



Conclusion

What is telling “if telling is all there is?”

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Sham Ataschi raises a similar question in her contribution to this special issue of *Acta Academica* on “Silence after violence”. As she writes, drawing from her study of Afghanistan, “efforts such as truth telling, documenting and recording of individual memory in relation to past violence provide a voice for women’s narrative and personal memories during war and conflict. However, what if telling is all there is?” (page no). For Ataschi, this question opens a discussion on how stories of violence perpetrated on Afghani women during the country’s successive wars and under the Taliban regime have been drawn into human rights reports and truth-commission proceedings without commensurate efforts to develop meaningful public dialogue or address past injustices. As she suggests, the interests of “the international community” which issues these reports and organizes these proceedings remain distant from the people whose narratives they collect. In this context, “telling” risks reinforcing existing power relations in which Afghani women are simply part of someone else’s project with little capacity to hold others accountable for past wrongs or to alter the circumstances of their daily lives.

Such a perspective, which highlights the disjuncture between personal/local experiences of violence and external truth-telling projects, is central to several arguments advanced in this issue. For example, Friederike Mieth maintains that, in contexts such as contemporary Sierra Leone, many people have developed coping mechanisms that enable them to adapt to the aftermath of a brutal civil war, thereby defying the expectation of (Western) trauma theory and projects

premised on it. Similarly, James Sedgwick draws from the case of the Japanese army’s “comfort women” to highlight the risk of pushing those who have experienced violence (especially sexual violence) to share these experiences as evidence in a court or other public forum, when such narrations undermine victims’ capacity to work through difficult experiences according to their own rhythms and to articulate narratives on their own terms. Viewed from these angles, silence does not appear to be an absence that impedes healing or hinders justice, but rather an active and potentially empowering response to a violent past. Conversely, telling seems to offer victims little, “if telling is all there is”.

Nevertheless, the central thrust of this issue is not to dismiss “telling” or to advocate “silence after violence” in any straightforward manner. Indeed, many of the articles focus on oppressive silences – especially those embedded in national narratives. For example, Gary Baines illustrates how former members of the South African Defense Force (SADF) have reproduced versions of “the Border War” that align with a White, apartheid-era nationalism – most recently through the proliferation of Border Wars memoirs written by former SADF soldiers offering “authoritative” accounts. Theresa Edlmann extends this theme to an analysis of the “discursive laagers” that confine discussion of apartheid’s wars – laagers shaped not only by South Africa’s racial divisions, but also by national borders, which, until recently, have made it virtually unthinkable to draw people into a regional conversation about a shared violent past. Reinhart Kößler and Heike Becker both point to the power of a dominant national narrative in Namibia to confine how histories of Namibia’s early anti-colonial wars and liberation struggle are told and to exclude different experiences. Rory Pilossof and Tim Scarnecchia highlight how Zimbabwean nationalism and an international community receptive to Zimbabwe’s discourse on “racial reconciliation” effaced mass violence, which the Zimbabwean government perpetrated on its own citizens during the Gukurahundi. Finally, moving beyond southern Africa, Jasneet Aulakh illuminates how, in the aftermath of India’s 1984 anti-Sikh violence, a national narrative was constructed that freed the Indian government from any responsibility for the violence it perpetrated on its own citizens and obscured how this violence and its legacy have been experienced.

Cases such as these seem to cry out for ‘truth-telling’ – projects aimed at recording silenced voices, replacing forgetting with remembering, and countering historical denial with recognition. Nevertheless, when silence is understood to be embedded in all our ways of relating to the past, the binary oppositions, through which we commonly articulate such projects, begin to dissolve. In their place emerges insight into how certain kinds of telling are intertwined with certain kinds of silencing and how oft repeated narratives may leave little room for speech. It follows that the most significant questions for those studying aftermaths of violence do not revolve around whether a given experience of violence has been

voiced or silenced. Rather, they address how we comprehend the vast terrain that exists in any given social context between these two imagined extremes and the complexity that any intervention may entail. To rephrase this theoretical point in the terms of our opening question: What is telling “if telling (and its opposite, silence) is all there is?”

Contributors to “Silence after violence” offer many insights that may help us extricate ourselves from this conceptual rut and push against the inertia of histories that have entrenched it. To begin, the introduction presents a history of the imperative to speak out, tracing it to the production of memory about the Holocaust and other developments during the latter half of the 20th century. Some of these insights involve developing and applying new analytical tools. For example, in his contribution, Gary Baines charts “three types of silence” practised by former SADF soldiers, all of which are acted out in “a liminal space between remembering and forgetting” (page no 79). Reinhart Kößler draws attention to “two modes of amnesia” in Namibia, comparing how overlapping, but different social structures shape the manner in which Germany’s colonial era genocide and SWAPO’s human rights abuses during the liberation struggle have been “silenced”. Steve Akoth circumvents the language of silence and amnesia altogether, preferring instead to discuss Kenyans’ response to the 2007/2008 election violence as a case of postcolonial “numbness”, generated both by a political culture that has condoned human rights violations on its own citizens for over fifty years and by an international community that has remained incapable of addressing this culture despite an increasingly vocal human rights agenda.

