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SPECIAL SECTION

Silence as Presence

Affective Spaces of Silence and Care

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Abstract

‘Giving voice’ can be an empowering metaphor for the process of creating space for another’s perspective, allowing for their experience to be noted and attended to. Yet it is also a metaphor that relies on a particular form of articulation. Voice and narrative share many of the same strengths and limitations: for some, they are powerful tools of sense making and communication; but for others they can elude important forms of experience and fail to capture many of the more inchoate aspects of lived life in general. What happens in those moments when words fail, or are simply absent? In addressing this question via fieldwork in a community space in Osaka, I explore how silence can constitute an affective space of care. Shared silences are felt in their duration, the passing of time brings them about. In these contexts, silence is not merely an absence, but an index of presence.

Keywords

Silence, Voice, Care, Affect, Limits of Articulation.

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Part I - Voices

As Yamaguchi-san opened the glazed sliding door at the entrance to the community salon, tucked away in an old narrow townhouse and favoured by local older people, he was met by smiling faces and a chorus of greetings. ‘How have you been, Yamaguchi-san?’ ‘How is your grandson doing?’ Three men and six women were sitting around the two large wooden tables at the centre of the softly lit, welcoming space. ‘Have you been to the mountains?’ ‘Show us some photographs!’ ‘Take it easy, everyone,’ laughed one of the regular salon goers, gently taking charge. ‘He’s not even ordered a drink yet!’ Smiling quietly, Yamaguchi-san was whisked away by the older of two sisters who attended the salon regularly, and offered a chair and some hot tea, made by a volunteer on duty. Yamaguchi-san, a tall man in a smart beige tailored jacket, was a regular himself, dropping in at least once a week. Last week his daughter had been visiting with her son, and Yamaguchi-san had missed his usual Wednesday tea; now everyone wanted to hear the news. A man of few words, he took out a small stack of photos and briefly told the story of the journey with his family to a nearby mountain spa. Looking at the photos, the room was full of chatter and laughter, as it often was on busy evenings.

The lively and garrulous crowd in this particular downtown Osakan community centre[1] certainly did not need me, an anthropologist, to give them a voice or to speak on their behalf, as the anecdote above illustrates. This volunteer-run space was open to all, but mostly frequented by older people living in the area, the majority of whom were living independently or with their families, and were in relatively good health. Exchanging stories was an important way of crafting communities of care among the older salon-goers, mostly aged in their late sixties to eighties, with several nonagenarians. In addition to being part of, or listening in on their everyday conversations, I was also able to interview many and collect their life stories. Sometimes they were somewhat reluctant and modestly claimed their lives were not ‘special’ enough for such an account, a consideration that was as unwarranted as it was untrue, as their life stories were invariably rich and beautifully conveyed. But the claims embodied their modesty and reticence.

Giving voice can be an empowering metaphor for the act of opening up a space for the perspective of another, thereby allowing for their experience to be noted and attended to. At the same time, it is a metaphor that relies, at least in part, on a particular form of articulation. In many ways, most of my interlocutors had a

[1] I conducted fieldwork in the South of Osaka in 2009–10 over a fourteen-month period. I have returned and spent time in the area and visited the salon on my following visits in 2013, 2019 and 2022. For an extensive account of the community and the salon see Kavedžija 2019a. The follow up visit in 2019 was focused on aging and work and offered me an opportunity to re-engage with many of the interlocutors for a period of four months.

multitude of voices, although perhaps not ones that were always widely heard.[2] The elderly in Japan, while overall treated with respect, are in some ways marginalised, especially if they have not occupied positions of influence in their workplace or local community—which most of my interlocutors had not. Many were women who had predominantly cared for their families for many years, and only later in life, with age, arrived at a position where they could—to an extent—do (or say) what they liked. In this sense, much could be said about 'voice' and the missing voices of the marginalised elderly.

In this article, however, I will engage with the claim that 'voice is a limiting concept of an inclusive methodological practice' proposed by the editors of this special section. Like narrative, voicing and voice find their strength in articulation—making a position clear. Not only are some people's experiences not best portrayed in terms of voice or articulation, but some aspects of forms of experience, more imagistic, inchoate or ambiguous, might not lend themselves to voicing. In this paper, I suggest attending to silences as intersubjective, affective spaces and move towards a preliminary exploration of methods in the silence. Rather than proposing novel methods (which is a project which we may well need to undertake), in the first instance I focus on ways of shifting attention in the fieldwork encounters might allow us to capture a broader range of silences, (including and) beyond the disruptive and harmful modes of silencing. With respect to my own ethnographic encounters, I argue that silence, in its duration, offers a shared space that has a capacity for care[3]: silence here is not simply an absence (of words, or sounds), but a presence.

