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978-0-521-19658-1 - Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century

Edited by Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio and Jay Winter

Excerpt

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*Part I*

Framing the problem: Multi-disciplinary  
approaches

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## 1 Thinking about silence\*

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*Jay Winter*

Les souvenirs sont façonnés par l'oubli comme les contours du rivage sur la mer.

Memory is framed by forgetting in the same way as the contours of the shoreline are framed by the sea. Marc Augé<sup>1</sup>

To be silent is still to speak. Maurice Blanchot<sup>2</sup>

### **Below the surface**

Marc Augé's elegant formulation of the embrace of memory and forgetting draws upon a long tradition of philosophical and literary reflection. It is time, though, to go beyond it, in the effort to transcend the now saturated field of memory studies dominated by scholarship which adopts this binary approach. For the topographical metaphor employed here is clearly incomplete. We need to see the landscape of the shoreline in all three dimensions. Doing so enables us to observe a vertical dimension to the creation and erosion of the shoreline which is dynamic, unstable, and at times, intrusive. We speak of those deposits below the surface of the water which emerge with the tides or with other environmental changes. In the framework of how we think about memory and forgetting, these hidden shapes cannot simply be ignored because they are concealed at some moments and revealed at others. They must be examined as part of the cartography of recollection and remembrance.

*Silences: liturgical, political, essentialist*

We call these hidden deposits silence. The composer John Cage said all that needs to be said about the performative nature of silence. It exists in

\* I am grateful to Efrat Ben-Ze'ev and Ruth Ginio for contributions to and extensive discussions on this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Marc Augé, *Les formes de l'oubli* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The writing of the disaster*, trans. Anne Smock (Lincoln, Neb. and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 11. Thanks are due to Kate McLoughlin for drawing this reference to our attention.

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the world, and is defined by the world according to certain arbitrary but powerfully reinforced conventions. Those who first heard his composition 4'33" in 1952 were stupefied by silence. What Cage did was to invite concert-goers to come together facing a pianist who sits at a piano and does not touch the keyboard for four minutes and thirty-three seconds precisely. What Cage showed them, much to their discomfort, was that silence is 'the presence of ambient and unintentional noise rather than the complete absence of sound'.<sup>3</sup> Our subject in this book is focused, directed and purposeful silence, not conceived of as the absence of sound, but as the absence of conventional verbal exchanges.

In the landscape we survey, silences are spaces either beyond words or conventionally delimited as left out of what we talk about. Topographically, they are there whether or not they come to the surface; and their re-emergence into our line of sight can occasion a reiteration of the interdiction on talking about them or the end of the interdiction itself.

Critically, therefore, we cannot accept the commonplace view that silence is the space of forgetting and speech the realm of remembrance. Instead, we offer the following definition of silence. Silence, we hold, is a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken. The circle around this space is described by groups of people who at one point in time deem it appropriate that there is a difference between the sayable and the unsayable, or the spoken and the unspoken, and that such a distinction can and should be maintained and observed over time. Such people codify and enforce norms which reinforce the injunction against breaking into the inner space of the circle of silence.

The reasons for this cultural practice are multiple, but in the context of war and violence, the subject of this book of essays, the primary impulses underlying the social construction of silence are three. In the first place, silence is always part of the framing of public understandings of war and violence, since these touch on the sacred, and on eternal themes of loss, mourning, sacrifice and redemption. We term these uses of silence as 'liturgical silences'. They are clearly linked to fundamental moral problems, described in reflections on theodicy, or the conundrum as to why, if God is all good, evil exists in the world. Such liturgical silences are essential parts of mourning practices in many religious traditions, since not speaking enables those experiencing loss to engage with their grief in their own time and in their own ways.

<sup>3</sup> Branden W. Joseph, 'John Cage and the architecture of silence', *October*, LXXXI (Summer, 1997), pp. 80–104.

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Consider, for example, the paradox that the Hebrew prayer for the dead, the Kaddish, does not mention the word 'death' or 'dying' or 'grief' or 'bereavement', all conditions or states of mind associated with the seven days of mourning passed together by families in mourning. The prayer is silent over the critical reality this practice marks. Mourning practices always touch on such matters, since they perform the fragility of life and the limitations of our own understandings of our mortal existence.

The second impulse behind the social construction of silence addresses problems of social conflict more directly. Here silence is chosen in order to suspend or truncate open conflict over the meaning and/or justification of violence, either domestic or trans-national. The hope here is that the passage of time can lower the temperature of disputes about these events, or even heal the wounds they cause. We term these practices as yielding 'political' or strategic silences.

