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Introduction: A Turn to Silence

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Every society lives with silence and the tensions created by absence. We choose to notice some aspects of our world, allowing others to fade into the background. Then there are moments when we speak out about what was once silent, bringing into social life topics that had been unspoken or were unspeakable. The slogans of our time ring out to mark the silences that have made us what we are: #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #RhodesMustFall, and even #AmericaFirst. These slogans are self-conscious unsilencings and can be powerful mobilizing devices.

Silences come to define the society that keeps them, and its future depends on how these silences are identified, broken, or maintained. This is nowhere more evident than in the transformation to democracy in South Africa that both editors of this volume have lived through. Apartheid was a state of silence, built upon geographic partition (Cell, 1982) that kept the pain and violence of what Fanon (1963) called the "colonized sector" out of sight and out of mind of those living in the "European sector." Whites could live in relative ease, consumed by ordinary concerns of day-to-day life while cultivating mundane and even exceptional pleasures and aspirations. White privilege was hardly viewed as privilege at all, but as justly earned success or as the product of a natural order or an unfortunate history. Certainly, rumblings of discontent could be heard. Daily news broadcasted dehumanizing representations of black people in angry crowds, throwing stones amid the flames of burning tires (Posel, 1990). But the topics of injustice, white privilege, and state violence were routinely made absent from national public discourse by banning, censorship, imprisonment, and exile, on the one hand, and by a cultivated and enacted sense of ordinariness, on the other, naturalizing white privilege and silencing oppression and black pain. These silences became the social action that maintained the apartheid regime, allowing it to continue in a business-as-usual fashion.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) played a central role in the transition to democracy. It broke the silence between the oppressed and the privileged by allowing victims of apartheid to tell the

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truth about their experiences. All of those goings on that had been hidden and silenced – in the townships, on the streets, in schools, in private homes, in police cells, on the country's borders, and in exile – were to be spoken about. The silenced were given a platform that humanized the suffering of apartheid and that called the perpetrators to account. The Human Rights Violations Committee gathered a total of 21,296 statements, narrating a staggering 46,696 violations involving 28,750 victims (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, vol. 3, chap. 1, 1998, pp. 2–3). There was much to be said and, as one survivor stated, the TRC ensured that "we are no longer living under the tyranny of silence" (cited in Krog, 1998, p. 145). The TRC catalogued events, moments, and figures of the struggle through testimonies that spoke to the violence of apartheid: burnings and bombings, shootings, torture, forced removals, gendered violence, police custody, detention without trial, exile, disappearances, and attempts to disrupt the status quo. These stories needed – and still need – to be told and retold. Progress depended on an ability to break the great silence that had held South Africa in its grip.

However, as important as the TRC was for breaking silence, it also preserved silence. Not all utterances in TRC hearings were heard and accepted. For one, testimony fell on deaf ears when listeners refused to engage with utterances that fell outside of the preferred discourses of the TRC, discourses that focused on building the Rainbow Nation and were based on Christian ideology (Statman, 2000; Verdoolaege, 2005). TRC Commissioners redirected expressions of anger, calls for vengeance, and outraged reactions toward moments of forgiveness and reconciliation (Statman, 2000). Also, by focusing on discrete events and figures – namely victims and perpetrators – the TRC hearings presented a "reduction and flattening" (Wright, 2017, p. 175) of apartheid experiences. This focus on the extremes of apartheid meant that the harrowing effect of the daily grind – what Motsemme (2004, p. 922) calls the "material and political lived conditions" – of apartheid was effectively made absent. In choosing to say and hear some things, others were left unsaid and unheard, constituting a form of social action.

These silences have reverberated into the new order, which remains haunted by the past (cf. Frosh, 2012; Stevens, Duncan, & Hook, 2013). The TRC represented an important unsilencing moment in South African history, but it "contained contradictions, ambiguities and generated contestations and conflicts" (Robins, 2007, p. 126). It even serves as a "reference point for leaving the past 'behind'" (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2012, p. 253), burying apartheid in history, allowing the beneficiaries of apartheid – white South Africans – to

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forget about the injustice upon which their ongoing privilege rests (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2012). Yes, the “Rainbow Nation” still has its silences, some of which originate in the unsilencing project of the TRC. These silences have come to define the current order and struggles, which have their own unsilencing slogans (e.g., #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall), curse words (white privilege, white monopoly capitalism), and political projects (e.g., decolonization, Black First Land First). Yet, as was the case with the TRC, these voicings and the social actions they inform cast a veil of silence that will haunt future generations.

