

# 1 Introduction

## Regimes of silence

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Across the world in the twentieth century, as states, communities and nations struggled to emerge from one order of power and give rise to the next, the violence that structured such transformations depended upon and created profound silences in individual and collective experiences. Liberation from colonial control, the forceful rule of oppressive regimes, and the social rupture of communal conflict entailed dramatically different forms of violence, tools that were shaped by history and context in each case. In the problems of silence, however, there is a point of connection.

Most simply, silence is an absence in an individual's speech, a suspension of words or the things she does not say. The concept of silence, on the other hand, also evokes collective omissions, the things no one will say. It may be a matter of etiquette and polite sensitivity, or of discomfort or determination to avoid problematic words, or of grief, terror or pain that is inexpressible in any other way. It may be a literal absence of any words at all, or it may be the elision of one matter or one voice or one story amid endless talk of other things. It may be an active verb—the silencing of other people or the silencing of a particular truth, opinion, observation or experience. It may be an act of denial or an act of protection, finding refuge in words left unspoken. It may be a scar, the outward sign of an open wound, or it may be the only possible space of healing. It can be an act of power, whether imposed on others or adopted for oneself, a tool of domination or an art of resistance, or a far more ambiguous space of engagement and detachment in between.

The contributors to this volume examine the form of silence, of truths known but not spoken, to facilitate a dialogue across great diversity. In the ways that acts of political violence have gone unspoken we find a global forum in which the experiences of Cold War Latin America and South Asia may come together with those of decolonizing Africa, of autocratic regimes in the Middle East and of ambiguous transitions within the former Soviet world. Transnational silences span the globe in mutual entanglement, national taboos define the nature of emerging state powers, while communal silences mark the breaks and coherences of social life. “The form of silence is always the same,” suggested Keith Basso in his ethnographic reflections on Western Apache sociality. However, “the function of a specific act of silence—that is,

its interpretation by and effect upon other people—will vary according to the social context in which it occurs.”<sup>1</sup> Taking the form of silence as a point of departure encourages the distinction of its function, meaning and consequence from one experience to the next.

### **Acts and entanglements**

Emerging states may be defined by their liminality. The unspoken dimensions of violence come to prominence in times of transition, especially as the orthodoxies of contemporary transitional justice have made the end of silence the defining threshold of the emerging state, emerging from political oppression to liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> New states break from their predecessors by encouraging (some of) their subjects to speak about (some of) their experiences of preceding violence. In doing so, they ascribe a temporal profile to silence that confines it to the past and thereby distinguishes this past from the present and future. Communities are expected to be healed by talk of trauma, and states are empowered by managing this talk.<sup>3</sup> Neither the transition to liberal democracy, nor the singular end of silence, nor the cathartic effect of speaking, however, are universal or even representative characteristics of such change.<sup>4</sup> Transition brings attention to silence, but its orthodoxies risk distorting the debate.

“Breaking the silence” is a relatively recent archetype of transition. After the proclaimed watersheds of the Nuremberg and Tokyo Tribunals, neither transitional justice nor the redemptive power of speech took an immediate hold in global politics.<sup>5</sup> For much of the Cold War, truth-telling was a matter of activism and protest against ongoing violence rather than a ritual of redemption, as the report of Bertrand Russell’s 1967 Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, “Against the Crime of Silence”, most notably exemplified.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for some states that emerged from conflict and dictatorship as the Cold War reached its peak, silence itself was the choice of change. In Spain’s “Pact of Forgetting” after Franco, or Nigeria’s “No Victims No Vanquished” edict after Biafra, suspending talk of recent violence was meant to buy time to rebuild.<sup>7</sup> Silence seemed necessary to permit a transition from the past, even if, for some, the same absence of public speech binds them painfully to this past half a century later.<sup>8</sup> As Hayner observes, the collective choice of silence depends on a degree of consensus that is exceptionally rare, and it is never absolute.<sup>9</sup> Its possible appeal, however, for communities of memory as much as for emerging state powers, ought not to be occluded by the international paradigm of transitional justice today.<sup>10</sup>

When this dominant framework emerged and took root towards the end of the Cold War, on the other hand, the various processes that gave rise to it exhibited strikingly different conceptions of what silence meant and what it meant to break it. The pioneering Latin American commissions of the 1980s pursued the silence of the disappeared, taking the forensic truth of their abduction and torture as a path towards the “larger historical meaning of

collective political repression”<sup>11</sup>—even if such commissions were also subject to rigorous silencing constrictions of their own (see Molina below, [Chapter 2](#)). While pursuing some individual criminal trials, post-Communist states in Eastern Europe largely prioritised historical inquiry and access to secret information over individual truth-telling; seeking redress from a systemic devotion to “the task of silencing truth”, they seemed to require a systemic response.<sup>12</sup> The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, certainly the most influential of all such institutions, placed forensic truths and historical revelations alongside personal narratives and social dialogues, turning the end of silence towards the Commission’s paramount good of social reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> The subsequent blossoming of various forms of truth commission across the world have similarly sought different truths in different silences, to mark different forms of transition to different ends.<sup>14</sup> Yet problems of timing, politics, public performance or the perennially difficult relationship of truth with justice make silence in transition less a moment of rupture, and more a four-dimensional, endlessly shifting space of complexity, contradiction, continuity and change.