Having and giving a voice

Anthropologists have long valorised the endeavour of 'giving people voice', especially when they see themselves as being in a position that enables or even requires them to represent perspectives and positions of those with whom they work. The health researchers Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2021), for example, coined the term 'academic ventriloquism' to convey this act of speaking for another, departing from the idea that that researcher 'throws their voice' for their participants. In contrast, François Cooren (2016), a communications specialist, suggests that our voice comes from elsewhere, insofar as the world speaks through us, and what we say is shaped by our experiences and attachments. That does not absolve us from responsibility, however, and we need

[2] That said, sometimes people found it difficult to reach out, '*koe o kakeru*', or literally 'cast a voice' (see also Nozawa 2015, 383). Many a time people are encouraged by the local government: if in doubt about your neighbours, do reach out, 'cast a voice'.

[3] Silences are often uncomfortable, pointed or even outright violent erasures, as has been often noted in anthropological literature. I aim to slightly redress the balance by suggesting that silence is capacious and has a potential for care. Care itself, of course, is also not always warm, kind or unambiguously positive (see Stevenson 2014, Ticktin 2011; also Authors' own discussion in (2022).

to examine and re-examine the status and the provenance of those regurgitations, as it were, by remaining reflexive and attentive, by ‘listening to the situation’ (Cooren 2016, 28). In this sense, the researcher could be seen as a puppet, or vessel. One powerful corollary of such considerations of voice and ‘voicing’ is the attention paid to listening (see also Couldry 2009, and Reid 2020)—which no doubt serves a key purpose in anthropology, and encompasses attention to voices and silences alike, as I will show.

Giving a voice, or having voice, may be somewhat less salient in some contexts than others—in some situations in Japan, for instance, voicing one’s own opinion or position forthrightly is generally seen as undesirable. The resistance to stating explicitly one’s own position or one’s own emotional states might be in tension with the value of *omoiyari*, which refers to noting and addressing the needs or feelings of another person, without the need for these to be expressed explicitly (Travis 1998, 55). According to Katherine Travis (1998, 56), omoiyari entails active and ‘intuitive’ recognition of the feelings of another person and doing something appropriate, rather than empathy as a form of understanding or attunement. ‘Intuitive’ here refers to an understanding that does not require explicit articulation of the feelings or the position by another, allowing these actions to take place without saying too many words.

What makes explorations of voice particularly challenging is the term’s dual meaning as both a sonic, embodied phenomenon and as a metaphor of agency or personhood. (Weidman 2014, 38). The material and embodied qualities of voice are extremely important, not least to those who once had but then lost them. Some of my interlocutors were concerned about the weakening of their vocal cords, and one had had a surgery that left him unable to vocalise for the period of his recovery. However, while some of the other contributions in this issue speak more directly to sonic and embodied voices (e.g., Jones-McVey and Woolner), I will attend to articulation in a broader sense, and hence lean more towards the metaphorical aspects of voice and its intersections with subjectivity and agency. Voice is, no doubt, a powerful metaphor, with consequences for participation in public and political spaces (see the introduction to this issue). At the same time, the metaphorical usage implies particular kinds of facilities for articulation, or the desirability of articulating in a particular way. Certain kinds of experience are considered ‘untellable’, especially trauma (Goldstein 2012). Comparable issues, presumably, arise with other such metaphors such as ‘visibility’—ensuring the visibility of certain groups can similarly be seen as important, while invisibility figures as a problem, or a methodological challenge.