One example, related to Vincent's essay below (see pp. 47–67), may suffice to illustrate this usage, and stand for a host of other instances, many of which are surveyed in the essays in this book. In the late 1970s, the forty years' reign of Franco's dictatorship in Spain came to an end peacefully. In short order, a socialist government came to power, and proceeded to refashion the country as a dynamic and stable member of the new European order. The price of that transition was the postponement or adjournment *sine die* – that is permanently – of any formal and public inquiry into atrocities committed during and after the civil war of 1936–9. Spain's new democracy chose peace over justice, order over the open investigation of the abundant evidence on atrocities which – like the underwater sand bars to which we referred above – was present but invisible. Not seeing what everyone saw and not saying what everyone knew became a strategy accepted by everyone at the time to ensure the success of a peaceful transition to democratic rule (see chapter 3). As we will see, such accords are matters of negotiation and thus suffer from all the faults of political compromise. With time, their hold over the parties begins to loosen, a new generation comes to power, and though silence is still ordained at the national level as wise and necessary, people start talking, looking, digging, writing and inevitably accusing. And how could it be otherwise when the scale of accusations is monumental? Here we can see that silence, like memory and forgetting, has a life history, and – when new pressures or circumstances emerge – can be transformed into its opposite in very rapid order.

Such transformative moments are examined in many essays in this book. Heidegger's silence about Nazi crimes, and his complicity in them, echoed similar lacunae in many German discursive fields after

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1945. But more recently, silence about war and violence ends when victims are invited to come forward, and are given a forum ensuring that what they say will be heard. This is evidently the case in South Africa and in numerous other 'truth commissions' established for this purpose (see chapter 8).

The third impulse behind strategies of silence arises from considerations of privilege. That is, who has the right to speak about the violent past? One nearly universal answer is to privilege one group of people who pass through an experience and who thereby have the right to speak about it, as against others who were not there, and thereby cannot know and cannot judge. Only those who have been there, so this argument goes, can claim the authority of direct experience required to speak about these matters. These are what we term 'essentialist' silences.

There are many examples of such distinctions. Soldiers frequently speak about their war experiences only to other soldiers. Ben-Ze'ev's chapter refers to an annual reunion of the members of a unit in the Israeli army of 1948; these events continue to this day (see pp. 181–96). In other cases, soldiers express a kind of sexist rejection of the very capacity of women to enter and understand this masculine realm. Others take an essentialist line, in defining experience as internal and ineffable. When I addressed a conference on the First World War in the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, forty years ago, one of the participants, Charles Carrington, who was a noted author and survivor of the Great War, urged me to choose another profession. The reason: 'You will never know the war; only we who were there can know what it was like.' This was said with avuncular kindness.

Other such strictures are more acerbic. Time and again, patriots ask how can anyone criticise soldiers and the choices they make under fire if they haven't been there? And when the fighting is still unfolding, what right do civilians have to criticise what they do? Then there is the charge that moral issues are too easily framed by those who had the moral luck to avoid extreme or violent situations. And even among those who endured suffering, there were distinctions between those who knew the worst and those who luckily never reached such a point. Primo Levi said that even survivors like him did not know the worst; that knowledge was restricted only to those at the bottom of the world he inhabited in Auschwitz, those who had already become the living dead.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 90.

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Furthermore, others pose the question as to how we judge those who survived the war and kept secrets about their past? Condemnation is the easy way out for people who live comfortable lives. Shoshana Felman took this tack in considering the puzzle that her colleague and great literary critic Paul de Man had written anti-Semitic prose in a Belgian newspaper in 1940. This unsavory fact came to light only after de Man's death in 1982. How do we interpret his behaviour? Felman sees his scrupulous scholarship as distinct from his earlier behaviour, and goes further in suggesting his silence about his own past was a profound philosophical reflection on the terrible difficulty of all moral judgment, including judging those who as young men and women fell into the trap of the fascist temptation.<sup>5</sup> While not sharing this conclusion, we feel Felman's argument does offer a telling riposte to what E. P. Thompson termed the 'enormous condescension of posterity',<sup>6</sup> or the tendency to look down upon those stuck in predicaments we ourselves might not have resolved in any morally superior manner.

The problem with this approach to silence is its characteristic essentialism. Few any longer subscribe to the romantic definition of experience as ingested, visceral and objectively present in the lives and minds of only some individuals. According to this view, experience is theirs and theirs alone. In contradistinction, experience is much more fruitfully defined as a set of events whose character changes when there are changes – through age, migration, illness, marriage, religious conversion and so on – in the subject position of the person or group which had shared those events.<sup>7</sup> Students of memory in the cognitive and neurosciences no longer view their subject as fixed, as in a computer's hard drive, but more as dynamic and unstable, as in a collage. The work of Elizabeth Loftus has deepened our understanding of implanted memories, ones suggested to individuals by outsiders and sometimes by clinicians in therapeutic relationships. The danger of such interventions is evident.<sup>8</sup> If memory changes radically over time, then we must abandon the notion that not only memory but the right to speak about memory is the property of only a chosen few who recall the

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Paul de Man's silence', *Critical Inquiry*, XV, 4 (Summer 1989), pp. 704–44.