Meeting silence in transition alone therefore fails to grasp its full dimensions, its diversity and temporality. It is never confined to matters of memory, nor is it ended by the institutions put to the purpose. Silences met in the present provoke the sensation of solidity, how resilient they may be to the pressure to speak, how difficult or necessary it is to “break” them. From a historical perspective, however, we see silences rise and fall, shift in prominence, meaning and utility, or expand until they become impossible to hear at all. Taking silence seriously means moving beyond memory and the moment of transition, looking within and across national boundaries, and seeing scales from the intimate to the global moving in interaction and disjunction.

In the middle of the twentieth century, for example, Britain and France fought their decolonization wars in Kenya and Algeria while attempting to restrict metropolitan public speech about their extensive use of torture.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, both former colonial powers perpetuated and even extrapolated this silence in their own emergence into a new postcolonial condition. For several decades France sustained a generalised public “amnesia” over its traumatic break in Algeria,<sup>16</sup> while Britain actively silenced the historical record through the retention and concealment of 8,800 boxes of archival material from its former colonies.<sup>17</sup> As in contemporaneous transitional justice processes, these silences have recently been addressed by the truth-speaking of personal memories, the work of historical researchers, and prominent judicial test-cases.<sup>18</sup>

In an archetypical illustration of the ubiquity and sprouting forms of silencing processes, however, the silences of these departing colonial powers were mirrored in their former colonies. Inverting France’s amnesia, Algeria’s hegemonic patriotic history blotted out the experience of others in its decolonization war, from Islamists and rival nationalists to those who

fought for France,<sup>19</sup> while Kenya's political complex sustained the British ban on its Mau Mau organizations and perpetuated the same strategic silence to cover wars and abuses of its own.<sup>20</sup> The judicial and historical work that has tackled the absences of colonial memory in Europe has been a joint work of deconstruction and revision between European and African researchers in both cases, and public controversies in France and Britain are matched by simultaneous contestation and transformation in Algeria and Kenya. Apparent divergences of history are bridged by parallel and entangled stories of silence.

The critical issue, whether in such national stories or more personal experiences, is that the "life history"<sup>21</sup> of silence is a matter of continual regeneration, management, enforcement and change. Just as silences persist beyond the moment of transition, so they evolve and splinter through the long processes of degradation and transformation. The silences of emerging states tell us not only about memory and contestation at the self-conscious point of transition, but about life through the long years and explosive moments that came before.

### **Three images: The rock, the fence and the edifice**

We may be rightly uncomfortable in collapsing a great diversity of phenomena under the single label of silence, however. Between multiple disciplinary, linguistic and cultural approaches to the same common word, there seems little to define in unified terms. Linguists and linguistic anthropologists cite silence as a necessary, if endlessly nuanced, element of language itself, a part of communication rather than simply an obstruction to it.<sup>22</sup> The psychiatric heritage of trauma theory, in turn, hangs over much of the discourse surrounding the connection of silence and violence, while it is largely through the work of literary scholars that the term has taken central position as the inability of the scarred psyche of the individual to represent traumatic experience.<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, many have seen strategies of silence, centring on power rather than psychology. Studies of totalitarianism and state terror have understood silence and its secrets as a technique both to acquire and to reproduce power—even to define it<sup>24</sup>—and political science and sociology have explored further silencing strategies in censorship, propaganda and doublespeak.<sup>25</sup> Subaltern perspectives have, by contrast, proposed silence as a tactic adopted in response to domination or as a cover that exposes the weaknesses of power.<sup>26</sup> In memory studies, silence remains perhaps most casually invoked as a synonym of forgetting or denial,<sup>27</sup> but it also shows its face as a necessary suspension of speech in the processes of remembrance, mourning, and "living together again".<sup>28</sup> The "silences of history", finally, seem to both justify the discipline and stand as a critique of its failings.

Speaking of silence is undoubtedly awkward, tacking close to oxymoron, and the scope seems endless to find different meanings in the word.