This book seeks to focus attention onto the silences and absences of our social worlds. The chapters will show how the unsaid can become the object of qualitative analyses in a wide range of contexts, and they will demonstrate how the maintaining and breaking of silences can be treated as social actions.

Qualitative Studies of Silence

The work of the South African TRC shows the centrality of discourse for the setting up, securing, undoing, and at times maintaining of silence. No doubt, the silences and invisibilities of apartheid were established by violence, forced removals (Platzky & Walker, 1985), and imprisonments and torture (Foster & Davis, 1978) and cemented in law (Horrell, 1978), economics (Lipton, 1989), and the geography of partition (Christopher, 1994). However, all these practices and structures were informed by a pervasive discourse of apartheid (Norval, 1996). Consent for apartheid policies and practice was entrenched by a discourse of control and normalization (Posel, 1987).

Qualitative methods of ethnographic and archival research as well as discourse, narrative, and conversation analysis have been invaluable tools for studying the legitimizing powers of discourse. Critical scholarship in South Africa was part of a colossal global body of work that has been inspired by the turn to language in the social sciences and humanities, a turn that attempts to give voice to the oppressed and to tackle all manner of inequality and injustice. This work pivoted on the idea that language constructs reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Critical qualitative studies straddled and cut through and across disciplinary boundaries: linguistics, history, psychology, education, political studies, cultural studies, feminism, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and many others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Inspired by the crisis of representation and legitimation, qualitative researchers showed how discursive routines and conventions – including those in the social sciences – worked to legitimate

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the status quo – patriarchy, racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and so on – and silence alternative possibilities.

This turn was itself thoroughly discursive. It drew on the language of poststructuralism, ethnomethodology, and pragmatism, and it made thunderous challenges to the positivist traditions of inquiry and the traditional criteria for evaluating research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), including its central adherence to "objectivity." The breaking of silence in qualitative research was a noisy and political activity of debate and contestation that challenged and reestablished the boundaries of legitimacy and attempted to give voice to the voiceless. While an invigorated qualitative tradition sought to challenge these layers of silence in scholarship and in society at large, it did so by focusing on the said rather than the unsaid, and on presences rather than absences.

This focus is built into the very definition of its terms. For example, the concept of discourse was defined as social practices (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972) or a "group of statements" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 107); and the fecund concept of interpretive repertoires was defined as "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138) and as "building blocks . . . constituted out of a restricted range of terms" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). Qualitative research focused attention on what people were saying and doing and on the representations that circulated in the media, among elites, and in everyday discourse. Absences were seldom treated as social actions.

Qualitative research was underpinned by the "authenticity of presence" (Atkinson, 1988, p. 454) that was accomplished through techniques such as thick description (Geertz, 1973) and literally transcribed conversation (Hepburn & Bolden, 2013). This work presented social interactions and routines for analysis and highlighted the expressive functions of language, including its powers for constructing speaker identities and the subjects and objects of talk. Silence was indicated (if it was) by audible gaps and pauses in the spoken word, whereas the focus of analysis was on the content and enactment of what was said and done instead of what was left unsaid and undone.

Nonetheless, even as they focused on talk, action, and other presences, qualitative researchers brushed up against the unsaid. They encountered conspicuous absences that appeared to incite, constrain, and naturalize forms of social action. The presence of the unsaid in the noisy world of discourse became evident in three layers of silence: social exclusions, traces of avoidance, and conversational expectations.

