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Wake—to be or to remain awake  
Wake—to hold a vigil over the body of someone who has died  
Wake—to come back, or bring somebody back to a conscious state after sleeping  
Wake—to become alert and active or make somebody alert and active after being inactive, in a daydream or preoccupation  
Wake—the rack left in water by a vessel or any other body moving through it  
Wake—a position behind somebody or something that is moving ahead fast; the aftermath or after-effects of a dramatic event or powerful thing: quiet, silent  
Wake—to make somebody aware of something  
Wake—a stream of turbulence in the air left by an aircraft or land vehicle passing through it
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Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound

Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra

Reflections on silence

This book provides a series of reflections on the paradoxes and transformative possibilities of silence. Our title, *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, evokes the paradoxical relationship between sound and silence that is obscured when we assume an equation between voice and agency, and its inverse equation—silence and oppression. Our impulse is to challenge the binaristic relationship that has been assigned since antiquity to voice vis-à-vis silence. We seek to break with the Western tradition, reiterated from Aristotle to Audre Lorde, that locates silence as a site of reform and privileges voice as the ultimate goal of and means to achieve empowerment. If one of the major interventions we have inherited from Lorde (1984b) is that the “master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110), our work seeks out new tools of speaking, listening, and wading into the fullness of silence.

The articulation between silence and powerlessness is almost common sense within Western culture, an assumption that is reified across literary, progressive academic, and activist contexts. Its equation presumes a political imperative: for an individual or group who is silenced to gain power, they must activate voice in order to resist and transform the conditions of their oppression. Sometimes an intermediary (a more powerful representative) can “speak for” the subaltern or marginalized classes.1 The lacuna within this formulation is that the burden of social change is placed upon those least empowered to intervene in the conditions of their oppression. The figure of the subaltern gaining voice captures the political imaginary, shifting the focus away from the labor that might be demanded of those in positions of power to learn to listen.
to subaltern inscriptions—those modes of expression that are often interpreted as “silence.” This anthology interrupts this dynamic, providing a new imaginary for how the spaces between silence and voice might be traversed. It opens up space between transnational feminist work on subalternity and US third world feminist calls for women of color to come to voice. As such it functions as a bridge piece, joining women of color and their white allies—and various groups who are unevenly empowered—at the edges of sound.

Silence, Feminism, Power builds on the ironic relationship between voice, silence, and power to reveal the complexities that lie within these often-obscured interconnections. Authors engage questions like: What forms of resistance and healing does silence make possible? What nuances, strategic forms of engagement and ways of navigating or resisting power are made possible through silence? What alliances might be enabled as we learn to read silences? Under what conditions is it productive to move between voice and silence? How might the binaristic construction of voice and silence be reconfigured and with what political effects? What is silence?

Silence, Feminism, Power examines silence as a space of possibility. The authors argue that in entering the stillness of silence we might communicate deeply at the edges of sound. Silence allows us the space to breathe. It allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in reaction to what is said. Standing in silence allows for that breath, for that reflection that can create a space of great healing. We theorize silence as a space of fluidity, non-linearity, and as a sacred, internal space that provides a refuge—especially for nondominant peoples. Silence is a process that allows one to go within before one has to speak or act. This is crucial if our work as activists, writers, and creative artists is to come from a grounded place that connects the spiritual with the political.

In what follows we detail the various literature on silence and voice. We begin with a discussion of disciplinary and interdisciplinary treatments of silence, exploring the ways in which disciplinarity can enable, but also constrain, how silence is theorized. Next, we provide a more detailed account of feminist treatments of silence. Finally, we trace a genealogy of feminist treatments of silence as a political and intellectual point of departure for this volume.

Disciplinary and interdisciplinary treatments of silence

The authors featured here draw on a host of academic disciplines and interdisciplinary fields with a history of theorizing silence, primarily
rhetoric and communication studies, postcolonial studies, anthropology, and critical pedagogy. This chapter traces a body of related research to excavate a genealogy of silence as it has emerged as an object of intellectual inquiry. It focuses primarily on critical and feminist perspectives, especially those critics and theorists who have examined the relationships between silence, voice, and power. We note the disciplinary frames in which silence has emerged and consider what’s gained and lost through previous discipline-based investigations of silence. We also consider the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to silences, like the one we employ in this volume.

While the literature on silence crosses various fields that are beyond the scope of the project at hand, we have limited our review of the literature to the disciplines from which the scholars and writers included here draw their insights and expertise. Silence, for instance, has a long tradition that is associated with Buddhist meditative practices. Buddhist practitioner Thich Nhat Hanh explains that silence is not an external but an internal state that is achieved through mindful living: “Silence comes from our heart and not from the absence of talk” (2009, p. 76). Silence has also been associated with yoga as a means to achieve deep reflection and meditation. Yogic practitioner Steven Cope describes the ways in which his energy shifts when he engages in “restraint” from speaking: “My energy is clear. It’s powerful. It’s focused, and quiet all at the same time” (Cope, 2006, p. 163). While many of our authors are inspired by the teachings of Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh and Pema Chodron and engage in yogic practices, the expansive scholarship that surrounds their texts is beyond the scope of this book.

