
EMERGENT CONVERSATION

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Reflecting on Silence and Anthropology

Introduction: Framing Anthropological Knowledge

by Natasha Zaretsky

How does silence shape our fieldwork and ethnographies, and consequently, inform the contours of the knowledge we produce as a discipline? These questions inspired the creation of the panel, *Silence in/and Ethnography: Cartographies of Power and Knowledge in Anthropology and its Publics*, an Invited Session sponsored by APLA and the Society for Linguistic Anthropology at the 2014 AAA Meeting.

Since the 1980s, anthropology as a discipline has devoted considerable attention to narrative and text, questions of ethnographic authority (Clifford 1983) and the interpretive nature of our work, the “webs of meaning” (following Geertz 1973) in which we are suspended, together with our subjects, in the field and in the ethnographies we produce. These issues of representation have become particularly pressing as we engage subjects that highlight the uneven cartographies of power in which we move as researchers and writers, as well as the challenges to representation presented in the aftermath of political violence and trauma.¹

The reflexivity devoted to the process of writing and ethnography has been integral to the evolution of anthropology as a discipline; however, a focus on narrative cannot be disarticulated from an attention to the *silences* that shape our experiences in the field and the ethnographies we produce. Such silences – as they exist in the field and in the knowledge those field encounters generate – reveal the broader dynamics of power in which we continue to participate as we produce anthropological knowledge.

How does silence inform our field encounters and experiences? What gets left out of our ethnographic texts? Which voices are included, and excluded, from our narratives? Why are anthropologists silent in many public debates about issues that matter to our discipline? These are the questions that animated the papers in our panel (described in more detail by each contributor below), drawing on fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America, and the United States. As a session, we examined what silence reveals about the ongoing workings of violence and war, the tensions between structural violence and agency, the political uses of visibility, the public engagement of anthropologists in media representations, and how silence articulates with difference and alterity.

In the discussion that followed, the key points that resonated focused on how we produce knowledge as we navigate the boundaries of the field. One line of inquiry examined the importance of what happens before going to the field, and the way advisors and funding sources can shape our projects, thus inflecting our work with a different set of silences. Other questions explored what happens when you step outside the traditional field of anthropological publishing, engaging media representations (the focus of Rachel Newcomb's paper). Just as advisors and funding shape the contours of what we study, the public sphere and even government agencies can engender their own resistance to our work, often in ways that present limits due to safety concerns for ourselves and our research participants.

As ethnographers, we also determine how we engage the silences we encounter in the field. There are many complexities involved in writing and productively exploring the many valences of silence. During the discussion, we pursued the importance of probing that silence and engaging the discomfort it might engender, instead of shying away from that which might not easily fit or cohere.

In the papers we presented, it was clear that anthropologists are always embedded in multiple layers of relationships – with advisors, research subjects, students, funders, government agencies, and broader publics. If we understand knowledge to be produced dialogically, these interlocutors shape and reshape our narratives, engendering new meanings, and of course, new silences as well.

Representation as an Extractive Economy: Silencing and Multiple Marginalities

by Ann E. Kingsolver

Engaged listening is our most useful tool in cultural anthropology. That includes actively listening to silences, silences that we sometimes produce and reproduce as researchers. Neither listening nor silence is neutral, of course, as is clear from the violence resulting from reading bodies for citizenship, for religious and political views, and through racialized expectations, all without ever actually voicing and interpreting identities and actions.

There are ethnographic opportunities in exploring, rather than assuming, the meaning of silences. It would be useful to know, for example, the many reasons for which the fewest people voted in the recent U.S. elections for over half a century and what that very active silence means beyond the news cycle commentaries on party politics. How do we listen beyond binaries? If we reproduce them in the framing of our questions – which is often encouraged through funding mechanisms for social science research – what might we not hear? How can anthropologists make sure to include the voices of those who do not fit into neat, binary summaries of social life?

At one recent conference I attended, the social scientists in the room (from many different nations) realized they had all been interviewing the same dozen people for books and articles on a particular resistance movement. What might other community members voice in the complex continuum that is often the lived experience of family and labor relationships in conflict zones? What might be learned from the meaningful silences between the boxes unchecked? One example of such an active silence was the movement to create U.S. Census categories that recognize individuals' multiple identities.