But perhaps a single definition is unnecessary, or even counterproductive. Silence is as much a metaphor as an empirical element of communication, applied to absences and omissions of all forms, and it is in metaphors for silence that we may begin to grasp what we are dealing with. It is not for nothing that English clichés speak of “eloquent” or “deafening” silences, placing meaning in the aural absence rather than treating it as a void. But if we set aside cliché, it often seems easier to approach in other sensory metaphors than hearing alone. It is through three such contradictions, therefore, that we may begin to feel out the dimensions of an elusive subject.

Speaking of memories and memorials of war, Jay Winter approaches silence by stepping inside Augé’s landscape of forgetting.<sup>29</sup> Where the latter described memory as a shoreline, gradually eroded by the sea of oblivion, the former sees silence in the rocks and shoals hidden beneath the waterline; fallen from the headland, they nevertheless are not lost but lie just below the surface, concealed and exposed by the tides.<sup>30</sup> While distinguishing “liturgical” silences (dwelling on the “eternal themes of loss, mourning, sacrifice and redemption”<sup>31</sup>) from “political” silences (seeking to suspend conflict over the meaning of memory) and “essentialist” silences (claiming the right to speak as the privilege of certain groups and denying it to others), this image of the shoreline remains the coordinating key. One who knows the coast knows where the shoals lie.

Intimate knowledge is similarly key for Veena Das, when she considers silences in memories of violence in India. Yet the imagery of concealment, however inconstant, seems inapplicable to some of her renditions. She sees instead “fences” erected around memories that are very much present on the surface of social life but cut off from the voice of narration and experience.<sup>32</sup> She views the goal of the ethnographer as pursuing the moment when one can say, “My spade is turned,”<sup>33</sup> but silence is not something to be excavated but observed, because it is already exposed. Here silence forms part of the path towards an ordinary life, not towards the transcendence that other “liturgical” silences might suggest. It is a hard splinter, entangled yet tangible in her otherwise pliant imagery of the weave of life.

For Michel-Rolph Trouillot, speaking of the silences of history means speaking less of an absence of sound but of the presence of texts.<sup>34</sup> A certain textuality of history structures Trouillot’s view of the creation of silences, in words not written, records not kept, and stories that never end up on the paper that authorises them. The power dynamics he stresses in the production of academic history-writing place the textuality of the narrative to the fore, as one set of silences within a history “buries” another,<sup>35</sup> one consensus “masks” another conflict.<sup>36</sup> Silence is something partly created by paper and texts, an experience or historical moment not only obscured but, perhaps, destroyed by this weight of words. Yet Trouillot’s ultimate image is of a monumental edifice, a resolutely material sense of history embodied in graves and walls and cement. This is not a barrier between a narrative and a silence—rather the solid mass of these artefacts and immensities exudes

both. “We suspect that their concreteness hides secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences,” he suggests.<sup>37</sup> The silence is found within the material mass, not at all distinct from it.

Each of these images hinges on silences of the past, of memorialization, memory and history. In the imagery variously preferred by Winter, Das and Trouillot, however, even the particular silences of memory are given a shape and ambiguous temporality. Whether between individuals, in the public space of memorial or in the narratives of history, silence is a formidable presence, at least for those who perceive it or know what it withholds. It may grow or recede, be made and broken, suddenly vanish or reappear, or stand stubbornly resistant to any attempt to penetrate it. It may have a teleological point of completion in oblivion—the rocks finally washed away and the silences of history lost from recall—or it may rest as a fact of life that displaces communication to other forms of expression and underpins the emerging social world itself.

The diverse interpretations of silence defined by different academic disciplines, held in common understandings or emerging in divergent contexts, share a fascination and a power. We may recognise the hidden rock, the rigid fence or the impenetrable and evocative mass of the edifice as much in the silences of an individual as in the collective gaps in historical narrative, in the power of omission and elision in present discourse as much as the heavy silences of memorialization. The unspoken memories of a traumatised individual may be different on a quite fundamental level from the secret actions of a state. The propensity to read “a silence” in each diverse form, however, need not entirely be rejected. The question of something known but not expressed in words binds these disparate forms together, regardless of their origin, dynamic or consequence, and provides the opportunity for dialogue across them.

### **One proposition: Regimes of silence**

How then are we to approach such a solid yet shifting phenomenon? We cannot simply “listen to silence”, as the most oxymoronic call would have it. It is true that silence may not only conceal. Silence is indeed a part of communication, and must be treated as such. If silence does not entirely conceal, however, then it also cannot be said to reveal the truth that it does not speak. At best, it may point the way to it. Das describes the “stillness” of women mourning their dead following the anti-Sikh riots of 1984; unable to express traditional mourning laments, as she reads this stillness, they sat silent amid dirt and squalor to embody “pollution”, “the loss, the death, and the destruction”.<sup>38</sup> Their silence pointed the way to a truth, but it did not in itself speak; the communicative aspect of silence may only be grasped by correlation with other dimensions of speech and sociality, performance, power and politics, and therefore by coordination with larger scales of contextual knowledge.