Rhetoric and communication studies

The relationship between silence and voice has emerged as an important topic of investigation in the fields of rhetoric and communication studies. Heavily influenced by Western understandings of communication practices, voice has traditionally been elevated as a privileged object of study within these fields (Tannen and Saville-Troike, 1985). Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike challenge traditional treatments of silence and voice, drawing on close readings of conversations to render silence as a “valid object of investigation, bounded by stretches of verbal material which provide boundary marking for its identification” (1985, p. 4). Their work seeks to provide a fuller description of communication processes that are erased through the assumption that silence is absence. In her essay “Silence: Anything But,” Tannen (1985) employs
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conversational analysis to demarcate the distinction between a conversational pause and a silence. She finds that a pause tips into a silence when it is “too long,” thus while silence “communicates” for Tannen, it remains negatively valenced within her analysis.

Feminist communication studies scholars such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989), Lana F. Rakow and Laura A. Wackwitz (2005), and Karen and Sonja Foss (1991) have undertaken important work to uncover women’s silences and the patriarchal conditions that produce them, as well as the vital ways in which women leverage voice to resist silence. Campbell (1989) has worked over the long trajectory of her career to recover women’s rhetoric by tracing the history of early women’s rights movement that focused primarily on women’s suffrage. While vital to the field of feminist rhetoric, her work remains bound within a frame that valorizes voice against a backdrop of silence, in which silence is equated with oppression. The work of Rakow and Wackwitz is compelled by this tradition as well, exploring the ways in which “women are either denied access to communication forms…or admitted to them only to have their ideas dismissed out of hand as deviant or irrelevant.” Silence for Rakow and Wackwitz is a devastating condition of women’s lives to be overcome, for “to have voice is to possess both the opportunity to speak and the respect to be heard” (2005, p. 9). Karen A. Foss and Sonja K. Foss (1991) expand the archive of what constitutes women’s voices, exploring the various ways in which women’s lives and their art becomes acts of “speaking.” Centering women as communicators, their project explores the “eloquence” of women’s lives in diverse forms of expression: gardening, graffiti, jewelry design, motherhood, needlework, painting, quilting, photography, and rituals.

Other communication studies scholars have begun to question the equation of silence with absence. Robin Clair and Kris Acheson, whose current work on silences is featured in this volume (chapters 6 and 14), have been at the forefront of this intervention, pushing the field to rethink the assumption that silence is somehow opposed to and distinct from communication. In her important book Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities (1998), Clair argues that silence is both an aesthetic and a political practice that can be traced to the origins of language. She believes that “exploring silence as a fundamental part of communication, culture and conflict may illuminate the complex nature of social relations” (1998, p. 4). Her work looks at the ways in which silence is structured into language and, by extension, “interests, issues, and identities of marginalized people,” who are “silenced and how those silenced
voices can be heard” (Clair, 2012). Drawing on a rich archive of philosophical treatments of silences within communication, she excavates the often-overlooked silences that constitute language, institutions, and society. Her feminist treatment of silences situates silencing practices as embedded in and cross-cut by relations of power. In “Silence is a Gesture: Rethinking the Nature of Communicative Silences” (2008), Acheson argues that silence and speech are often defined as binaristically opposed to one another, obscuring the multiple meanings of silence as a form of human expression. Following the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty, Kris Acheson suggests that silence is “as like speech as it is different,” thus is a “gesture,” enacted by bodies in a physical world. This means, for Acheson, that silence is not secondary to expressed thought but rather is essential to embodied life.

Rhetoric and communication studies scholars have also focused on the relationship between silence, speaking, and listening. Krista Ratcliffe’s (2006) *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* argues that listening is under-examined in both pedagogy and communication theory, while Cheryl Glenn (2004) explores silence as a subordinated term within the rhetorical canon. Ratcliffe (2006) affirms the notion in her observation that “Listening is rarely theorized or taught” (2006, p. 18). She theorizes rhetorical listening as an interpretive invention, and as a code of cross-cultural conduct, as she points out the gendered and raced dimensions of listening, which is a function of power differentials in society, proposing *rhetorical listening* as a practice to bridge these gaps. Glenns’ project argues that silence is a “rhetorical art” that has been ignored in the rhetorical tradition due to the elevation of speech as a “gift of the gods” in ancient times (2004, p. 3). Alternately, she proposes that silence “reveals speech,” even as it “enacts its own sometimes complementary rhetoric” (2004, p. 3). *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* is an explicitly feminist project that underscores the importance of choice in assessing the quality of silence. Glenn’s opening lines signal the feminist impulse that drives the project as she observes the deeply gendered nature of silence that brought her to the writing: in her efforts to write women into the field of rhetoric, she observes “pockets of female rhetorical activity that punctuated those long stretches of silence” (2004, p. 1).