<sup>6</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Joan W. Scott, 'The evidence of experience', *Critical Inquiry*, XVII, 4 (1991), pp. 773–97.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Schacter, *The seven sins of memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 20–3; Elizabeth Loftus, *Eye witness testimony* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), and Veronica Nourkova, Daniel M. Bernstein and Elizabeth Loftus, 'Biography becomes autobiography: Distorting the subjective past', *American Journal of Psychology*, CXVII, 1 (2004), pp. 65–80.

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experience of what Calvin termed 'election'.<sup>9</sup> Relegating the rest of us to silence must be seen as a strategy of control, of cutting off debate, of *ad hominem* assertions of a kind unworthy of serious reflection.

Who has the right to speak is a question many of the essays in this volume pose. War stories are never uncontested, and over time, they change as the people who frame them grow old, move on and pass away. When the victims of violence have the sanction to speak out, as in a court of law or truth commission, then they become the authors not only of their stories, but also of their lives. Not speaking can entail accepting someone else's story about what happened to you. Or, as Bethlehem shows, it may be an assertion of dignity by those who, like rape victims, pass through indignity (see chapter 8). The central point is that the entitlement to speak about war and violence is in no sense universal. Some have the right; others do not. The difference between the two categories is a matter of social and cultural codes, which can and do change over time.

#### *The advantages of silence*

These preliminary reflections indicate the thinking behind the gathering together of the essays in this book. We intend to show in this book that the vast array of writing on memory and forgetting has reached an impasse, one imbedded in the time of its creation. We also claim that introducing the category of socially constructed silence into the literature provides a way out of some of the difficulties in the current literature, where memory and forgetting are constructed as polar opposites.

The memory/forgetting divide is a matter of perennial philosophical reflection. Paul Ricoeur's magisterial survey of this literature goes back to Plato and Aristotle and the extent to which the *eikon* and the *topos*, the trace and the place, have been understood differently in the domain of memory and in the domain of history. But even his extraordinary survey is a tract for the times, reflecting many of the intellectual currents behind the current memory boom. His book was published in 2000, and reflected decades of thought on this subject. 'I am troubled', he wrote, 'by the disturbing spectacle that gives an excess of memory here and an excess of oblivion there.'<sup>10</sup> This comment echoed similar remarks by the French historian/publisher Pierre Nora on our surfeit of ersatz memory, in *lieux de mémoire*, and a lack of imbedded, lived memory, in *milieu de mémoire*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering war: The Great War between history and memory in the twentieth century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. xi.

<sup>11</sup> Winter, *Remembering war*, p. 33.

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Memory, according to these and other French commentators, had become a commodity, an unavoidable sign of ethnic identity, a repository for romantic wishful thinking about the past, for which people paid substantial sums in theme parks, museums and historic sites around the world.

The memory boom is the outcome of many different processes, some commercial, some technological, some political. We do not share the critical viewpoint of these French writers, since the growth in interest in commemorative projects arises from changing political circumstances as much as market opportunities. There is a substantial literature on this subject, which we need not summarise here.<sup>12</sup>

In this discussion, it is evident that the Holocaust has been at the heart of the huge spiral of publications, lectures, exhibitions, museums and internet sites we have today. Initial oblivion, eventual entry into the realm of public memory: these two phases of public acknowledgment of the Holocaust have unfolded in sequence, and have inflected many other inquiries into other crimes and other abuses elsewhere in the world.<sup>13</sup>

It is impossible to miss the shadow of the Holocaust in the philosophical realm inhabited by Ricoeur. The third part of his study is on forgiveness, on the need to recognise the moral fallibility of all who judge the past, and therefore the necessity to aim at a kind of redemptive approach to history and memory, the effort to construct what he terms 'happy memory'. In English, the term appears absurd; in French it has more resonance, but it still has the scent of incense about it, the notion that to remember is to understand, and to understand is to forgive. There is also a psychoanalytic form of this position. To know is to heal is a premise of some forms of psychotherapy. But we must bear in mind that Freud said that his hope was to turn neurosis into normal unhappiness; no 'happy memories' here.