Other insights highlight the benefits of revisiting conventional wisdoms through new cases, sources and practices. Ronen Steinberg’s article is path breaking on all these accounts. By applying the questions of transitional justice and trauma theory to the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, Steinberg highlights the historical specificity of present-day notions about violence and silence, notions that rely overwhelmingly on case studies since the mid-twentieth century and a narrow range of human experiences. Moreover, Steinberg works with historical documents to discuss a visual medium, the phantasmagoria, using it to highlight the space “between silence and speech” through which the French responded to the ghosts of their then recent past. In the contemporary Namibian context, Heike Becker also works with the visual, using photos taken by research participants during ethnographic fieldwork in northern Namibia to illuminate a grey zone between silence and speech and to critique assumptions about the link between speaking and healing. Finally, as Theresa Edlmann notes in her reflections on the Legacy of Apartheid Wars Project, projects such as hers may easily become “ossified and universalized” pressuring people into certain forms of speech or replacing the voice of one group with that of another (page no 99). But

they are also capable of developing a praxis that attends to the complex terrain between speech and silence.

Like all good symposia, the one that led to this special issue of *Acta Academica* was extremely stimulating, focusing attention on all kinds of issues and aspects not usually addressed in academic discourses. It is in this mode that we wish to raise some additional questions, or some might say provocations.

Silence after violence is not a recent phenomenon as Steinberg's paper reminds us. Indeed, it goes back to prehistoric times. Why has it become an issue in the contemporary world resplendent with new disciplines such as Victimology, with its own credentialed experts with their own specialist vocabulary, which is now so broad as to include not only those that have suffered psychic trauma, but also those who were unaware that they were traumatised? The introduction to this special issue traces the rise of the 'therapeutic industry' to the Vietnam War. Might there be other factors at play? How does the rise of the 'therapeutic industry' relate to the rise of other currently fashionable fields such as memory studies which are rapidly usurping what used to be known as history? Again, it is an industry with its own terminology, journals and credentials. Some of the more cynical might see it as more than an industry, as big business. Has a complex and disastrous episode involving European Jewry become the model for construing histories of other disadvantaged and traumatised groups who have been subject to mass violence? What might the connections be with the hottest fad in law, 'restorative justice', with its roots in Melanesian notions of compensation and which anthropologists popularised? While intellectually autonomous, these three fields have developed a synergy, and we need to have a sense of the situations in which this synergy formed.

We also need to locate these trends in the context of globalisation, especially in the way in which time and space have been compressed. New technological modes of silencing and remembering have contributed to shaping this phenomenon, not only through mass means of destruction, but also visual technology as Steinberg's and Becker's papers show. In Mark Twain's brilliant satirical skewering of King Leopold and his atrocities in the Congo, Twain (1905: 68) has Leopold soliloquise:

The kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy indeed. In the early years we had no trouble in getting the press to "expose" the tales of the mutilations as slanders, lies, inventions of busy-body American missionaries and exasperated foreigners ... by the press's help we got the Christian nations everywhere to turn an irritated and unbelieving ear to those tales and say hard things about the tellers of them. Yes, all things went harmoniously and pleasantly in good days, and I was looked up to

as the benefactor of a down-trodden and friendless people. Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible Kodak – and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe. Every Yankee missionary and every interrupted trader sent home and got one; and now – oh, well, the pictures get sneaked around everywhere, in spite of all we can do to ferret them out and suppress them. Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand presses are saying the good word for me all the time and placidly and convincingly denying the mutilations. Then that trivial little Kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb!

How do instruments of mass culture such as cameras and video recorders, with their ability to transport ideas through space and time, make memories that were once merely personal into memories that are collective? It is in response to such questions that Lansberg (2004) refers to some memories as 'prosthetic' – memories that extend beyond direct experience. At the same time, pictures can also be fetishised. It appears that photographs are still regarded as *prima facie* evidence in South African court cases, suggesting that *visuality* is considered more credible than hearsay evidence. Moreover, many human rights groups now issue cameras to their observers as prophylactics against mass violence. Yet, the world is saturated with images, constraining the capacity of any particular image to affect its viewers. Therefore, rather than being concerned with what visual theorists called 'the Gaze', it is perhaps more appropriate nowadays to consider 'the Glaze' and how, in this context, the meanings of images become highly reliant on the manner in which they are framed.