The work on silence in rhetoric and communication studies has been influenced by philosophical treatments of silence in communication. Clair credits Max Picard as being the first Western philosopher to offer “a full treatment of silence that asserts that speech and silence exist simultaneously” (1998, p. 25). Picard personifies silence, characterizing it as
“always present” during human communication: “Silence is listening. That is what gives breath to a conversation” (1948, p. 25). Silence has a rhetorical force in Picard’s writing, a quasi-spiritual essence that “comes from afar” to “give words a new fullness” (1948, p. 25). While these works productively bring silence more fully into focus by challenging the epistemological conditions of its annihilation, they remain bound to Western and modernist assumptions about completeness of understanding. Our volume addresses this gap, providing perspectives on silence from a host of diverse positionalities and inter/disciplinary perspectives. As silences are embedded and performed in specific contexts, silence emerges in multiple manifestations in relation to voice and power.

Anthropology
Silences have also been taken up—as a marker or manifestation of cultural difference and as a category deployed to challenge power relations—in the field of anthropology. Keith Basso’s early work on silence within Western Apache culture (1970) was foundational to the theorizing of silence, voice, and culture in the field of anthropology and beyond. His linguistic studies explored the six conditions under which the Western Apache deployed silence: meeting strangers, early courting, children returning home after a long absence, encountering an angry person, and dealing with people in mourning or participants in healing ceremonies. His findings suggest that the Western Apache use silence in situations in which the social status of participants is ambiguous, unsettling expectations for social roles and thus deploying silence to respectfully allow for uncertainty to play out. Following Basso’s early mapping of Native American silences, Lawrence Gross has conducted a series of studies on the relationship between Anishinaabe uses of silence, open-mindedness, and senses of humor. “I see silence and humor as sharing an attitude of open-mindedness that allows the individual to experience the world as it is and to appreciate the world for what it is, complete with all the contradictions and incongruities that lead to humor," he writes (2007, p. 70). He underscores the importance of silence to what he calls the “comic mind”: “the ability to observe the world keenly” (2007, p. 70). Gross is interested in the ways in which silence generates an “openness” of perception among Native Americans, which engenders the capacity to see oneself as flawed and stricken with contradictions—as fragmented, imperfect subjects who can laugh at these incongruities.

Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb’s edited volume titled Silence: The Currency of Power argues that studying silence is central to understanding the
more elusive aspects of power and identity within anthropological contexts as it enables us to “trust that our categories of experience are discrete, as opposed to arbitrary bindings of fluidity” (Achino-Loeb, 2005, p. 36). Because she situates practices of silence “at the heart of the very experience of any identity as a discrete entity,” (p. 3) silence becomes an active and dynamic host of practices that anthropologists might excavate to more deeply understand identity formation. Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989) calls attention to the “suspension of language” as the precondition to knowing the other, a paradoxical voyage through which one arrives only to realize that she has never taken a step. As she poetically writes, “Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored” (1990, p. 373). Silence emerges as a threshold between presence and absence, and as intimately tied to agency and resistance. Kamala Visweswaran signals the importance of learning to read silences in ethnographic settings to explore the resistive strategies through which activist women cultivate their identities, such as utilizing strategic omissions that rewrite the ‘script’ of the ethnographic encounter. She observes that “‘Lies, secrets, and silence’ are frequently strategies of resistance. Yet the ethnographer’s task is often to break such resistance” (1994, p. 60). Visweswaran draws on an ethnographic encounter with a woman she calls “M” to unpack multiple and contradictory uses of silence as resistance. Through various evasions of speech and detours into silence, M refuses to be subjected to the author’s anthropological inquiry. Reading M’s silences, Visweswaran underscores the importance of how anthropologists construct meaning around silences and how they might be held accountable to subjects’ strategic uses of silence. “For the story I give you is not exactly about this woman,” she says. “…It is rather more about how I negotiate and understand the construction of a silence, how I seek to be accountable to it” (1994, p. 60).

Visweswaran’s theatrical reading of M’s silences makes her reader aware of the responsibility and accountability that we must undertake when we encounter silence in an/other, and the ways in which we become implicated in the silences of others. Every act of inscription, or assertion of voice, is simultaneously an act of omission. Each time we speak, something is said and so much more is not said. Visweswaran calls these moments “situational knowledges” in the ethnographic contexts. She writes that such “situated accounts by definition exclude some analytic elements from their purview while focusing intensely on others,” concluding that “Acts of omission are as important to read as acts of commission in constructing the analysis” (1994, p. 48). This argument
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complicates contexts in which feminists of privilege seek to break previous speaking patterns. While it is productive, for instance, for white antiracist allies to name the specificities of white privilege, it is also useful to recognize that whiteness continually speaks over and through silence. If every act of commission is contingent upon countless omissions, then voice functions through silence. This means that we can and should analyze uses of silence within the context of who is speaking, what is being said, and—especially our concern here—what is not being said within each oration. These texts prompt us to question prevailing cultural norms around interpretations of silences.