The way that research dollars and the capital control of news production in the United States can shape the framing of questions, including in social science research, can be silencing in itself, avoiding engagement of what those outside the United States readily discuss as major issues in the United States: world-record incarceration rates, gun violence, and domestic violence. Reproducing dominant debates about immigration in social science research, for example, can silence the diverse experiences and identities of recent immigrants and the view that the United States is *not* the most desirable destination.

Sometimes simple answers go unheard because of the framing of questions. In Appalachia, for example, social science research (sometimes seen as yet another extractive industry) may refer to high rates of toothlessness, conforming to Hollywood stereotypes but not referencing the policy implications of Medicaid covering tooth extraction but not dentures. When terms like food deserts and sacrifice zones are used in social science proposals, have we listened sufficiently to how residents of those areas refer to them? I have heard individuals express frustration about trying to talk about experiences of economic inequality within areas mapped as “economically

distressed” or of racism on campuses understood to have diversity “covered.” Anthropological analysis, unlike the 24-hour news cycle, affords the possibility of long-term, engaged listening to the more complex stories silences can hold.

Remembering Silence in Brazil

by Robin E. Sheriff

“Remembering Silence in Brazil” is based on research conducted more than two decades ago. Dramatic changes in both Brazil and the United States have accompanied the new millennium. Silence has played a critical role in what we might call a new phase in the politics of “race” in both locations. As I note, the early 2000s saw the emergence of a series of affirmative action measures in Brazil, mostly directed to opening space for people of color within the country’s universities and its civil service sector. A majority of Brazilians supported the move, but the opposition (which included a few anthropologists) was not insignificant. News media gave a great deal of airspace to this opposition and in the process, helped to break open the silence around racism. The contexts, visibility, and sheer volume of the debate were unprecedented. Brazilians had no more expected to see such a policy in their lifetime than Americans had expected to see a black family in the White House. In both cases, there was an unmistakable sensation of rupture.

Such events illuminate silence. We perceive cultural censorship much more clearly from our rearview mirror—when it is in retreat. And this suggests another observation about the behavior of such silences: when they are ruptured in some definitive fashion, they are often followed by a backlash. But, since silence, once broken, can rarely be rebuilt, this backlash is articulated through a peculiar code. Such codes are the cousins of silence.

In Brazil, opposition to affirmative action coalesced into a set of public, mediated discourses that in some moments, at least, verged on the apocalyptic. Among the dire predictions made was the claim that affirmative action measures would introduce the specter of race where it previously had not existed, that this new commitment to the race concept would create two separate and opposed Brazils, and that the measures, with their top-down origin, resembled the political maneuvers of the Third Reich. As young Brazilians of color began to enroll in, and graduate from, public universities in record numbers, comparisons to Nazi Germany proliferated.

In the United States, a similar Nazi card emerged soon after the election of Barack Obama. Posters depicting Obama as Hitler probably originated among a fringe political group, but the image and the discourse linking Obama to Nazism went viral. In 2010, when the conservative economist Thomas Sowell compared Obama’s policies to those of Hitler, his “argument” won a nod of approval from a U.S. senator as well as a former candidate for vice president. Recent years have witnessed what history will no doubt recognize as an

unprecedented level of political incivility and obstructionism in Congress. The so-called birtherism movement is but one example in a larger pattern in the demonization of America's first black president. Yet, silence intervenes again: although many ordinary Americans can hear in these attacks a rearguard, threatened form of racist reaction, the mainstream media has been remarkably silent, maintaining the fiction that the vitriol is simply a product of policy-related dissent.

Brazil and the United States share a similar foundation involving European expansionism and the transatlantic slave trade. It is no coincidence that they also share the use of silence and codespeak to buttress and defend white hegemony. We are in an age of covert stratagems. Silence works hard. As anthropologists, we must work harder and ask: who or what is being served or protected by silence?

Silences in the Media

by Rachel Newcomb

What can anthropological engagement with the media tell us about the silences and visibilities in our work? In my paper, I consider anthropologists' public engagement with the media as the most visible in a range of authorial practices. Examining my own experiences, as well as those of other anthropologists writing in mainstream media from an anthropological perspective, I argue that three types of silencing can occur for the anthropologist who attempts to be a part of current debates. For one, the political sensitivity of certain topics can effectively silence the voice of the anthropologist. Self-censorship, the desire to return to one's fieldsite, or the aim of maintaining one's professional standing are personal reasons for silencing. Secondly, anthropology itself is frequently silenced in mainstream media, as anthropologists are often bypassed as "experts" because of public misconceptions about what anthropology is. Further, the uncomfortable truths that anthropologists may bring to light in reflecting on culture are potentially unwelcome in a jingoistic media certain of the superiority of our culture. Third, there is an additional silencing that occurs within the discipline itself, in terms of a favoring of certain theoretical debates and orientations over others. Anthropologists who attempt public engagement are often ignored in anthropological circles.

