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To Not Forget and to Not Remember: The Blurred Faces of Silence

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The texts collected in this volume address the unequal access of groups and individuals to the production paths of history. They highlight how the production of traces that render some narratives possible and valorize certain artifacts of the past and not others is always accompanied by the production of silences. They tackle both the question of who imposes this silence and on whom, including studies on women refugees in Pennsylvania (Skillman), post-war Bosnian youth (Bianchi), actors and narrators of the Istrian exile (Hrobat Virgolet), or individuals and institutions involved in the patrimonialization of a religious tourist route in Croatia, the Stepinac path (Belaj).

In his contribution, Thomas McKean reminds us that silence is a verb that reveals the asymmetry of power relations, forms of violence, repression, exclusion, even eradication: "To 'silence' something is to end its communicative activity, neuter its power." However, the author also demonstrates that, as a noun, this term encompasses very different matters, which we often fail to explain in our work. Therefore, the characterization of a lacuna as "silence" might also result from a misunderstanding and thus refer to a (false) shared meaning. Thomas McKean poses the central question of the "what":

namely, what is silence? Secrecy or incompleteness? Denial, omission, erasure? Is it relative, absolute, partial or total, intimate or public? Is it a choice or an imposition? Is it a refusal or an impossibility to speak? Associated with the “weak” and the oppressed, is it not, in its ambiguity, a refuge, a force for life, for continuity, as robust as the voice to which it leaves space and which it thereby gives existence? Is it the unspeakable, the unspoken, the inaudible? Or is it the result of a misunderstanding or a lack of communication? An absence of sound and voice which, as Henri Meschonnic reminds us, is a matter of both body and language, questioning what remains of the voice when it is no longer sound and what remains of the body in written language (2005, 61)? Moreover, to what extent isn’t it also a matter of the seen and the unseen?

While silence often refers to what is deliberately concealed or hidden, it is less likely to be seen in terms of what we do not want or cannot see. Maybe because “there is a shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror [...]. In each instance, the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look. Those with the stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering” (Sontag, 2003).

Similarly, often analyzed as a form of oppression that deprives the “excluded” of history, of a public voice and of recognition, most works define silence as a problem, a reverse of memory, a disease of history, the symptom of trauma or imbalance of power, where the communicated triumph of some becomes the silent catastrophe of others. Nevertheless, silence is more rarely challenged from the actors

concerned themselves, especially when they remain silent by indifference, lack of interest, or even choice or tactics.

Do all these questions inevitably lead us to the issue of how it is happening? What point should we call the beginning of silence? How is silence created, and how does it occur? As Foucault suggests, we must examine why “and how the decision was made, how it was accepted by everyone, and how it hurts this or that category of people” (Foucault, 1984, 56–58)? How are certain events, traces, stories, signs, and actions discarded and others not, and does a community decide what to include and exclude from remembrance and history? What is the process involved in creating the facts, assembling and recovering them, and finally giving them retrospective meaning (Trouillot, 1995)? To what extent can facts be reduced to narratives produced about them and the absence of such narratives to silence? “Facts are not created equal” as Michel-Ralph Trouillot reminds us. “Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces [...] that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative” (Trouillot, 1995, 28).

Recently, somebody asked me what benefits societies can obtain in erasing traces, transforming places beyond recognition, forbidding “memory,” ignoring or silencing events that matter for specific communities, and telling the tale in different ways to conceal and delegitimize them better. I do not think that such a reductive approach in terms of benefits is relevant. Beyond “benefits,” any attempt to silence the memory of the others might

also be the result of “enormous mobilization of political and cultural effort” that finally condemns people “to remember and remember, and remember” (Confino, 2015), whether they are silenced or are imposing silence on others.

There is a “home” where I once lived, a place whence people today gaze at their skies crossed by planes, full of weapons, towards Azerbaijan, in the ruthless war waged by this country, amid a pandemic, against Armenia. Some do not even hear or see them. Others do. While writing these few lines, their image comes vividly to my mind. This conflict is not theirs. They cover their ears, and they wish they could no longer hear the noise of daily flights, the sound of death passing over their heads, the shattering sound of the silence surrounding this conflict, barely disturbed by a few press articles. They would like to see and not see what these weapons do and that it is their people who have sold death. They dream of not forgetting, but they would also like not to remember anything. Through Skype, I see their silent faces when communicating with each of them, every time a plane passes by, thundering. I look at the silence: it is a place on a map, in Nagorno Karabagh, that has almost already left its place (Benvenisti 2002, 3); and it is a place on a face (Kaygusuz, 2009) that remains when the men are wiped from the landscape and have definitively left the scene.

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