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Social Exclusions

In a widely cited essay, Spivak (1988) posed the question, "Can the subaltern speak?" to highlight the "epistemic violence" that prevents marginalized and oppressed peoples from representing themselves. Poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist scholars had criticized the way positivist social science presumed to speak for the people who were the subjects of their investigations – often in the interests of governmentality, colonial administration, and patriarchy. Being sensitive to the crisis of representation and legitimation, critical scholars sought instead to create a space for marginalized and oppressed peoples to speak for themselves and to build an alliance politics rooted in the conditions of their own lives.

For Spivak, the problem with this impulse was the disjuncture between the discourses and texts of liberation that were articulated by leftist intellectuals in Europe and the United States and "on the other side of the international division of labor, the subject of exploitation [who] cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation, even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved" (1988, p. 288). The interview and other methods were "flood[ed] . . . with social science agendas and categories" (Potter & Hepburn, 2005, p. 291) that were alien to the people who were invited to speak. Thus as qualitative research moved from the European/imperialist center to the margins of the third world, researchers encountered the "silent, silenced center" of humanity – "men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (Spivak, 1988, p. 283) – who might have been given space to speak, but who remained as "mute as ever." The subaltern was silenced, and even if they could speak, they could not be properly heard. Rather than focus on speaking, Spivak recommends that we attend to silence, as we seek to understand who does and does not speak, whose voice gets to be represented, and how epistemic violence is exercised on the voice of the marginal and oppressed.

There was a silence at the heart of the turn to language and discourse. The texts of investigation were often the texts of the privileged and powerful. True, these were subjected to a critical deconstruction and analysis. But this work left in its wake a conspicuous absence, an absence of the themes, topics, and concerns of the subaltern – in their own voice.

Traces of Avoidance

The second way in which absences became evident in qualitative studies of texts and talk was when speakers could be seen as actively avoiding

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something. In a series of influential writings, Billig (1997, 2004, 2006) has brought the repressive functions of language into view. These were evident at occasions where speakers could be seen steering conversations away from certain topics and toward others. Speakers routinely avoided moral violations by maintaining polite conversation and circumnavigating rude, embarrassing, or troubling topics. Although transcripts could not reveal what people do not say, "traces of avoidance" (2004, p. 52) were evident in discursive activities and tactics that gestured toward and gave shape to repressed topics.

Avoidance is often signaled by discontinuity markers such as "yes, but . . . " or "anyway" that allow speakers to turn conversation away from a particular topic and toward another (Billig, 1997, 2004, 2006). These small words mark a gap, not in the audible flow of talk, but in topic, specifically away from that which is personally or collectively troubling to that which is polite, comfortable, civilized. Of course, these same arts of indirection can also be used to undo repression, unsilencing topics, for example, "Yes, we know X already, but you haven't said anything about Y."

Avoidance is a dialogical accomplishment whose success depends on hearers playing their part, allowing the unstated topic to slide past without notice to be replaced with another, more acceptable one. In this way, "what is customarily said may also routinely create the unsaid, and, thus, may provide ways for accomplishing repression" (Billig, 2004, p. 67). These absences become psychologically and ideologically significant because they allow individuals and collectives to skirt around troubling topics that are left to remain unresolved. Social actors may then become invested in their silences and the violation of the routines of repression may occasion personal and collective upheaval (Zerubavel, 2006).

Conversational Expectations

Many have commented on the "miraculous" coordination of social interaction (Levinson, 2000). Seamless turn taking; conversational relevance; laying down and picking up of topical threads; and the logic, beauty, and passion of conversation are staggering. Yet all this coordination occurs in the absence of rules, directions, and central organization. How?

The self-organizing and generative quality of conversational activity is made possible by the expectations that regulate participation and allow each individual to join and contribute to social life in a way that is deemed appropriate or relevant. Interaction is "governed" by expectations (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 2000). A rich vein of scholarship in pragmatics and conversation analysis has argued that expectations are not fully

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determined by semantic meaning. For example, the meaning of the sentence "It will be finished soon" depends on context, not semantics. If "it" is tea that is brewing, being "finished" could mean being served and "soon" would be a matter of minutes. However, the job of packing boxes of tea (it), would be finished when the container is full, which might take hours. Or it might be the negotiation of a contract to import tea, which would be finished by signing a contract that might take weeks to conclude, "soon," after months of negotiation (Levinson, 2000). The pragmatic meaning – how to respond – is specified in silence in the space between speaker and hearer. Pragmatic implication sometimes only has a "most tenuous relationship to the semantic content of what is said" (Levinson, 1983, pp. 39–40). Nonetheless, the relevance of implicit meanings and expectations to participants can become evident in features of context to which they orient in social interaction (Whitehead, 2017).