The rise of globalisation with time-space compression and increased instantaneous media attention means that the public breaking of silence can provide one with instant celebrity status, sometimes welcome and sometimes a cause for embarrassment, even if short-lived. At the same time, such decontextualised 'public confessions' often strain the limits of credibility for such performances. Surely, in such cases the type of audience (and please note that the root of audience means "to hear") being catered to is important. Which audience is being addressed when one remains or breaks silence, and how has this audience changed through time? Why are such acts of breaking silence sometimes rather formulaic? Could it be that trauma was so unspeakable that its victims lacked a vocabulary to describe it and thus it continued to haunt them? The feminist historian Joann Bourke in her book, *An intimate history of killing* (1999), points out that, in the twentieth century, most of the psychiatric casualties were soldiers

who had not been in contact with the enemy, suggesting two important features: the role of the imagination and the power of suggestion or role modelling.

There is also an assumption, sometimes implicit, but often explicit, that ‘breaking silence’ is not only therapeutic, but also somehow closer to ‘the truth’, especially when in the form of a confession. This assumption is central to Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and similar truth-telling institutions, since it is assumed to be essential for reconciliation and, as Steinberg notes, this is a deeply Christian “thing”. But what is it that attracts audiences to public hearings of such truth-telling institutions? Yes, it is a deeply emotional experience for many participants and spectators, but might it also be linked genealogically to the crowds that watched and cheered public executions and crucifixions and our crude fascination with yellow or gutter-press magazines such as *True Confessions* and *People* found at the check-out counters of our local supermarkets?

On the other hand, one should also consider the dark side to truth-telling or -seeking. Again, there is a long history, the Inquisition being one of its most notorious chapters, and let it be remembered, organised by devout Christians. Contemporaneously, such practices as ‘water-boarding’ as well as other modes of torture are, of course, part of the operational procedures of many intelligence agencies. Despite these inventive efforts to extract ‘the truth’, some truth-seeking agencies, such as Israeli Intelligence have now realised that ‘confessions’ extracted by such means are generally ‘unreliable’. ‘Witch-hunts’, in which truth-seeking institutions seek to break the silence by eliciting ‘confessions’, have been shown to emerge periodically in different times and places and have generally been related to various cultural and social stresses. What stresses or contradictions might have fuelled the current interest in such therapeutic interventions after mass violence?

Lies and deceit and even self-delusion are part of everyday life. If we all consciously told the truth all the time, chaos would ensue. That is why we have etiquette and social conventions. Indeed, if such a situation were to eventuate, the social sciences and the humanities would become superfluous. As humans, we thrive on ambiguity and doubt, as well as truth. A totally truthful society is a utopian daydream or a dystopian nightmare. Take your choice! Both are acts of imagination, and silence lets the imagination run rampant, while talk may also generate imaginings, but in a moulded or pre-shaped way.

We conclude with a story. In *The Sunflower*, the famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal describes how, while imprisoned in a concentration camp, he was taken from his work detail to a dying SS member who, troubled by his ‘Christian conscience’ and the crimes he had committed, wanted to confess and obtain absolution from a Jew. Faced with the choice between justice and compassion,

truth and silence, Wiesenthal remained silent. After the war, he visited the dead Nazi's mother, but again remained silent about the son's activities. For many years afterwards, Wiesenthal wondered: Had he done the right thing?

Twenty years after the publication of *The Sunflower*, the publishers brought out a revised edition with responses from fifty-three prominent people: scholars, theologians, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, and survivors. Their responses as to how they would react in such a situation were as varied as their backgrounds, indicative of the profound and contested implications from an ethical, political, theological, psychological, historical and sociological viewpoint (Wiesenthal 1998).

The papers in this volume are similarly diverse. They cover the globe from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe and are written by scholars from a diversity of disciplines, namely history, psychology, sociology, literary studies, political science, and anthropology. Their diagnoses concerning the politics and ethics surrounding silence after violence are similarly diverse. To be humane, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is to be "marked by sympathy with and consideration for the needs and distresses of others". At the same time, being classified as *homo sapiens sapiens*, thinking people, our other humane quality is that of doubt. It is this synergy between doubt and humaneness that opens up the space for considering the role of silence after violence. There are clearly no easy answers. Perhaps, there are no answers, because in a sense this question goes to the heart of what it means to be human. But, as humans, we are compelled to continue addressing this question and it is in this spirit that these reflections are offered as provocations to sustain an ongoing dialogue. We cannot afford to let this discussion be condemned to taciturnity.

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