To the extent that voice as a metaphor foregrounds verbal engagement and narrative ordering, it may exclude some. To take one example: the people with

dementia in the Dutch nursing home described by Roma Chatterji (2006). Building on Kitwood's (1998) influential work on 'culture of dementia care', Chatterji explores communication as an element of care in hospital wards, highlighting the increased importance of nonverbal and embodied communication, challenging representations of those with dementia 'in terms of a loss of voice and of the possibility of constituting a lifeworld' (Chatterji 2006, 218). Non-verbal and non-discursive experience lies at the core of caring practices in another nursing home in the Netherlands, described by Driessen, who highlights the importance of pleasurable experiences for understanding subjectivity, moving away from a focus on agency towards ways of participating in events through embodied experiences (Driessen 2018, 25), for instance by allowing themselves to enjoy the experience of soaking in a bath (Driessen 2018, 31). Regardless of the capacity to voice and articulate—a capacity that some residents of the nursing home possessed to a greater or lesser extent—caring encounters created opportunities of pleasurable experiences in which they could take part.

Another example comes from the work of McKearney and Zoanni (2018), who chart a new direction for the anthropology of mental disability. They cite work by Grandin, a writer and scholar with autism, who in her autobiography describes her thought process as follows: 'I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me . . . When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures. Language-based thinkers often find this phenomenon difficult to understand' (Grandin 2006, 1, cited in McKearney and Zoanni 2018, 9). Using examples such as this, they show how people with cognitive differences transform their mode of engagement with the world into terms understandable for the majority. The inner life described by Grandin diverges from the widespread idea of consciousness as an inner dialogue (e.g., Wiley 2016) and hence predominantly structured as a discourse. This widespread idea of a consciousness as an inner monologue, or dialogue relies on an assumption that rational subjectivity is linked to a notion of an inner voice, where voice characterises the self and communicates it, links it to the world (see Weidman 2014, 39). In other words, in such an understanding of self, the very capacity for articulation through voice is part and parcel of its existence. This predominantly verbal or discursive set of concepts and metaphors, therefore, has consequences—in implicitly excludes not only those people whose inner life does not conform to such understanding, but also shifts scholarly attention away from phenomena that are less easily articulated in words, whether they are more sensory or more inchoate.

In my work I have not only been concerned with those who are excluded from voicing, or whose life-worlds are perhaps not best captured by voice, narrative or other discursive figures, but also in aspects of experience that are not best conveyed with the use of narrative and, perhaps, voice. In other words, it is not just

that some people are not best served by the metaphor of voice, it might let us all down, foregrounding particular modes of coherent selfhood over less organised, inchoate or otherwise less articulable forms of experience, knowledge and self-awareness (see Kavedžija 2019b).

The limits of narrative (and voice)

Voice and narrative share some of the same strengths and limitations. They are powerful tools of sense making and communication, but elude some persons more than others, and may fail to capture the more inchoate aspects of lived life in general. In my work with older Japanese people, I observed the importance of narrative for making sense of one's life, to reflect, and a myriad ways in which stories were social (Kavedžija 2019a). However, the importance of narrative for a good life has been both emphasised and strongly criticised. For example, the philosopher Galen Strawson has argued against the notion that narrative is essential to a meaningful life. In his 2004 article 'Against Narrativity', he argues both against the descriptive claim that lives are, for the most part, experienced narratively; and that the 'ought to' be, in order to make sense of our lives. Strawson argues that some people do not perceive themselves as existing in a continuous past and present. This leads him to distinguish between 'diachronics' and 'episodics', based on types of experience, where diachronics naturally perceive themselves, their own 'self', as something that extends into the past and future, and episodics do not have this tendency to perceive themselves as something that was present in the distant past and will continue in the distant future (Strawson 2004, 430).

Strawson describes these two types as based in distinct forms of experience, challenging the idea that narrativisation is necessary as a precondition of living a happy life, claiming that 'the finest lives almost never entail this kind of self-telling' based on his own experience as an episodic (Strawson 2004, 437). He describes this type of experience as rarely composing their lives in narrative terms and suggests that narrativity can sometimes stand in the way of self-understanding, because the mechanisms of remembering alter the memory itself: 'The implication is plain; the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being' (Strawson 2004, 447).

While Strawson focused on episodics and diachronics as two distinct types, I have found it useful to think about immediate and narrative orientations as states, or ways of being in the world, that everyone can experience, even if some are slightly predisposed towards one or the other.