Healing, acknowledgement, recognition, forgiveness: these are the hallmarks of the memory boom in the 1990s, the time when Nelson Mandela moved from prison to the presidency of South Africa and when Bishop Desmond Tutu drove forward the notion of a Truth and Reconciliation process for the victims and the perpetrators of the crimes of the former regime. In this environment, remembering is the key to repentance and forgiveness, while oblivion is complicity in crimes still hidden from sight.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Wood, *Vectors of memory: Legacies of trauma in postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), is a good place to begin. See also Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight memories: marking time in a culture of amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust and the literary imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); James E. Young, *At memory's edge: After-images of the Holocaust in contemporary art and architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).



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Suffice it to say that there are huge problems imbedded in this approach; why repentance follows remembrance, indeed why healing follows remembrance are questions with no easy answers. Many survivors of the Holocaust, as well as many of those born long after the end of the Second World War, are uncomfortable with this fundamentally religious or spiritual approach to these matters. Primo Levi did not forgive those who told him that in Auschwitz, there was no 'why'; neither did Paul Celan forget those who destroyed his family, indeed his entire world. They wrote; they remembered, but healing was not their purpose or their fate. Victims insist on attention to other issues as well. Compensation for truncated lives and for stolen property matter too, as Bethlehem's essay suggests. The difficulties with this nearly sanctified part of the memory boom are endless, and require us to seek another way. As long as we stay in this morally charged domain, we are unlikely to emerge with anything other than an updated version of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

It is our contention that by privileging the category of silence and the socially sanctioning activity of silencing, we can get beyond this moralised and moralising moment. The prime advantage of this approach is that we escape from the shadow of the Holocaust which, while unavoidable as a subject of moral significance, has tended to frame our subject in terms of the sanctification of speech and the denigration of silence about war, violence and the victims of both. Speech, we claim, is morally neutral, and so is silence. Both can be deployed in morally defensible and in morally deplorable ways.

### *Silence and war*

If we see the question as to how to remember war and violence as one which both antedated and has continued long after the Holocaust, we can also escape from an exclusively Eurocentric approach to this matter. Since the Second World War, the institutions of war have fragmented. That is to say that unlike in the years before 1945, now our attention is fixed less on international than on trans-national or internal conflict. We focus more than ever before on organised violence within states and between non-state agents and territorial states. This is in part because the post-1945 period was one dominated by wars of national liberation, leaving in their wake fundamental social, ethnic and political cleavages, which in turn bred armed conflicts of many different kinds. The genocide in Rwanda, and the ongoing massacres – some say genocide – in Darfur are two African examples of the terrible plight of people caught in these post-colonial ethnic conflicts. Crimes committed in Bosnia during the Yugoslav civil war, in Colombia, in Lebanon, in Sri Lanka, in Kashmir,

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in Afghanistan and in Iraq arise from what may be termed the post-national and post-colonial setting of armed conflict.

Clearly, as war evolves, the stories we tell about it evolve in turn. Today the collage of organised violence and the suffering it entails is much more complex, even dizzying in its shifting character. The tale of war can no longer be told primarily or exclusively within the unfolding saga of nationalism and the achievement of self-determination and national dignity.

When thinking about contemporary warfare, it is essential to take a step back from our current preoccupations. The Westphalian system of conflicts between states which we tend to take for granted as the natural order of things was nothing of the kind. It was not universal and not timeless. African warfare developed its own character outside of a European system of states. And efforts by colonial powers to keep their hold on colonies struggling for independence usually took on the kind of fragmentary character we mistake as unprecedented. Nothing could be further from the case. Still, the catastrophe of the two world wars has left its imprint on what Samuel Hynes terms our 'war in the head', our shared assumptions about what war is.<sup>14</sup>

It follows that we may need to adjust our notions of remembrance while we adjust our attitudes towards war. The de-centring of the experience of war and violence may make it less useful to apply the categories of memory and forgetting, which frequently assume that the story is determined by a top/down approach to political power configured in a national state. This is the landscape of Orwell's *1984*, which was a dystopia set in London during the Second World War, and of Camus' *The Plague*, set in Algiers in the same time period. Shifting our attention away from the hegemonic state or police apparatus to a broader social landscape may help reconfigure our understanding of subtler processes of the framing of debate through the construction of silence. This shift could also help us chart the life cycle of silence, in such a way as to show how different memory agents use different means to puncture the balloon of silence and put words in its place.

Attention to silence and silencing also helps us turn the tense of our discussion from the passive to the active. Elsewhere we have called for greater rigor in the use of the terms 'memory' and 'forgetting', such as to point to the person or group remembering or forgetting whenever possible.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the terms 'collective memory' and 'national memory' are parts of everyday speech, and as such lose any concrete meaning

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The soldiers' tale* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and remembrance in the twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 1.