Here, therefore, we propose to consider silences not in their abstract presence but in their dimensions of creation, enforcement and transformation. It is in regimes of silence, rather than in gaps of speech, that we may find a means to comprehend both the power and the life cycle of silence. Thinking about how pressures and structures constitute a political regime of constraint, or arise from social expectations, sensitivities, conventions or divisions, immediately attunes us to the variability of significance and consequence any silence might hold. Regimes of silence push us to see mechanisms and structures, sources and edges, the social dynamics of communication and interpersonal power relations. In acts, words, institutions and imaginaries, the creation and maintenance of silence help us triangulate its source and significance in a social context and political moment. The categorization of memory silences in the liturgical, political and essentialist forms adopted by Winter and colleagues, while not necessarily to be translated literally outside of the field of memory, is a good place to start. Pivoting on both social and political constraints and purposes, such a delineation suggests how the meaning and function of a silence may be intimated by the pressures that create it and lend it power.

In this manner, we might be well served by a misappropriation of Foucault's regimes of truth. Silence, like the truth that it may conceal, is a "thing of this world ... produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint," something that "induces regular effects of power."<sup>39</sup> Rather than generalising the meaning of silence or prescribing to it a mirrored trajectory in all circumstances, we are better served by testing these ideologies, the mechanisms and instances that distinguish speech from silence, the techniques and procedures that might accomplish or dismantle silence, the status of those whose silence is recognised or passes unheard, the words and representations that overwrite others or that speak around the gaps in discourse. As with the regime of truth, so silence is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it,"<sup>40</sup> whether it is the powerless or the powerful who refrain from speaking.

This alignment of "regimes" is merely another metaphor, not an insistence on Foucault's rendition of truth nor on a strictly Foucauldian approach to silence. Neither is it simply a frivolous appropriation. Silence is entangled with truth, because in silence we assume the silencing of *a* truth, a true voice, a true experience or a true opinion kept from open expression. Conversely, we may oppose silence to truth, by no means diminishing their entanglement; the imposition of a truth demands the silencing of other claims to which it is opposed. The mechanisms and constraints that create a silence may not be so distinct from those that regulate what counts as true, in either case. A social regime of silence might designate as true that which is unspoken, its truth confirmed by the inability to express it, as in an authorising discourse of trauma;<sup>41</sup> a political regime might designate as true that which is spoken, enforcing silence on other truths to denote their deception

or their error. Ultimately, a regime is constituted by dynamics of power as much as it shapes them; it is constituted by words and actions, values and convictions, created in an act and reconstituted, “ratified”<sup>42</sup> by new objects, processes and legitimising institutions later in the course of its existence.

No universal designation of such regimes is possible or desirable, changeable as they are between moments and places, languages and contexts, cultures and modes of power. The regime of silence is something with which to think, not a law or model to be recognised in defined sets of configurations. It simply asks from where a silence comes, how it is maintained and expressed, to what it is applied or how it is recognised, where its edges might be found and, if there is purpose, to what purpose silence is turned. It asks what relationship there is between a silence and a truth and, therefore, what position this silence takes with regards to power. Whether the metaphor of the regime is imagined more in the flooding of the tide or the fixing of the fence post, the verbal erasure of a written or unwritten text, the imposing presence of the edifice or any other imagery or sensory evocation that best describes the problem at hand, it points the way to the question of what creates, maintains and changes the truth and power of the unspoken.

The contributions in this volume thus are not to be categorised according to a set array of regimes or isolated dynamics. Most touch on several aspects of the problem, from the scale to the purpose or the nature of silence, how it frames or occludes speech, or how it is found behind many spoken words. Some look to the inverse, to words where we have assumed there was only silence (Walter in [Chapter 7](#) and McGregor in [Chapter 8](#) especially). The unifying thread of discussion is in the constraints on speech, however conceived, and the effects of power that these constraints produce. The recognition each of us have seen in the circumstances explored in other parts of the world encourages the collective treatment. The variety of place and context, of culture and circumstance, permits a rich glimpse of an impossible topic.

This is not least because regional circumstances and areas of scholarly focus within those regions have pushed debates around silence in different directions. The primacy of the disappeared as a symbol of modern Latin American history focuses attention on both the act of disappearance itself and the truth-telling processes intended to redeem its experience (Molina in [Chapter 2](#), McSherry in [Chapter 3](#)). The disciplinary background of African history, in turn, has long promoted discussion of language and orality, the pursuit of “words” and “voices” in rich and problematic ways,<sup>43</sup> and so the search for silence within such words seems a necessary step to take (Russell in [Chapter 4](#), Igreja in [Chapter 5](#) and White in [Chapter 6](#)). Meanwhile, distortions of history and the means of speaking to domineering power are revealed by the possibilities of particular archives in the Middle East and the Soviet world (Walter in [Chapter 7](#), Martin in [Chapter 9](#) and Cheterian in [Chapter 10](#)), or in transnational networks and repositories that disrupt the geographical premise of the state that imposes its silence (McGregor in [Chapter 8](#)).