In addition to the narrative mode, my interlocutors were apt at employing another orientation, one that I refer to as immediate mode (Kavedžija 2016; 2019a). The immediate mode, in which attention is firmly held on what is at hand or in the surroundings, was an outcome of doing things properly, or *chanto suru*. If doing things properly is understood predominantly as attention to form in interactions with others, then it might appear rather constraining. However, it can also be understood as encompassing a broad range of everyday actions, including mundane chores like making a cup of tea or coffee, or even putting out the rubbish. In this sense, doing things properly requires attention to detail, to a specific order of actions, and to mastering them. These actions then hold our attention and are neither so simple as to be boring, nor too difficult and therefore frustrating. In this sense, doing things properly requires focus and anchors one in the moment. It therefore became apparent that both the narrative mode, or a way of being in the world (entailing the sociality of stories and the capacity to make meaning from events by ordering them), and the immediate mode had important roles to play in the efforts of my older interlocutors to live well.

In the context of a discussion of voice, the point that not everyone lives their lives narratively, or at least not all the time, is compelling. Not only does the metaphor of voice, like narrative, exclude some forms of subjectivity, it also does not serve well various forms of experience, particularly those that are less ordered, or inchoate.

The inchoate and the ineffable

Lone Grøn and Cheryl Mattingly introduce the idea of ‘imagistic inquiry’ to capture those aspects of experience that are not reducible to ‘common sense’ and which allow space for uncertainty and doubt (2020, 7–8). Interested in accounts of caring encounters, which were not always verbale, they suggest drawing on ‘images’ as a way of communicating experience that transcends the words alone, arguing that ‘the imagistic offers a potent mode of critique through presentations of perplexing particulars and singularities that resist reduction’ (Grøn and Mattingly 2020, 20).

Similarly, writing about the plant induced visions among his Amazonian Shuar interlocutors, Rubenstein (2012, 40) grapples with elements of their account that are vague or omitted. These visions are seen as a particularly important part of life by the Shuar, but their details are not discussed in anything but the most general terms. They are understood to be a helpful avenue to uncovering valuable insights, a palliative to fallible everyday perceptions, rather than merely hallucinogen-induced distortions of ‘reality’. How can anthropology do justice to the kinds of experience that are not spoken about, asks Rubenstein, who embarks on an ‘anthropology of the ineffable’: ‘is important for ethnographers to acknowledge that our informants may have experiences and their cultures may involve practices, or

dimensions . . . of experiences . . . , that resist representation' (Rubenstein 2012, 40), in the same way that some aspects of the plant-induced visions cannot be put into words, or cannot be voiced.

Taken together, these works direct our attention to those aspects of experience that elude articulation or resist representation. They do so by attending to visions, images or imagination. In other words, these approaches explore ways in which anthropologists can and must attend to those aspects of life that are difficult to put into words and therefore open up in the spaces at the 'limits of voice'. I would like to suggest that these efforts can be expanded by attending to silence.

Part II- Silence

It had rained that morning, but the rain was slowly dying down now. The narrow streets of this old downtown, merchant neighbourhood in the south of Osaka were darkened by the rain, and the plants in scattered variety of old ceramic pots and plastic tubs, lined along the front walls of the narrow houses seemed lush and refreshed. People on bicycles with umbrellas overtook me as I walked to the community salon nestled in the middle of a small old, covered shopping arcade.

Even though the shopping arcade was sheltered from the rain, everything seemed a little slower and stores emptier than usual. I picked up a key from the fishmonger, who handed it to me with a quiet nod as soon as he saw me. I unlocked the door, put the kettle on, checked that the foldable chairs were lined up around the two large wooden central tables, ready for any visitors—on a lively afternoon, a couple dozen elderly gathered here, chatting and laughing. Soon a regular, Tanaka-san, with the nickname 'sensei' or 'Professor', perhaps due to his passion for obscure kanji writing, appeared and took a seat at the table closer to the kitchen. He ordered a black coffee and, after a brief chat, read his newspaper. An older lady in a brown pullover came in, taking a seat at the other end of the large table where 'sensei' was sitting. They had a brief chat, exchanged greetings and as I was making the drinks, settled into a quiet morning. The lady stirred her tea using a small gold-plated spoon, then relaxed into her seat, sipping and savouring it. She seemed to be content just sitting, looking at the flower arrangement on the table, enjoying the warm drink. Not much happened in the following half an hour. The refrigerator made a soft humming noise. Some louder bangs came from the outside, as the shopkeepers opened the shutters of the neighbouring stores and arranged some of their goods at the front.

