguist Gilmore gives one familiar example: that of the student whose silence in the classroom serves to resist the authority of the teacher, whose power in turn cannot force an answer. The studied silence, or ‘sulk,’ can be used against a teacher’s attempt to settle, understand, or appropriately punish a student; in refusing to speak the student resists participating in the linguistic management of a classroom. Gilmore noted that while teachers may refer to persistent silence in a variety of ways, such as “‘pouting,” “fretting,” “acting spoiled,” “being rebellious,” “acting nasty,” “having a temper tantrum,” and so on,’ in each case it is seen as a threat to the normative standards of a classroom and usually causes a teacher to respond and pay attention to the silent student (Gilmore, 1985, 154).



Silence can serve as resistance to any institution that requires verbal participation (as do virtually all). On a macroscopic political scale, states often require such participation and subsequently employ a variety of means to compel it. The state-sponsored requirement to take an oath is a particularly overt form of obligatory speech. Loyalty oaths, public recantations of heresy, self-incrimination, enforced pledges of allegiance, and required judicial affirmations all oblige certain well-circumscribed speech acts. Bosmajian (1999) has illuminated a profound trajectory of the ways in which coerced speech has been used to control, imprison, and even kill those who dissent, from Thomas More and Galileo to the victims of the US House Un-American Activities Committee and employees forced to sign oaths as a condition of employment. Most notably, these institutional forces consider silent dissent threatening; declining to support a king' or legislative body's activities is judged tantamount to opposing the nation.

Silence as non-participation is threatening to insitutional forces in that silence resists whatever demands are made without necessarily opposing. In a cosmology of language, it is equivalent to heresy. For the Catholic theologian Picard (1952, 18), for example, the primary value of silence is, paradoxically, this lack of value. 'Silence,' he argued, 'does not fit into the world of profit and utility...it cannot be exploited.' As absence, it lacks substance; as non-response, it resists interpellation.

Campion's film *The Piano* meticulously captures and illustrates this role of silence. The protagonist, Ada, played by Holly Hunter, is mute: early in life, she says, she decided to stop speaking. 'My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last.' (Campion, 1993). Her silence weighs heavily on her husband Stewart (who selected her by mail order), but his inability to listen carefully to the silence in which she lives distinguishes him from his blunt, illiterate, but ultimately more responsive neighbor Baines who learns to treat her as a fierce, independent, full person. Ada's silence adds to her humanity in that she demands more from her non-interlocutors, yet her silence clearly demonstrates a constant defiance rather than any sort of passivity.

The silence of a 19th-century woman is not an uncommon affair, especially as represented by the strain of feminist criticism epitomized by Rich. Ada, unlike the archetypal silenced woman, uses her silence to discomfit those who regulate social behavior with speech. Her primary communication through the eponymous piano is available only to those with the ability or will to listen; that she does not speak seems both the literalization of the norms of her society and her rebellion against those norms. One way of viewing the relationship of silencing and being silenced is as a 'self-contained opposite,' where silence can be reclaimed from the mechanisms of power to be used as a practice of self-creation (Clair, 1998).



Silence can be used against others, but not merely in resistant ways. To see such usage as merely wresting a tool from an oppressive system, as a self-contained opposite, is to miss that silence's power extends beyond resistance. Silence, both as withdrawal and as pointed avoidance, can be used to manipulate, control, and harm others just as easily as to protect the self.

Again, to turn to children to understand its uses, their deployment of silence against one another shows a silence which itself does violence. The 'silent treatment,' the calculated withdrawal of communicative words from an unfavored member of that societal group, can be devastating. Importantly, this does not literally silence the individual in the sense of negating that person's attempts at speech, but attacks by revoking accepted social forms of recognition. Similarly, so-called 'passive aggressive' behavior, using silence to punish someone who relies on verbal interaction within a relationship, also wields silence to castigate and discipline (Sattel, 1983). In each case, silence operates on an exoteric register.

In each of the above cases, silence is not something that is done to one, but a practice which one aggressively performs. Active and reactive silence does not fit well into the predominant model of silence as powerlessness. However, this is not to say that silence as power is better, or more often true, than silence as denigration. Indeed, insofar as normative speech structures both, discourse equally constitutes both models, since each works with and against the norms of speech. Brown (1998, 316) points out that these conceptions, far from being oppositional, are in fact mutually structured: that it is possible for silence, she argues, 'both to shelter power and to serve as a barrier against power.'

Yet before moving beyond this dialectical relationship, one more model of silence as power exists, one that is not reducible to either a passive, resistant, or aggressive posture: that used on the analysand. Professional psychotherapeutic relations are premised on an evocative silence, yet one that is certainly far from neutral as structured by organizational power. The therapist's silence, at least relative to the client, intends to promote, or even provoke, disclosure.