Postcolonial studies

Silence, Feminism, Power builds on the work of the Subaltern Studies Group (Guha, 1997) to pose processes of subalternity as relational—not as a condition residing within an individual or group but rather as a relational dynamic that gets played out among differently located social actors (Carrillo Rowe, 2008). Such a view places responsibility—not only for silencing processes but also for decoding or reading silences—on those who hold power and have access to public voice. Thus we take seriously the challenge put forth by Gayatri Spivak (1998) and others (e.g. Glenn, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2006) that the work of the academic and political left is to learn to listen to and decode subaltern inscriptions. In her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak challenges critical theorists Michel Foucault and Felix Delueze, who seek to transparently represent subaltern groups. In their efforts to liberate them, Spivak argues, academic left scholars may unwittingly end up reinscribing subaltern silences, while gaining value as Western scholars on the backs of the oppressed. She concludes the essay with a reading of the suicide of a Bengali woman, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri. The dominant reading of the suicide would suggest that Bhaduri took her life as an “outcome of illegitimate passion” (1998, p. 103). So Bhaduri, aware of this diagnosis, “had waited for the onset of menstruation,” potentially rewriting the “social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way” (1998, p. 103). In taking the “immense trouble to displace (not merely deny) the physiological inscription of her body,” Bhaduri challenges its “imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male” (1998, p. 104). While her act was read as a “case of delirium rather than sanity,” it challenges the male ownership of her body, as well as the edict that the widow should wait until she is “clean” (no longer menstruating) before she asserts her “right to immolate herself” (1998, p. 104). Spivak’s reading of Bhaduri’s silent inscription is as inspiring as it is politically astute. She interprets the gesture through a close reading of the various social cues through
which the act of desperation might be reread as an act of resistance. In this way, the subaltern speaks, if those in positions of privilege could learn to listen—and learn to decode the silences that inscribe resistive meanings to potentially rewrite the social text.

Placing silence and voice, speaker and listener, in relation to one another shifts the responsibility for silencing processes to those who hold power. For instance, King-Kok Cheung’s (1993) insightful literary analysis of Asian American women writers decenters the logocentric tendency to privilege voice over silence. She thus invites her readers to become literate in the multiple tongues through which Asian (American) women speak. Her work aims to “explode” the stereotype of passive Asian (American) women, inviting us to become fluent in the strategic and culturally specific uses of silence through which alternative historiographies of Asian America might be decoded. Cheung and others teach us that as cultural workers we must become fluent in reading what is not said, or what is actively omitted, to unravel the imperative to domination embedded within any efforts to represent or know “others.”

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is another site of emerging theories that unearth the binary between silence and voice, centering strategies of silence within the classroom. Alexandra Fidyk, whose work is featured in our volume (Chapter 9), has argued for the centrality of uses of silence in the classroom and in creative, poetic, and scholarly writing. Her (2011) work resituates “knowing and not-knowing” within an alternate epistemic framework: one that privileges contemplative and imaginative ways of knowing in the classroom. Fidyk and others making this move draw upon the work of Parker Palmer, one of the founding critical scholars of engaging contemplative practices in the classroom. In The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, Palmer unpacks the “simple premise: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (1998, p. 10). To do so entails making the teacher “available and vulnerable in the service of learning” (11), a “presence” enabled through practices of mindfulness, such as silence. Working in this tradition, Mary O’Reilly (1984) approaches teaching as a space-clearing activity in a departure from the compulsion to constantly fill the classroom with our voices. She argues that silence creates the classroom as an expansive space in which students can explore their own relationships with the course materials. Tobin Hart (2011) speaks of the deeper nuances of knowing that might be accessed through silence, “Silence also provides access to the streaming depths.” He notes that poetry, and Sufi poetry like Jalaluddin Rumi’s,
Still the Silence has recognized the ways in which in stillness and in breath we are able to access a deeper place and become a conduit for the information we find there. Rumi (1995) writes:

There is a way between voice and presence where information flows. In disciplined silence it opens. With wandering talk it closes. (p. 109)

What are the depths of knowing and wisdom we might be able to access through a pedagogy that includes silence as an integral part of its practice?

Other critical pedagogy scholars have situated uses of silence in the classroom in relation to questions of power, identity, and culture. Barbara J. Boseker and Sandra L. Gordon (1983) describe the importance of inverting the traditional frame of indigenous education in the USA. Whereas the traditional model underscores what Native American people need to know “in order to survive in today’s world,” Boseker and Gordon argue that educators have much to learn from Native American people: cooperation over competition, collectivity over individualism, consensus over majority rule, the importance of privately attending to the body, and uses of silence. They note that the Native American students and community members with whom they have worked demonstrated a “tolerance for silence” that allows for a “wait-time” following a question, which enables students to engage in “speculative thinking” as opposed to rote memorization. Third world feminist scholar Sherene Razack (1998) interrogates her own complicity with the story-telling imperative within contemporary critical pedagogy when a white woman seeks to draw a story from a black woman, and all the people of color in the room feel that it is not a “safe space.” Razack gestures toward the necessity of respecting the “right to silence” but acknowledges that, as an educator, she finds the “idea of silence extremely unsettling” (1998, p. 53). As these examples demonstrate, critical pedagogy scholars excavate their own teaching practices to help students and readers come to a fuller understanding of the importance of silences in the classroom.