These are issues of emphasis, not contrast. Departing from different points of origin, with our own regional concerns and preoccupations, we may give shape to a broader conversation over the dimensions and significance of a common, if protean, experience of life and violence in the emerging states of the twentieth century.

Instead of models, therefore, or too strong a geographical categorization, let us consider three broad fields in which these excursions cross paths: the alignments of silence with power, with speech and with history.

## **Silence and power**

Attention to its structuring regime discourages the singular interpretation of silence as either strategy or response. It may indeed be among the “arts of resistance” in some circumstances, but, as Susan Gal notes, a studied silence can equally be “as much a strategy of power as of weakness, depending on the ideological understandings and contexts within which it is used.”<sup>44</sup> The explicit dynamic of power forces a confrontation with silence as a matter of action and creation, constrained within its context, from which any strategic or contingent effect may arise.

Acts of state terrorism and counter-insurgency push us to see the unspoken as there “from the start”, as the Argentinian journalist Jacobo Timerman wrote, and not solely a matter of memory and transition.<sup>45</sup> “The silence begins with a strong odor”, he recounted, preferring another sensory metaphor to the visual. “People sniff the suicides, but it eludes them.”<sup>46</sup> Disappearance, as Greg Grandin remarks, was the “signature act of Cold War violence”,<sup>47</sup> a singular term for a mess of processes; whatever form of violence the victim suffered in arrest, abduction, torture or execution was subsumed into a greater cloud of uncertainty, the deficit of knowledge. Contained within the fact of disappearance was an unknown temporal scope of violence, extrapolated into an indefinite ignorance. Disappearance was a silent act that reproduced and proliferated silences.

Silence binds together the acts of violence suffered, the nature of the power behind them, and the attempt to change in the wake of this power. This final apparent rupture in transition, however, also creates traps. Guatemala most emphatically took the “memory of silence” to heart as the symbol of its emergence from violence.<sup>48</sup> Writing in a partially testimonial mode, Molina (Chapter 2) reflects on how silences have persisted throughout his country’s recent history, across multiple “transitions” of varying forms and degrees. Speaking of the memory of silence, and thus breaking one particular field of political taboo, may mark *a* transition, but it does not in itself achieve the emergence of a new political order. In a sideways shift, elements of an older regime of silence may persist under emerging regimes of political power, and talk of today’s abuses is no more liberated by the ability to speak of yesterday’s violence, especially when the latter remains constrained by “mandatory silence” on particular names and responsibilities.

The Latin American context, however, also presses the extent to which the dynamics of power behind individual and transnational silences are scarcely to be separated. As McSherry explores through hemispheric counter-insurgency strategies in [Chapter 3](#), the silence imposed on individuals in many countries during the Cold War was a necessary corollary to the coordination of terror and dread, fundamental to the purpose of political control that ensnared a continent. In such times, silence *is* power, and a regime of silence is inextricable from the power of the political regime responsible for it, one that may far exceed that of a single state. Whether the silence of a person disappeared, the silence of witnesses and survivors refraining from speaking about what they have seen, or the most prosaic silencing of a dissenting political opinion, the acts that create absences of speech describe the nature of the power held over them. Through such a regime of silence and its intentional, strategic construction, we can see the dynamics of control within and beyond the nation.

Of course, the dynamics of power in the construction and transformation of silence are not a matter of state actions alone. A regime of silence is a matter of social reality as well as a political creation, and its power is coordinated between these intersecting fields. For Timerman, the silence of terror in Argentina was not only a matter of subjugation but of implication, the “veil of silence” imposed on his own muzzled media<sup>49</sup> giving breath to “that silence which can transform any nation into an accomplice”.<sup>50</sup> The social sustenance of a silence created in acts of state violence substantiate the power of that state. Sebastián Carassai has described the general silence of an Argentinian middle class as essential to the regime in which they lived;<sup>51</sup> jumping contexts, this element of social collaboration is equally critical for Cheterian here in his analysis of the oblivion over the Armenian genocide ([Chapter 10](#)). The silence of political terror may be the acute edge of domination, but there is also a more ambiguous social regime of implication. Even underpinned by violence, political power may be marked by the “domestication” of rulers and ruled, the “mutual zombification” that Achille Mbembe describes for the (African) postcolony, to be sought in the things all agree not to speak of.<sup>52</sup>