"Silence," Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb writes, "is implicated in power both in the first instance of experience as a by-product of identity and its selectivity, and as part and parcel of the veiling process that accompanies the wielding of power" (Achino Loeb 2006:3). Moving forward, then, it would be wise to consider where we are complicit in silencing, both from within and outside the discipline. A heightened awareness of, or sensitivity to, the type of veiling Achino-Loeb describes is a step toward being more conscious of how anthropological perspectives can be brought into better dialogue with the public.

Memoria, Desmemoria and Silence in El Salvador's Post-Postwar Generation

by *Ellen E. Moodie*

Two years ago I began a new research project related to middle-class politics in El Salvador. I was never sure how to describe what I was studying: was it about new kinds of social movements? Post-revolutionary participation? I was surprised to find that many people preferred to frame what they were doing as “civil society.” Especially youth. At first this choice irked me. The rubric of civil society shapes a way of thinking about, and acting in, the world. In places like El Salvador, it can operate to create silence about memory of subaltern struggle—of insurgency.

But after studying more than 50 interviews I carried out with Salvadoran youth in 2012 and 2013 and rereading my fieldnotes, I began to see that for some young activists this way of framing their actions has helped to lift off the weight of their predecessors' ideological dominance. Associations with politics, movements and activism abound with fierce social charges in much of Central America, after the turbulence and terror of the 1970s and civil war of 1980s; they carry a heavy Bakhtinian “taste” of the past. Upon reflection, I believe that their label for their actions, coded in the word “civil society,” may permit them to move into present struggles.

Today, 22 years after the peace accords, a new generation has come of age. They have organized protests; they have formed organizations, movements, begun newspapers and started blogging and tweeting. But many veterans of the past struggles, especially those of the former guerrilla movement now in power, say that youth have not yet had the experience to contribute to have a say. Young people must wait their turn, they say. So, in some ways, the kind of silence about struggles embedded in the choice of the term “civil society” creates a space for speaking. It also, of course, is a dangerous choice, risking erasure of the past; and certainly, many youth tend to shy away from any ideological commitment, gathering to act on issues (such as corruption) but not holding larger visions. And yet some also clearly yearn for the passions of the past, idealizing their rebel predecessors.

Consider Cristina, a 25-year-old nongovernmental organization (NGO) researcher. She does not remember much of the war. In her case, what her parents have transmitted to her about the past (and present) has to do with silence and fear regarding activism. “We are not supposed to talk about politics. Because the houses are really close to each other. ... So I'll be saying, ‘And this government ...’ and my mamá says: ‘Be quiet!’”

“Or on Twitter. On the day they appointed a general [from the military] to be the Minister of Security, and that's against the Peace Accords. So I was tweeting, ‘We might be returning to the past, with the military in power again,’ and my papá sent me an email, ‘*Hija*, please don't talk about the military publicly...’” And for me [to speak out publicly] is the most normal

thing in the world. Everyone is giving their opinion in our generation, we didn't live the war like that.”

Through a conscious choice of signs, in part by locating their struggles for change as part of “civil society,” Cristina (and others I interviewed) frame their activism as different from that of the past, in a way that allows them a freedom from the past discipline of their parents—whether to follow a specific ideological line, such as that of the FMLN, or to not say anything at all. Ultimately, though, it remains to be seen whether their sense of themselves as part of “civil society” will allow them freedom to define themselves, or imprison them in a toothless post-Cold War liberal “neutrality.”

“Hidden” Transcripts: Strategies of Silence and Agency in Public Narratives of Undocumented Migrants

by Natasha Zaretsky

My interest in silence derived from years of fieldwork that focused on social movements and protests. In Buenos Aires and New York, standing in the plazas and streets, I carefully chronicled the marches and commemorations that sought justice in Argentina and fought for immigration rights in New York. Yet, what also struck me were the quieter moments in those fieldsites and what they might mean for understanding the multiple valences at work in political narrative. In my work with undocumented migrant youth, I sought to explore how they engage silence publicly in ways that offer compelling insights into understanding agency and testimony.