A genealogy of feminist treatments of silence

Early second-wave feminist movement writers Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen have passionately attended to the politics of women’s writing. Their narratives, poetry, and theorizing reveal the often-observed
politics of labor, marginality, and privilege entailed in the production of knowledge—in writing itself. Attending to the gendered and classed restrictions imposed on (white) women writers—on their time, on their labor, on their bodies, on the male reception of their words—Rich and Olsen analyze the texts of their own lives to render palpable the struggle involved in “coming to voice” as women. Rich’s work outlines a complex relationship between voice, gender, and silence. Several of her essays address the material conditions that produce women’s silences: a lack of time, privacy, and space; the compulsion to serve men and care for children; the exclusion of women from higher education; and men’s domination of public spheres of knowledge production. Her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979) traces the struggles of women—particularly feminists of the second-wave historical context in which she writes—to speak and be heard. Rich’s tone exudes a sense of urgency as she maps out the stakes for “re-visioning”: it is the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (1979, p. 35). Re-visioning becomes possible as women break the isolation of domestic life to find each other through writing and speaking. Rich stresses that re-visioning is “an act of survival” for women. “In a world where language and naming are power,” she writes, “silence is oppression, is violence” (1979, p. 204). Here Rich underscores in stark terms the equation of silence with oppression. Yet elsewhere, especially in her poetry, silence takes on a surprisingly rich and resistive form:

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed
the blueprint of a life
It is a presence
it has a history a form
Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence. (1978, p. 5)

Here silence is expressed as agentive: at once surreptitiously resistive (a plan rigorously executed) and an historical presence. Rich’s work, then, points to the complexities and contradictions of silence as both a form of violence that must be rigorously rejected and a form of resistance in and of itself.

Rich’s contemporary, Olsen, was one of the first feminist writers to highlight the relationship between silence and power. Her work sought to render visible the erasure of countless, overlooked creative processes
undertaken by those marginalized by gender, race, and class. Like Rich, Olsen underscores the conditions of women's silences in the male-dominated public sphere. “Literary history and the present are dark with silences,” she writes. “Some the silences for years by our acknowledged greats; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after one work appears; some the never coming to book form at all” (1978, p. 6). Also like Rich, Olsen distinguishes between different forms and valences of silence: some are “natural silences” that allow “necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation,” while others are “unnatural”—the “thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot” (1978, p. 6). Elaine Hedge and Shelly Fisher Fishkin trace a compelling genealogy of Olsen’s work, arguing for its continued relevance through their collection. Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism investigates the “simultaneously paradigmatic and problematic” components of Olsen’s work.

While early (white) feminist writers like Rich and Olsen leveraged their writing and organizing to break silences, their efforts did not necessarily empower all women to speak. Indeed, feminists of color often found white women’s efforts to speak for “women” served to reinscribe the very silences that white feminists sought to remedy. The tradition of US third world feminism is forged within a (post)civil-rights context in which women of color challenged oppressions imposed on them by calling for visibility and voice in various cultural and political contexts. Feminists of color writing in the 1970s and 1980s theorized the importance of accounting for the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Nonetheless, feminists of color did not challenge the basic premise of the political imperative to break silences. From Audre Lorde (1984a) (“your silence will not protect you”) to Cherríe Moraga (1981/1983) (“Silence is like starvation”), radical feminists of color write about the importance of coming to voice, of overcoming their silences, in order to liberate themselves and others.

Many US feminists of color have palpably interrogated the embodied conditions of their own silences. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her open letter to third world women, encourages women of color writers to write and to speak their truths. “The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy,” she charges. “It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as ‘other’ – the dark, the feminine. Didn’t we start writing to reconcile this other within us?” (Anzaldúa, 1981/1983, p. 169). Her call to expression through writing evokes the importance of finding voice and therefore finding “self” in previously silenced lives. Feminist writers of color have struggled to
break the silences constituted by multiple and intersecting displace-
ments: to speak to the shame of poverty, racism, homophobia, and
gender subordination in their own lives and in the cultural landscapes
in which they are embedded. In this vein, bell hooks echoes Anzaldúa’s
call in *Talking Back* (1989) through her vivid critique, which exposes the
lack of cultural spaces for African American women to be heard.