However, this raises many problems of its own. Where do the parameters of political power around a silence end and social pressures begin? When is a “public secret” constrained by authoritarian censorship and when by social taboo? Considering the sprouting silences of euphemism, denial and social restraint emerging from Burundi’s history of violence, [Chapter 4](#) explores a “singular” absence that has changed dramatically over the years. State denials of genocide and a common vocabulary of euphemism constituted the substance of authoritarian rule. Silences over the same experience, however, when framed by a context of mourning in a moment of possible change, could turn that silence to protest. Today, while some pursue truth-telling as the precondition of reconciliation, for others social values, pains and sensitivities make a continued absence of talk positively desired, even as they

reject the power that once enforced the absence. The variation in regimes of silence shadows the shifting dynamics of power in perhaps surprising ways.

Yet the power dynamics of silence must be sought on intimate scales as much as on the scale of states, nations and continents. Igreja, in [Chapter 5](#), turns to the sudden ruptures of silence in Mozambique that may come unexpectedly, long after an experience of violence or the achievement of an apparent transition from a state of conflict. Social regimes of silence provided a means to live together, in his context, but only for a time. Igreja demonstrates the power in idioms of silence particular both to a language and a political community, tied to a complex of spiritual and cosmological understandings. Silence, as he observes it in Gorongosa, is pierced first not by words but by “embodied accountability”, as the ability to break a silence over an intimate crime of violence belongs to the spirit of the one who was killed. Provoking severe bodily discomforts as an old conflict resurfaces, spirit possession then permits the expression of accusation, and the provocation of truth, not through the voice of the living but through the voice of the dead. The relationship of power and silence far exceeds the stark terms of political domination, resistance or even reconciliation, but opens up uncertain spaces of alternation, inversion and change. The question of who speaks, who stays silent, and whose voice is heard at any one moment forces us to consider the effects of power that derive from the words spoken or passed over, and how these change over time.

## Silence and speech

Words, indeed, must take a particular prominence when we begin with silence. Bakhtin suggested a distinction between quietude, in which “nothing makes a sound”, and silence, in which “nobody *speaks*.”<sup>53</sup> In most treatments of the latter in the context of violence, this special relationship with speech is a latent assumption. It is the lack of words, whether a total muteness or a selective omission over certain truths, that seems to constitute a silence. It may therefore be a wound to be redeemed by speech, or it may be the necessary displacement of representation to other forms beyond words, from images to objects, landscapes and memorials.<sup>54</sup>

Thinking in terms of regimes of silence, however, produces a certain slippage that seems to drive our discussions of the unspoken away from Bakhtin’s suggested opposition. Words too can serve as part of such a regime. A memory “ghost-written” in a language uncomfortably foreign to normal speech,<sup>55</sup> an experience drowned in an excess of others’ words, and a history denied and destroyed by the telling of another, all suggest a silence somewhat distinct from a simple absence of words. The matter of which people speak, the voice they use and the distinction between truths known and words spoken, create absences in discourse that evoke the same sense of absent presence, the rock hidden by the tide or the fence around words on the tip of the tongue. Whatever else silence is, it is not necessarily

a total absence of words, but instead may be found in a matter “obscured by words” themselves.<sup>56</sup>

Approaching a regime of silence through the words spoken around it reveals its full dimensions. Where and when is it possible to speak of an act of violence, and who is able to speak it? Igreja’s focus on voice brings this critically to the fore (Chapter 5), while the euphemisms of power and the ambiguities in which people speak of their memories make a permanent problem out of the same question (Chapter 4). In Chapter 6, White confronts the relationship of speech and silence directly, in the most probing problematization of the parameters one might conceive as a regime of silence. She sees the repetition of a “piece of speech” in Rhodesian counter-insurgency discourse as creating the “effect” of silence around the event it purportedly described. The truth of the event became impossible to discuss, not because it was never mentioned or was ever denied, but because a set of words around it was subject to endless repetition. Such repetition constitutes the “recursive” loop of iconization by which words become symbols,<sup>57</sup> while exerting the effects of silence on the truth of the event. Routine words create silences of discourse, undermining the possibilities of communication in a stultifying noise of words.

White’s ultimate flirtation with the problem of *wordless* noise may take us one tentative step further. The noise of aeroplanes, bombing raids, crackling radios and cackling baboons, as she describes in one moment of war, scarcely constitute Bakhtin’s quietude. Is there also a silence created by such noise, where speech in its empty repetition simply adds to the cacophony, and both words and their sense are lost? If the diverse forms of silence we consider are tethered loosely together by the concealment of truth, the effect of noise to obscure any expression of truth seems to fall, paradoxically, into the same scope. The principle of the regime of silence pushes us beyond a binary of speech and silence, to find the effects of power in the boundaries not only between what can and cannot be said, but between what is and is not *heard*, even and especially when words and sounds overflow.