Similar situations include a professor's use of silence used to draw out a class, a journalist's to encourage elucidation, a priest's hearing a confession, or indeed any interlocutor to induce conversation. In each of these cases, silence functions as a demand, not for silence in return, but for narrative participation. Silence thus evokes non-silence: it incites interaction without demanding it. Even Sontag (1969, 20), renowned for her opposition to the authoritarian nature of Freudian psychoanalysis, recognized that this use of silence contains an 'element of wisdom' within it, where it 'keeps things "open."'

If silence can function to provoke a discursive subjectivity, then, its power is neither defensive nor aggressive. I may operate on both registers at once, as in Lyotard's (1988, 3–31) description of the 'differend' as speech which is simultaneously demanded and impossible, as in those who demand eyewitness



accounts by victims of genocide. It may operate on neither, as the evocative silence does. It may be that *silence has no predetermined structure of power at all*. If this is the case (and it is my contention here that it is), silence can play an infinite variety of roles in social, political, and linguistic networks. If it can be destructive, defensive, and evocative of selves and social relations, then it can also contribute to the constitution of these identities. The remainder of this paper therefore examines some ways in which silence operates at this formational level, particularly emphasizing its use as a strategy to negotiate the competing realities of incommensurability and community.

Constitutive Silence

Silence can operate in multiplicitous, fragmentary, even paradoxical ways. The politics of silence, in other words, are not reducible to any particular political functionality; even more than its putative opposite, language, silence resists absolution.

As Block de Behar (1995, 7) has explained, ‘silence remains subject to the interpretations of the receiver to whom its message is addressed.’ The difficulty of articulating silence, she continues, arises because there is ‘no guarantee that an interpretation occurs of a discourse which is not uttered, of an intention which remains unknown, and which may not even exist.’ Insofar as silence cannot be literalized or universalized, it is not reducible to one singular function. If silence was strictly resistant, or oppressive, it could be neatly categorized as salutary or sinister; instead it both embodies and transcends these neat categorizations.

Condemnations of silence, especially in institutionalized contexts, arise from this very indeterminacy. Griffin describes classroom silences for the college professor thus:

A stretch of silence may mean any number of things. It may mean ‘We have no idea, as we have not yet even glimpsed the frontispiece of this text.’ Or ‘You appear to be operating under the naive delusion that we care.’ Or ‘I will never drink orange vodka again.’ Or ‘If she doesn’t call me tonight I will throw myself off the chapel tower.’ Or ‘If you’d just break down and tell us the answer, we could all go home and sleep.’ Very often it means ‘I am a cretin in a classroom of geniuses.’ But teachers, often bad translators, usually interpret it as follows: ‘We despise and loathe you’ (Griffin, 1992, 219).

Griffin clearly means to remind teachers that silence is not necessarily to be feared, but her multitude of meanings is not quite so reducible to the moral lesson she intends. For the classroom silence may well mean loathing; its very

irreducibility to any of these territorializations makes the lack of speech threatening to those organizational structures and their representatives; teachers are often justified in distrusting silence.

This particular capability significantly differs from the customary political roles of silence, even among those discussed above who recognize some of its potential kinds of power. If silence is comprised solely as lack, communication becomes impossible; if it is limited to force, either as resistance or as aggression, it separates and partitions relationships. If it can function within, say, families in various ways, both to create divisions and to resist power, then the nature of silence is in fact no intrinsic nature at all.

That it has no necessary form, however, leads to an unexplored and unacknowledged capability: it can also enable and produce. Silence, in other words, can be constitutive. It can create identities and enable communities. Once understood as freed from interpretive structures that necessarily condemn (or celebrate) it, the unlimited aspects of its multiplicitous functionality are freed for their creative and productive capacity.

Nietzsche (1969, 202–204), as Zarathustra, conceives of silence as the method for the most profound individual changes. An anthropomorphized Solitude welcomes him from the world of men, the ‘world below,’ where ‘[e]verything among them speaks, everything is betrayed.’ To the ‘fire-dog,’ the creature of the underworld, he argues against the cacophony of the so-called ‘world-changing events.’ ‘The greatest events — they are not our noisiest but our stillest hours. The world revolves, not around the inventors of new noises, but around the inventors of new values; it revolves *inaudibly*’ (Nietzsche, 1969, 153–154). Zarathustra, in a parable he calls ‘The Stillest Hour,’ explains how he changed from his comparisons with other men to his creation of himself. Repeatedly, ‘something’ spoke to him ‘voicelessly,’ helping him realize how to escape his childhood, his pride, his shame, and his limitations imposed upon him by society (Nietzsche, 1969, 166–169).