Looking back at this important work, we see a struggle in these
feminist interventions to break free from a purely oppositional stance
in which silence emerges as an unexamined force of oppression that
must be thrown off. We see this dynamic in the generative exchange
between critical race feminist scholars Margaret Montoya and Dorothy
Roberts on the ambiguous nature of women of color silences in the
courtroom and the classroom. Montoya’s treatment of silence in the
courtroom attends to the difficulties of distinguishing between silence
that is repressive and silence that is resistive. On the one hand, Montoya
finds that Latin@ silences reinscribe dominant power relations. For
instance, during jury selection processes, silences were misread within
the white courtroom, resulting in Latin@ jurors being dismissed and,
by extension, Latin@ defendants losing the right to be judged by their
peers. Yet Montoya is reticent about dismissing the resistive possibili-
ties of silence out of hand. She concludes her essay by contemplating
her own silence in response to an incident of hate speech on her cam-
pus. While she wrote a letter condemning the act, she never sent the
letter. She seems reluctant to settle the score for her readers, yet she
ends her story by noting: “It is hard to know what gives me greater
power—holding silence or breaking silence […] Finally I have decided
that this incident silenced me, that my silence has not been volitional.
Perhaps that was its purpose” (2000, p. 324). While Montoya ultimately
falls in line with a traditional feminist treatment of silence, reasserting
the equation between silence and oppression, her meditations and crit-
ical analyses reveal a host of resistive moments in her own and others’
silences. She seems to relish the possibility that her silence might be
the stance that “gives [her] the greatest power.” This moment of pos-
sibility is one we seek to tease out more fully in this volume, as well
as the vexed movements between silence and voice we see at work in
her piece. Dorothy Roberts’ reading of Montoya’s essay seeks to parse
out the conditions under which silences might be oppressive or liber-
at ing. She highlights an important point, noting that the task at hand
is not ultimately to figure out the theoretical distinction between sub-
jugation and resistance but “to listen to those who have been silenced
so that we might learn how to work toward a more just society” (2000,
p. 347). Yet Roberts ultimately comes down firmly on the side of the argument that people of color—students in particular—need to break silences: “Our goal for these students of color should be to help them speak up more rather than to encourage them to remain silent” (Roberts, p. 354). Like Montoya, she opens up alternative spaces for readers to decode the silences of people of color, yet she reverts to the logic that we seek to disrupt in this volume: that the burden of speech should fall on those most marginalized. While we affirm the importance of breaking silences, we also want to underscore an alternative path: that those in positions of privilege learn to read and respect the silences of marginalized people. Montoya and Roberts’ essays both perform this critical reading practice—they demand that dominant readers decode the silences of people of color in the courtroom and the classroom—even if their arguments ultimately undercut this political possibility.

Taking the impulse to liberate silences a step further, Veena Das’ (1997) article, which interrogates the feminist imperative to “break silences,” underscores the violence embedded in the relationship between language and pain within imperial contexts. Writing in a philosophical tradition, Gemma Fiumara’s work (1990) on a “listening silence” has also informed our conceptualization of how silence works. She critiques Western philosophies for privileging expressive language, while reducing everything else that surrounds language to a void. Drawing on the insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others, she argues for us to develop an authentic listening to silence.

Interrogating the Western compulsion to speak entails that we learn to read silences. Joanna Kadi is a working-class Arab Canadian radical queer woman. The refrain of her piece, “Speaking (About) Silence,” is: “If there is a hesitation with which I speak, it is because I am surrounded by spaces filled with my silences. If you want to hear me, listen to my silences as well as my words” (2002, p. 541). Like the spaces between footfalls, or the breath within the breath, there is a deep and abiding kind of knowledge that arises from the spaces between words, from the spaces between silences. The spaces filled with silences that surround Kadi are those of marginality, of non-belonging. She argues that spaces speak to us, or are spoken by us, telling us who belongs and who does not. “If you feel comfortable and speak easily, it’s because those spaces have been set up for and by your own particular group of people” (2002, p. 541). The construction of these spaces is a collective process, then, that takes place through communication practices through which “comfort” is produced through a set of mutually constitutive silences.
and orations. The “spaces filled with silences” might productively be understood, then, as the silences not of the marginalized but of the privileged—or better, as constitutive of both a process of marginalizing and of privileging.

Mab Segrest writes of the psyche and the soul of the oppressor as functioning through a deep investment in individuality, a sense that we are born to domination, isolation, and separation. Her theory of the souls of white folks offers a chilling account of the Western compulsion to speak. The will to voice and imperative to fill space with words are animated both by a fear of invisibility and a fear of visibility in more full form. To tell the story of hegemony, to tell stories of belonging, requires voice. But the “community of the lie”6 also functions through a set of strategic omissions, continually (re)staged within our own and our students’ communication practices (2002, p. 248). We inherit this story and keep it alive through our spoken silences. Gloria Akasha Hull, in her study of black feminist spirituality, Soul Talk, recognizes the relationship between creativity, inspiration, stillness, and silence. Quoting the poet Carolyn Forché (“The language of God is silence”), she equates the “absolutely stunning and sacred sound of silence” with “the space of the all-creative” (Hull, 2001, p. 140).