The Turn to Silence

Qualitative researchers have come to appreciate that silence is an important force in shaping social order and social action. The constructive powers of *what is said* are matched by the power of *what is not said*. Social scientists from a variety of disciplines have recognized the potential and importance of focusing on what is missing in conversation and society. Major publications – such as Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike's (1985) edited collection (*Perspectives on silence*), Adam Jaworski's (1993) systematic conceptualization of silence (*Power of silence: Social and pragmatic perspectives)* and his (Jaworski, 1997) edited collection (*Silence: Interdisciplinary perspectives)* – declared that silence was no longer a study on the peripheries of academic interest. Instead, silence had become a legitimate, productive, and promising area of inquiry in its own right. This is even truer today when silence research has started to become a central concern for many qualitative researchers. There is growing interest in the influences, causes, implications, experiences, affect, and ideology wrapped up in various forms and features of silence (see, e.g., Achino-Loeb, 2006b; Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio, & Winter, 2010; Billig, 2004; Schröter & Taylor, 2018a; Zerubavel, 2006). We might say that the social sciences and humanities have taken a turn toward silence.

Just as the discursive turn invigorated qualitative inquiry, the turn to silence and the focus on the meaningfulness and activity of the unsaid has reignited interest in the functioning of language and ideology (Achino-Loeb, 2006a; Billig, 2004; Schröter & Taylor, 2018b). This scholarship has broadened the focus and expanded the boundaries of what the

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business of qualitative research can – and should – include (Mazzei, 2007). Following this trend, this book situates studies of silence and the unsaid within the general ambit of discourse analysis. While there have been many fruitful and influential investigations into the unsaid in disciplines such as linguistics and pragmatics (see, e.g., Ephratt, 2008, 2011; Kurzon, 2007), this collection is primarily interested in how silence – like discourse more generally – can be treated as a variety of social action (see also Schröter & Taylor, 2018b).

The Unsaid

Jaworski (1993) states that silence "can be graded from the most prototypical, (near) total silence of not uttering words to the least prototypical cases of silence perceived as someone's failure to produce *specific* utterances" (p. 73, emphasis in original). While a great deal of energy has gone into studying forms of silence such as pauses, delays, hesitations, gaps in talk, and other audible and measurable silences, more recently attention has turned to the less prototypical forms of silence that Jaworski mentions. These silences are the focus of this volume. We will use the terms "silence" and the "unsaid" interchangeably to refer to discursive absences that have been described as "what is not said, but could easily have been, and, indeed, on occasions is almost said but then removed from the conversation" (Billig, 1997b, p. 152) or discursive spaces that "are inhabited by so much more that could be said" (Carpenter & Austin, 2007, p. 671).

Noticing the Unsaid

Some essential elements of the unsaid deserve our attention. These characteristics of absence are central to our conceptualization of the unsaid and provide an umbrella for understanding the contributions to this collection. Qualitative studies are ideally suited to embracing an understanding of the unsaid as (1) slippery, (2) multilayered, and (3) a form of social action. We have purposely kept these orientations broad to allow for the wide scope of possibilities and approaches that exist in noticing and studying the unsaid. As Rappert and Bauchspies (2014, p. 2; cf. Jaworski, 1993, p. 34) argue:

> [T]he more forcefully we try to analytically get a grip on what is not there, the greater the risk that something slips through our fingers. Rather than grasping more tightly or pointing more vigorously, it is necessary to investigate the missing with a sense of openness and receptivity.

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Slipperiness

Qualitative studies of silence face significant analytic challenges. Johnstone (2008, p. 70) states, "noticing silences, things that are not present, is more difficult than noticing things that are present." Rappert and Bauchspies (2014, p. 2) describe silences as being "diffuse and wily," and Frickel (2014, p. 89) says that silence is "an exceptionally slippery subject."