As Muneto (1991) (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’s foremost Japanese translator) has shown the centrality of silence to Zarathustra’s self-origination is remarkably akin to that of Buddhism, especially that of two books on the Buddha’s achievement of enlightenment that Nietzsche was reading at the time of *Zarathustra*’s writing. The profundity of the role of absence of language within Buddhism extends far beyond the ken of this paper, but individual silence and meditation figure centrally within the process of Buddhist enlightenment, especially its Zen (Chan) and Mdhyaika forms (Wright, 1992; Wang, 2001). (The ascetics of monkish silence likely also serve as a model for Nietzsche.) Zarathustra’s embrace of non-linguistic forms of communication (dance, music, singing) ultimately do not depend on silence, but Zarathustra’s trajectory exemplifies how rejection of language can help a new self transcend the limitations of the old.



Zarathustra's conception, Zen meditation, and monastic asceticism all point to silence as a constitutive element of the overcoming self. These models are intrinsically individualized; each characterizes subject-centered creation. As such, they are akin to silence as a resistant form of power. For Zarathustra, for example, only after he renounces language (the language of others) does he find a new mode of being. Ultimately, however, these are silences which reinforce disparity and discontinuity, whose archetype is that of withdrawal.

Yet if silence can be constitutive of individual subjectivity, it can also serve to constitute commonality. The very existence of social silence depends upon its acceptance. Silence must always be a collusion, as Tannen (1985) points out; social silence cannot be limited to one side. Silences between two or more people must be actively maintained as such.

That any communal silence must be socially preserved is obvious, especially when cases of those who disturb it are taken into account, e.g. the response of an audience watching a theatrical production or listening to symphonic music. Noise, be it speaking or mere rustling, is seen as disruptive to the experience of the performance; an audience member who cannot learn silence is commonly seen as failing in his or her place. Nor is this limited to those moments where dialogue emanates from the stage or sounds issue from instruments. An audience member who speaks loudly during a tense emotional standoff in a Harold Pinter play or applauds between movements in a Mozart concerto implicitly breaks an alliance of silence, an alliance to which other audience members (and occasionally venue staff) are deeply invested.

This is of course a partial silence (one on the part of the audience, not the performers), but instructive nonetheless. The audience members recognize the necessity of silence on their parts for the experience they desire, and go to great lengths to protect it. In doing so, they create a particular kind of audience, with norms and mores: a community. Yet this is a limited example. To better explore this aspect of silence, I turn to two cases which actively and overtly use silence to constitute a community, instances where silence plays a far more active and recognized role than in the familial example with which this essay began. These two illustrations, traditional Quaker meetings and the prominent John Cage piano piece *4'33'* (www.azstarnet.com), show silence bringing together disparate people in common experience.

Quaker worship is famed for being conducted, in the most part, in silence. Friends, as Quakers often call themselves, were not the only Christian group to promote silent worship; even within the Catholic Church the apophysis tradition gained strength in the late 17th century in the quietist movement led by Miguel de Molinos. (Both likely inherited the tradition from the Seekers, though their theological underpinnings cause both to be loathe to admit historical influence or precedent; see Zielinski (1975) and Fraser (1979).) But Quakers are the best-known historical and contemporary sect to worship in



this way, and the centrality of silence in their worship and daily life is overtly justified as conducive to theological truth and community creation by Quakers themselves.

From the denomination's beginning, this form of worship drew considerable attention and criticism. In his *Apology*, the 1678 explication of Quakerism, Barclay spends considerable time defending silent worship, especially once he has declared that 'there can be nothing more opposite to the natural will and wisdom of man than this silent waiting upon God....' (Barclay, 1831 [1692], 353; Bauman, 1983, 22) Barclay saw silence as a method of diminishing the automatic demands of the self, allowing the word of God to emanate instead. Speaking, thereby, became representative of all activities of the body, which could through practice become secondary to listening to God's voice. (Bauman, 1983, 22) For Quakers, silence has long been the foremost way to allow the overcoming of the egocentric mind. In the words of a 1805 pamphlet, 'there is no exercise whatever where self is more shut out' (Colley, 1805, 4).

This is not the silence of constative individualism; like most religious ceremonies, it is practiced as a community. This silence must take place communally, Barclay argued: it is the 'duty of all to be Diligent in assembling of themselves together, and when assembled, the great work of one and all ought to be to wait upon God' (Brook, 1795, 27). The Quakers considered congregation vital, even, as was their convention, in the absence of a central speaker/priest/minister. When 'these who came together, to meet after this manner in Silence, so that they would set together many hours in a deep Silence and Quietness,' they practiced silence together, as a community (Keith, 1687, 17).