 Silence, Feminism, Power honors the multiplicity of views and struggles of our feminist forerunners; it is inspired by the politics and poetics of their texts. However, we take third world feminist critiques of white women’s struggles, which underscore the power imbalances among differently located women, as a point of departure for our text. Silence, Feminism, Power works within and against US third world feminist traditions. We recognize that it is the voices and activism of feminists of color from the 1970s and 1980s that have created the space for our explorations today. Without their work to make visible the lives and stories of women of color, racial politics would have continued to oppressively silence and invisibilize us. Just as many feminists of color in this particular historical moment are complicating and further nuancing their arguments about race, identity, and the politics of location, we hope to build on their insights around voice by grappling with notions of silence within feminist praxis. The authors assembled in Silence, Feminism, Power are inspired by the political fire of US women of color feminism, but we seek to recuperate the abjection of silence from within these texts. Rather, we consider how feminists (white and of color) deploy, rewrite, and move through silences in multiple and often productive ways. Thus silence is inscribed through diverse tones and textures to reveal how women can be multiply positioned vis-à-vis silence, not always already
subjected by it. Some 30 years later, we stand on the shoulders of these women, empowered by the force of their words of fire to carry their political vision to another horizon. Here at the edges of sound we might cultivate a host of silent practices: we might dwell within the possibilities of silence; we might use our silences as a weapon; we might rest; we might meet one another; we might encounter our shadow and our light within its expansive embrace.

Origins and organization of Silence, Feminism, Power

Silence, Feminism, Power is an interdisciplinary edited collection from cultural critics on the paradoxes and possibilities of silence. The initial conversations that inspired this book originated at three conference panels in which the editors participated and which they helped to organize: the National Communication Association (2003), the National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference (2004), and the Western States Communication Association Conference (2005). The conversations these panels generated were invigorating. Audiences and panelists alike were eager to rethink and engage the possibilities of silence. Several authors featured in the book participated in those early conversations. We followed this enthusiasm for the topic by collecting work that engaged the silence/voice binary and imagined strategic possibilities for silence in a host of interdisciplinary and activist contexts. We have arranged the essays into the following parts:

• I: Transformative Silences: Intersectionality, Privilege, Alliances;
• II: Learning to Listen: Academia, Silence, Resistance;
• III: Recovering Silences: Community, Family, Intimacy;
• IV: Legacies of Silence: Memory, Healing, Power.

The authors in Part I: “Transformative Silences: Intersectionality, Privilege, Alliances,” explore alternate strategies through which we might organize and imagine feminist politics that push up against the voice = empowerment/silence = oppression binary. Exploring what Adrienne Rich calls “cartographies of silence,” the authors create new political maps through which to navigate political alliances across power lines. We open with Cricket Keating's essay, “Resistant Silences” (Chapter 2), which argues that in addition to not confusing silence with absence it is vital to distinguish between different forms of silence. Drawing on democratic social theory and transnational feminist theory, Keating maps distinctions between “enforced” silences and “engaged
Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra

and oppositional” silences: “silent refusal,” “silent witness,” and “deliberative silence.” Ann Russo’s contribution, “Between Speech and Silence: Reflections on Accountability” (Chapter 3), explores her experience in a host of feminist organizing contexts. This auto-critique excavates white women’s strategic “uses of silence, speech and privilege” for purposes of empowerment and domination. These insights are, in turn, extended and recast in queer and multiracial settings in Julia Johnson’s “Qwe’re Performances of Silence: Many Ways to Live ‘Out Loud’” (Chapter 4). She explores the possibilities and political stakes in “qwe’reing silence” to ask how silence can be used to contain and control resistance within lesbian and gay communities, as well as how multiracial alliances circulate through silences to disrupt white supremacy. In “Silence Speaks Volumes: Counter-Hegemonic Silences, Deafness, and Alliance Work” (Chapter 5), Rachel Levitt interrogates her hearing privilege in her alliances with members of the deaf community. She mobilizes silence in its political multiplicity “as resistance to hearing norms, an act of solidarity, a pedagogical tool, and a counter-hegemonic strategy.”

In Part II: “Learning to Listen: Academia, Silence, Resistance,” the authors explore the multiple roles that silence might play in knowledge production, progressive pedagogy, and campus activism—creating space for transformation within academia. In “Imposed Silence and the Story of the Warramunga Woman: Alternative Interpretations and Possibilities” (Chapter 6), Robin Clair traces a genealogy of scholarly representations of Warramunga women to reconsider the presumption that the women’s silences were necessarily imposed. Alternately, Clair argues, their silences have been “used, and at times abused, by scholars, for purposes of theoretical and ideological commentary.” Jeff Bile theorizes the role of silence in human communications with the extra-human world in “Silence and Voice in a More-than-Human World” (Chapter 7). The academy’s investment in logocentrism, he argues, deafens us to the sounds of nature and reinscribes the human in an anthropomorphic world. Sarah Amira de la Garza meditates on the uses of silence and the ethics of research she conducted in the Navajo nation. Her essay, “Inila: An Account of Opening to Sacred Knowing” (Chapter 8), reflects on her identity as a woman of indigenous descent and ethnographic researcher as she excavates the place of “Inila,” the Lakota word for silence, in indigenous solidarity and ethnographic research methods. Alexandra Fidyk theorizes what she calls a “pedagogy of presence” in her classroom and her writing (Chapter 9: “Attuned to Silence: A Pedagogy of Presence”), seeking to cultivate the active, generative, creative, and
meditative qualities of silence within the academic context. Extending the convergence between silence and “presence,” Cheryl Lossie’s essay, “Hear I Meet the Silence: The Wise Pedagogue” (Chapter 10), works to “hear” silence—to create a space to “meet the silence” within the chaos of the end of the semester. She utilizes critical pedagogical practices to bring out the voices of students to ensure that there is sufficient space for both students and professor to deeply hear themselves, each other, and the voices of those whose work they’ve studied. Analyzing the structural and historical force of their particular social locations, Gust Yep and Susan Shimanoff theorize the political potential of silence and solidarity in LGBTQ politics on the USA’s “Day of Silence” (Chapter 11: “The US Day of Silence: Sexualities, Silences and the Will to Unsay in the Age of Empire”).