Speaking of words, on the other hand, helps keep in view the silences within our own work. Familiar as we are with talk of violence ignored or forgotten by the wider world, of dictatorships ruling through fear and imposing silence on their subjects, we easily let these silences grow; the absence becomes blinding. If words mark the edges of silence, means of speaking *around* the absences of discourse are as significant as the matters not spoken, not least because the words force us to look away from the simplest assumptions of repression. While many things remain unsayable in and to a violent state, this silence is rarely complete. As Walter explores in the content and form of Iraqi petitions under Ba’athist rule in Chapter 7, there may be great potential for manoeuvre and claim when one knows the words that can be spoken, and studiously, loyally avoids those that cannot. Ways of speaking encompass ways of keeping silent; when we follow words

we trace the shape of silences while turning them inside out. Yet, for Walter as for White, the questions of formula and repetition are key; as Iraqi petitions shifted towards more heavily constrained, formulaic structures, routine robbed speech of its communicative function, of its ability to express a truth other than that which was defined by the routine.

Chasing words, finally, allows McGregor in [Chapter 8](#) to trace the shape of silences that were simultaneously national, transnational and global at the height of the Cold War, and so defy the assumptions of their totality. She sees how attempts to speak around and against the silences over the 1960s massacres of the Indonesian Left constituted small-scale yet widely distributed “communities of resistance”. From exile alliances to women’s organizations, the words of these communities both defied a general absence of talk about what had happened and exposed the limitations of self-censorship and marginalization. The regime of silence confronted by such transnational words was not only a matter of state strategy. It also encompassed global priorities, conveniences and sensitivities that are as depersonalised as they are matters of agency.

## **Silence and history**

As McGregor shows, taking Trouillot’s words to heart, the silences of history are our own silences, as much as they are facts of past experience. They emerge from our own assumptions and limitations, some of which at least we can work to overcome. Both the practice and effect of history-writing are intimately bound to the regimes of silence we study. History is motivated by the silences of our sources, informants and predecessors. Attention to the regime that frames the truth we believe to be hidden, therefore, is as much a disciplinary precaution as it is a target of analysis.

Historians look for gaps in what has been written before, and seek to fill them. Oral history, most notably, has attention to silence at its core. Its methods were developed in part to answer silences of other forms of record, to hear the voices left out of the archival orders of power, to seek the past of “peoples without history”, of women silenced by social and political power disparities, and many other critical fields of human experience (see [White in Chapter 6](#)).<sup>58</sup> As a method rooted in a social exchange, oral historians are routinely faced with gaps, elisions and absences in their interviews, and thus are drawn to such problems as subjects in their own right.<sup>59</sup> Yet a similar concern emerges in the study of archives. A formal structure of power, subject to systems of selection, ordering and fragmentation,<sup>60</sup> the archive forms part of a regime of silence when we view it through Trouillot’s moment of “fact assembly”,<sup>61</sup> when things get left out from the possibility of record. Reading the regime in place of the silence it creates thus echoes Stoler’s famous encouragement to read along the grain of the archive, as much as against it;<sup>62</sup> the choices, priorities and logics of ordering are as informative as the things left out.

If the context of our work encourages attention to silence, however, Trouillot's primary warning is of the contribution that history-writing itself makes to regimes of silence. History may trace out a silence by its omissions (arising from the absences of sources, the ways that we chain our stories together, or the ways we value certain stories differently), or conform to the kind of repetition and routine that deadens official narratives (compare [Chapters 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10](#)). History-writing, and indeed rewriting, must be considered within the same space as the acts written. Barbara Martin makes this most explicit in [Chapter 9](#), when she considers the place of historians and debates over what kind of history to tell in the political knot of transition between a Stalinist and post-Stalinist USSR. Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" of 1956 both opened and closed the possibilities of speaking about the silences of past violence, and struggles over historical writing took center stage in political change. Writing about silence forms part of the life history of that silence; it may enforce one silence in the place of another, or alter its shape without necessarily dismantling it. Our work is entangled with its object, and good history requires an acute awareness of this fact.