Those who attempt to theorize silence often remark on Quaker practice, but its communal aspect remains consistently overlooked. Even Bauman, in his admirable treatment of the interplay between speech and silence in 17th-century Quakerism, treats silence as something ultimately individualistic. (Bauman, 1983, 22–31) However, the literature of the period, though primarily concerned with the overcoming of self in the service of 'the Light,' continually refers to the necessity of assembly. Even in the 20th century, Quaker theologians take pains to differentiate the experience of individualized silence from the authentic communal worship: silence, argued Hodgkin (1919, 79), must arise not from 'each soul alone, but united as a community.'

Silence, in this social role, creates the community. It provides emotional, theological, and political sustenance in many of the same ways any denominational organization does. But rather than sharing a literal symbol as the organizing principle of their association (a Torah, a crucifix, a minister) the symbolic unifier in the Quaker case is the absence of symbol. Silence functions as shared experience, but one whose meaning is not necessarily (or even likely) shared. Silence's 'primary object is group unity'; the unarticulated



yet contiguous experience of silence itself forms the community (Zielinski, 1975, 23).

John Cage's famous piece *4'33"* invokes similar experiences. A performer sits at a piano for 4 min and 33 s without touching the keys; an audience hears what would usually be considered incidental noises instead of notes from the piano. While not silence in the sense of absence of sound (Cage held there is no such thing as absolute silence), Cage's piece throws all sound into stark relief. (Cage, 1961, 8) In doing so, it encourages the audience to consider the nature of music (the most common interpretation of *4'33"*) but also, more importantly, to become aware of itself as an audience.

Cage's study of the role of silence within Zen Buddhism convinced him that music's ideal role was not to unilaterally communicate emotion or ideas to listeners, but rather to create awareness of surroundings: in this case, the surroundings of the performance hall (Kostelanetz, 1988). Cage's interest in the creation and reception of music is testament to this focus: his dislike of recordings as 'the end of music,' his insistence on a score, page turnings, and note durations for the performance of *4'33"*, and his fundamental interest in the art of everyday experience. (Soloman, 2000) As Sontag has pointed out, the dialectical nature of the silence that Cage created necessitates a surrounding fullness of response in the audience (Sontag, 1969, 10–11). It is as though the silence constitutes the awareness of the audience *as such*, both within its self-awareness and in the arrangement of its relation to the 'music.'

The audience, there, transcends its assumed identity as passive recipient and actively partakes in the piece. Cage's is not a form of performance art that primarily relies on shock, or even that of transgression. Instead, the surprise of *4'33"* emerges in uses silence to enable the recognition of the audience as integral to performance, as comprising the piece as much as the composer or performer. Silence, in this role, does not distance, resist, or overpower; it forms the artistic and intellectual basis for the recognition and constitution of communal identity. For Cage's musical composition, as for the Quaker theological tradition, silence creates community.

These creative productions, from Zarathustra's self-creation to Barclay's theological assembly to Cage's communal experience, make singular interpretations of silence's functions problematically simplistic. If silence cannot be fixed to the singular interpretation of powerlessness, or of resistance, then neither can it be easily and clearly constitutive. No sure way exists of determining if all members of a community are affected by silence in ways that actually create community; no silence is indisputably formative or reactive.

A search for *the* politics of silence, for the determinative classification of the power dynamics inherent within silence, is consequently doomed to fail. The multiple, fragmentary, and overlapping dynamics of silence can be iterated, investigated, and explored, but they cannot be fixed or predetermined. Indeed,



the implications of this impossibility may well have more to do with how politics gets conceptualized in contemporary theory than with the particularities of silence. Perhaps power itself, like silence, is radically indeterminate, open to processes of domination, emancipation, and resistance which can never be fully contained, represented, or comprehended.

In conclusion, it is silence's simultaneous resistance to and eliciting of interpretation that acts in ways profoundly troubling to those who demand explanation. It can be disturbing for moral and ethical reasons; Heidegger's lifelong silence about his attitude toward National Socialism remains a disturbing provocation both for those who wish to defend him as an insightful genius and those who try to reduce his thought to a pro-Nazi solipsism. (Lang (1996), for example, attempts to foreclose the question by arguing that Heidegger's silence equals guilt.) It disturbed those surrounding the Quakers, who as late as the 20th century would invade Quaker houses of worship and shout at the gathered Friends (Hodgkin, 1919, 76). It disturbs those institutions and institutional executors (including teachers) who demand verbal interaction as evaluative mechanisms. It disturbs precisely because the ideal of transparent speech is the presumed mode of affiliation in our cultural practices, a standard to which silence is not reducible.

Both the creation of community and the disruption of organization comprise silence's constitutive aspects. Each of these forms are linked to silence as oppressive or resistant power, but silence does not ultimately, necessarily perform any one of these functions. Or, more properly, silence does not perform only one of these tasks in only one way. Silence functions as a negotiation of the disparate and the common, but like any true negotiation it takes more than one path and more than one meaning. In silence, as in few other mechanisms, individuality, incommensurability, and community coexist.

Notes

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