Part III: “Recovering Silences: Community, Family, Intimacy” rethinks the assumption that recovery is equated with coming to voice in order to theorize the role of silence in processes of healing. It opens with Della Pollock’s “Keeping Quiet: Performing Pain” (Chapter 12) to theorize the relationship between pain, silence, and dignity. As with Keating’s essay, Pollock distinguishes between forms of silence, considering the importance of “tending silence” as a process that enables a relational approach to pain—one that extends beyond the individual body in pain. In “3210 S. Indiana: Silence and the Meanings of Home” (Chapter 13), Francesca Royster uses memoir to explore the silences of her ancestral home to intervene in the grand narratives of the Great Migration in Chicago. She reads the stories held in her growing-up home, where her mother was the silent center of the family, to cultivate a “theory in the flesh” of silence, memory, and black female respectability. Cultivating a critical poetic ethnographic methodology, Kris Acheson takes readers into the “home of addiction” in “Fences, Weapons, Gifts: Silences in the Context of Addiction” (Chapter 14). There she finds the unexpected silences that mark the speech of the “tongueless,” who name the edges of sound at the interface between addiction, intimacy, and recovery. Kimberlee Pérez’s essay “My Monster and My Muse: Re-Writing the Colonial Hangover” (Chapter 15) utilizes silence as a meditative methodology to theorize white heteropatriarchal temporality, producing an important political, cultural, and historical critique.

In Part IV: “Legacies of Silence: Memory, Healing, Power,” the authors stretch back into unspoken realms, reclaiming legacies and learning through embodied silences to reach a place of healing and power. In “The Silence in My Belly” (Chapter 16), Sheena Malhotra reads her own experience as a cancer survivor in conversation with Audre Lorde’s
Cancer Journals to theorize agency within silence and the paradox of needing silence and needing voice to create a space for healing. Bryant Alexander reads the silences surrounding his father’s passing to theorize intergenerational questions of genealogy and sexuality, masculinity, and blackness in “Standing in the Wake of My Father’s Silence (An Alternative Eulogy)” (Chapter 17). Next is Laila Farah’s essay, “Stitching Survival: Re-visioning Silence and Expression” (Chapter 18), in which she travels to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon to learn about the role of silence in women’s efforts to recover and “perform” a nation without territory. This final part (and the book) concludes with Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s “Sun Moon Silence” (Chapter 19), which draws on the sensual experience of her participation in sun moon dances to highlight the importance of silence in allowing dreams and visions to manifest. Her reflections reveal how holding sacred experiences, which would be lost through speaking, generates an expansive silence. Navigating between archive and repertoire, memory and healing, the essay points to an ontology that allows for uncertainty as part and parcel of spiritual design.

Notes

1. This move has been productively problematized by feminist and cultural critics, who point out that there is no transparent, innocent, or apolitical way to represent others (see Roof and Wiegman, 1995).
2. Deborah Tannen outlined the difference in listening and speech patterns between men and women in her 1991 bestseller You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, which created much debate and drew attention to different communication styles between men and women (Tannen, 1991).
3. Ratcliffe (2006) demonstrates that listening often has racial dimensions, in the sense that those in positions of lesser power are more inclined to listen than those in positions of greater power.
4. Hegde and Fishkin’s volume offers a textual analysis of “feminist critical treatments of the idea of ‘silence’ itself,” (1994, p. 6) examining the potentially empowering aspects of silence in feminist literary texts, as well as offering a discussion of silencing practices within the academy. While the volume opens up the space for examining silence as empowering, several essays that are highly evocative and important critical interventions nonetheless revert to the assumption that silence is oppressive.
5. Segrest writes in her piece “On Being White and Other Lies” of the “community of the lie” white folks inherit as a colonial legacy.

When the exploring party of Cabeza de Vaca lost three of its men in an accident, the survivors were amazed when the Indians who discovered them sat down among them and expressed a loud and earnest grief,
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feelings that the Spanish had not been able to muster for their own people. It is this failure to feel the communal bonds between humans, I think, and the punishment that undoubtedly came to those Europeans who did, that allowed the ‘community of the lie’ to grow so genocidally in the soil of the "new world". (2002, p. 248)

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