There are two related reasons for this slipperiness. First, noticing, recording, and demonstrating absences are difficult tasks because they have "no clear boundaries, no hard analytical edges of definition" (Mazzei, 2003, p. 355). They are "non-occurrences" (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 13) and "non-conversations" (Bischoping et al., 2001, p. 156) that have no concrete identifying markers such as an audible, timeable lack of speech (Ephratt, 2011; Kurzon, 2007). This leaves the analyst with "fewer formal cues to work with" to determine "what *could* have been said yet *wasn't*" (Huckin, 2002, p. 353, emphasis in original). In his seminal work on silence, Jaworski (1993, p. 85) notes that silence is "a highly ambiguous form of communication . . . it is more open for the audience to speculate about which assumption(s) the communicator had in mind to make manifest . . . in his or her use of silence."

Different audiences (including researchers) are able to speculate in this way because each is able to "read" the context individually to make a determination about what is relevantly absent. Such contextual readings of social actions are themselves deeply affected by sociopolitical, cultural, and rhetorical factors that direct attention to contextual cues of relevance, intentionality, and expectation (see excellent discussions by Jaworski, 1993; Schröter, 2013; Schröter & Taylor, 2018b). In addition, silence can be utilized and interpreted as "both strategies and impositions" (Carpenter & Austin, 2007, p. 669), making possible and plausible a variety of readings into their intentionality and implications. This leads Bilmes (1994, p. 85) to note, "this kind of silence is, in some cases, noticeable to whoever looks with a competent eye. In other cases, it is created by arguing plausibly that something is missing." As such, different audiences – including different participants and observers of the interaction and different researchers and research readers – may reach different conclusions about the nature and content of discursive absences and their implications. Analysis is slippery when researchers attempt to look at the unsaid from these different points of view.

In addition to this ambiguity, there is a second reason that the unsaid can be appropriately described as being slippery. If – as the chapters in this volume will show – every expression leaves something else out that could

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have been said but was not, then analyses and diagnoses of silences and absences are themselves silencing. Billig (2004, p. 223) explains it this way:

> As one matter is spoken (or written) about, so others are kept from immediate dialogic attention. Where topics of conversation become ritual, what is habitually spoken about may be dialogically functioning to prevent, as a matter of routine, other matters from coming to conscious, conversational attention. . . . Not only might such dialogues reveal, or express, what is elsewhere repressed, so they might also create their own silences.

Bringing one silence into view can have the effect of silencing other features of context and the perspectives that could make them visible. Silence is thus a slippery object. The more pressure you apply to a slippery object, the more likely you are to lose your grasp of it. The same is true of silence research. The more we try to pin the unsaid down, the more our own silencing may come into view, along with the criticism and challenge that it occasions.

This slipperiness has the potential to lead qualitative researchers into a number of ditches. On one side of the road is the ditch of naïve validation. This occurs when analysts treat their hearings of silence uncritically, without considering alternative hearings and (especially) supplying evidence to show that participants have read the context and heard a silence in one way or another. On the other side of the road is the ditch of discouragement. There are many voices of skeptical reception: “How can you know something in particular is absent? How can you prove that something is missing?” Researchers might begin their study of absence excited about its nuances and possibilities but eventually abandon the endeavor because the challenges of proving – and publishing about – the unsaid seem insurmountable.

Although slipperiness is a challenge, it also offers rich opportunity. It is precisely this slipperiness that gives the unsaid its power and its unique rhetorical and ideological functions. The ambiguity of the unsaid, the cultivated reading of contexts that make the unsaid apparent, and the potential silences produced by speaking about the unsaid all work together to make for a powerful form of communication. Silences can speak without being spoken, they can implicate without being implicated, and they can account without being drawn to account for themselves. Slipperiness gives the unsaid its vitality.

Multilayered

The unsaid is multilayered in its nuances and its implications. This is largely because silence is “always a joint production” (Tannen, 1985,

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