After all, given its intimate relationship with silence and its role in the creation of silences, history may have a certain responsibility in the field. As Cheterian asks ([Chapter 10](#)), what is the point of history if it cannot speak of some of the greatest crimes of human experience, or worse, becomes complicit in their denial? The danger is that the terminus of the life cycle of a silence, especially one concealed by other narratives of history, may be in the realization of oblivion. If silence is the rocks and shoals partially hidden by the tide, as Winter proposed, it is still Augé's image that prevails, the tide eroding even these hidden truths to nothing. Substantively distinct from the silences that precede it, oblivion does not conceal truth, but reflects its loss, the totality of its elision. Augé considers the necessity of the act of forgetting, of welcoming oblivion as the release that permits life.<sup>63</sup> Where silences have rather obstructed the work of memory that might bring this relief, however, oblivion comes as the completion of the act of violence that began the process. Cheterian's discussion of the doubled political and historical silences after the Armenian genocide ([Chapter 10](#)) provides the critical example of this trajectory. Denial is not necessarily the final act of genocide, because denial remains engaged (albeit destructively) with a claim of truth, and therefore remains open to many possible futures. Oblivion is the end of such futures, the consignment of truth to the past and its loss from the present. The fact that genocide denial, in the Armenian case, has become a source of great "controversy" in the last two decades is, if anything, a sign of progress—oblivion has failed if silence is followed by denial. Where history-writing refrains from engaging with such a silence, by contrast, or actively overwrites it with other stories that block it from sight, such writing forms part of the regime that propels silence towards completion.

The encouragement to pay attention to the silences that surround us and those that we serve to create, however, must be accompanied by a final note of caution. History, like other academic disciplines, has commonly addressed itself to silence in modes of discovery and revelation. The temptation to cast ourselves as archaeologists or magicians is seductive; we “delve” beneath an absence to find a substance, we “excavate” a memory repressed or concealed within an emptiness, we “reveal” the truth hidden behind nothing. Yet this can also lead to the fallacies of the historian as hero, risking the same distortions as any uncritical assumption of the redemptive power of speech in the archetypal truth commission. Worse, our determination to listen to silences can seem to authorise us to fill them with words of our own, triangulated and hypothesised from other sources as best and as responsibly as we can, yet too easily masquerading as the voice of the silenced themselves.

We can even become to suspect silences where they do not exist. Experience with oral informants and time spent with archives encourages suspicion, the idea that there are secrets that are being withheld from our scrutinising eyes. This may well be the case; the British removal of its “migrated” archives at the end of empire is only one of the more visible demonstrations of the truth that inspires such suspicions, the secrecy of records flowing directly from the acts of violence that preceded.<sup>64</sup> Declassification, punctuated by persistent redactions, similarly forms part of a continuous arc that emerges from original acts of repression, both revelation and continued retention of information shaping the long half-life of particular forms of violence (see McSherry in [Chapter 3](#)). Being aware of such secrets, we *expect* (more even than we suspect) intent behind the gaps we find, and we view them as secrets in the power that they evoke.<sup>65</sup> Caswell and Gilliland point to the power of “imaginary documents” in the hopes of survivor communities, the unspoken account of a perpetrator who dies before giving testimony in a court of law. “Such imaginary documents are bound by their impossibility,” they suggest; “they are always out of grasp, falsely promising to make sense of the non-sensical, always emerging on an intangible horizon.”<sup>66</sup> In their absence they intimate the possibility of meaning behind the act of violence, even if this meaning will never be found or expressed.

Such observations serve to underline the fact that secrecy and permanent loss in the record of violence, whether real or imagined, are functions of that violence itself. Once again, we ought to see histories of silence and of violence as part of the ongoing life history of each, and be alert to how we contribute both to silence and to the repercussions of violence wherever we seek to address them.

In the engagement of history with silence, therefore, we must consider our position with great caution. The accounts in this volume encourage us to reflect on what we are doing with the silences we hear. As a motivating goal, breaking the silence must be problematised for historians as for practitioners of political transition and any who engage the violent experiences

of others.<sup>67</sup> On an ethical level, we too must respect the potential value of silence for those who keep it. Historians certainly have no greater right to the truth than courts of law or truth commissions, when that truth is something so deeply personal, painful or dangerous as to be kept silent by those who experienced its violent beginning. This, at least, is a premise with which all researchers ought at least to be familiar, though it will always deserve repetition. Some acts of violence may defy representation, and assigning words to them from without is not to break the silence but to overwrite it, to contain and elide the “anomie” of its experience but not to express it.<sup>68</sup>

“Truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it,” wrote Walter Benjamin.<sup>69</sup> Telling histories of the mechanisms and constraints that create a silence or transform it, and the effects of power it produces, perhaps offers us a path ahead, while encouraging us to bear in mind our own role in this process. This is not the “burning up of the husk” that Benjamin saw in the revelation of truth; the husk remains, its formation under study. It may not allow us or authorise us to hear unspoken words or to break their hold, but it keeps them in view and helps us see their power in the world, whatever we may imagine that they contain. From power to words to history, the authors in this volume do not necessarily break the silences they study, but set their shapes, trajectories and forms under the microscope for us to explore.

## Notes

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