Testimony has become a central genre for understanding how populations seek social and legal redress in response to political violence and inequality. Starting in 2010, undocumented migrants in the US have also turned to testimony and personal narrative in the form of “coming out stories” that link social recognition in the national imaginary with future legal inclusion. Their protests and rallies in public and political spaces prominently feature the personal testimonies of migrant youth. Yet, while their voices have become central to the immigration rights movement, significant silences also exist. Most notably, the voices of their parents and family members are absent from these public fora and events, revealing faultlines in current immigration debates that produce certain hierarchies of acceptability in migration. Latinos also represent the vast majority of activists, thus revealing other silences in non-Latino undocumented migrant communities.

In my paper, I sought to ethnographically engage what may be “hidden” in their transcripts (following Scott 1990). Such negotiation of meaning can be seen in the use of the term “dream” – a central framing of how to understand these young activists. It took me some time in the field to learn that these activists used the word “dream” in a very critical way – understanding its power as a complex symbol – connected to other frames of meaning, like the “American Dream” as well as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream”

speech. This desire to be included in American narratives – to become an “acceptable” immigrant and a legitimate part of the civil rights movement – shaped their desire to become included in the nation, a belonging on which their advocacy for full legal inclusion hinged.

Their campaign to break the boundaries of silence and fear to “come out” as undocumented was an important part of their strategy for desiring inclusion. Yet, these youth were not unaware of how these new forms of belonging occasioned by their speech were also rendering certain silences and exclusions of their own, silences that included their own family members at times, who were not the idealized “dreamers.” Yet, I argued that their silences should be read in a more nuanced way – that activists are instead engaging silence strategically in public spaces, which further, reveals how silence can be a terrain for a more nuanced political agency in the public sphere.

Synopsis of Discussion: “Hope in Silence”

by Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb

The papers in our session share two major threads: a concern with the limits of knowledge derived from ethnography and a focus on silence as tool for pointing out such limits and the reasons behind them.

Accordingly, a recurring theme in these papers turns on the pervasiveness of silence; how silence envelops actors and field-workers, ethnographers and readers. This is manifest in Zaretsky’s discussion of the arbitrariness or chance in the choice of pertinent voice, in Sheriff’s notion of “cultural censorship” that channels the understandings of participants and observers alike, in Moodie’s concern with historical forgetfulness and its political dimensions, in the primacy that Kingsolver attaches to the silenced aspect of public debates, and it is overtly spelled out in Newcomb’s list of the areas affected by silence in the anthropological enterprise.

Not only do we have to deal with limited access and limited vision, these papers suggest, but also with various levels of covert and overt manipulations, some of which are unconscious, so that questions regarding the actual versus the imputed experience of informants become primary. In her research on undocumented migrants, Zaretsky bemoans the generational silences that curtail our understanding of “dreamers.” Unveiling the actual experiences may involve breaking down ideologies erected in part for self-protection, as Sheriff found with her research on racism in Brazil and the age-old insistence on its denial, when memory is too costly. “Cultural censorship” serves as cover against the pain and shame of memory for blacks and as buttress for the class position of whites. The personal and structural import of silence is also intimated by Moodie’s work with post-war Salvadorans who are caught between a need to forget and a desire to remember. Examining whose self-interest is protected by the reliance on silence or its rejection may ease this tension.

These authors are sensitive to the complex relationship between the pull of testimony and the push of denial. That is how silence works, I have argued, that is how it becomes a tool for the exercise of power: in the interstitial spaces between presence and absence (Achino-Loeb 2006).

Silence is useful as analytic tool in that it permits us to question what stands behind it. What it is covering up. That may be the real task for anthropologists, least we be relegated to irrelevance, as Newcomb worries in her paper. That is the task Kingsolver undertakes in her work. The questions she asks of her data make clear how, and perhaps why, we can use “silence” as a portal toward unpacking any and all social facts and getting to their deeper level, most often veiled for reasons of self-interest. Her point is that surface articulations are untrustworthy precisely because of their role in concealing the turmoil that simmers right below.

What all these papers intimate is that silence is not nothing; rather, it is the domain of deferred presence – of behavior, experience, analysis. Because it is often misconstrued as absence, silence is central to ideological manipulations at the heart of power. It is, in fact, the locus for the sleight of hand where actuality is trumped by ideology. But, as all these papers show, the manifest never manages to hide the latent fully. And so we study silence.

Notes

¹ While there are many ethnographic examples of such work, the contributions of Kay Warren (1993) to the workings of silence during the violence in Guatemala inspired some of the initial ideas about silence for this panel.

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