In the Japanese social context, silence may have communicative qualities (Lebra 1987). The case for the cultural specificity of silence should not be overstated, of course, as this is not unique to Japan and has even been decried as a cultural and linguistic myth (Chenhall, Kohn and Stevens 2021, 22; see also Miller 1982, 85).

Yet the various uses of silence are interesting: it can be seen as a sign of truthfulness and moral integrity (Miller 1982, 345; Lebra 2004, 185). And that is not to say that silence is always positive; it can be a form of punishment and disengagement for social faux pas; or on some occasions be seen as obscuring the truth, as in cases where social discretion is exercised to protect the members of one's group (Lebra 1987, 348). The meaning of silence[4] depends on the situation and the relationships among those involved. When seen to be indifferent, it is 'dead talk' (*shigo*; Lebra 2004, 104), but it can also be a space in which the needs of another are understood and met, without the requirement for exchange, as the earlier discussion of omoiyari indicates.

That morning, like many others, was a quiet one. The silence was not absolute, sounds reached us from all direction, but the otherwise vivacious and sociable space of the community salon certainly had some slower times. In general, silence is always relative, rather than a complete absence of physical sound (Chenhall, Kohn and Stevens 2021, 52). Slow or quiet times were certainly not always silent—a couple of laughing and chatting friends could fill the whole space with giggles. Silence acquires meaning in contrast to these times.

On a few occasions, the silences felt rather more uncomfortable, like one time when Yamada-san, who had an argument with two of the other regulars, came by the following afternoon, and the conversations dropped off. The ruffled feelings were quickly sensed by Kato-san, a ninety-year-old lady adept at reading social situations, or as Japanese say, 'reading the air' (*kuuki wo yomu*), and who asked a polite question about Yamada-san's neighbourhood shop, and the conversations gently started up again. While unpleasant, awkward, or pointed silences appear to be more noticeable, and possibly more often noted in the ethnographic accounts, silences can have not only many communicative functions, but also various affective flavours. In general, in the community salon silences were neither rare nor unwelcome. In most such cases people were content to share the time and space with others. Reading newspapers and warm cups of tea facilitated these companionable silences.

[4] Words for silence in Japanese include 沈黙 chinmoku, which refers both to silence and reticence, shizukasa, deriving from the widely used adjective shizuka (quiet), with connotations of stillness and calm, serenity; and 無音 muon or 'no sound'. Another interesting word that can be translated as silence, literally refers to absence of words - 無言 mugon (similar to 不言 fugen, or 不語 fugen, both implying absence of speech, or language). Silence as taciturnity or 'keeping silent' 黙り damari, also seems to imply 'without words', especially when used in relation to the wordless pantomime in kabuki theatre, performed in the dark, or in a compound like 黙とう mokutou, or silent prayer. This kind of silence is often used for memorialisation, for example, in honour of victims of a natural disaster, or war. It is not, however, the same as the 'minute of silence' associated with the Christian ritual (see Nakamichi 2012): 'Sometimes we can only withstand the cruel and sad reality in silence' (translation from German by the author). The positive evaluation of silence and the impossibility of verbalisation comes across in the phrase '言わぬが花' (iwanu ga hana) some things are better left unsaid, or, literally 'unspoken blossom'.

Affective spaces of silence

During my time in Osaka, I encountered several community welfare commissioners (*minseiin*), volunteers commissioned by the local government to serve as a bridge between community and the local welfare services. They often visit families in need, and particularly keep an eye on older people living on their own. Community workers would go and visit people in their homes. Sometimes, after some brief chatting, a silence fell. As the community worker was not able to help with cleaning or in other more substantive ways, sometimes they just stayed. Once the elders told them their problems, some of which they could support them with, others they could just hear them out on, they stayed a little longer, sitting together. The silence here is a form of care, or, to paraphrase Haraway (2016), 'sitting with the trouble'.

What goes on within the space of a silence? Sometimes tension, conflict, sometimes companionship and care. In her ethnography *Life in Debt*, Clara Han (2012) explores the interweaving and dynamic boundaries of speech and silence in the ongoing processes of 'living with dignity' among people with mental illness and drug dependencies, against a backdrop of debt and a volatile political situation. Silence shores up living with dignity, for instance, when people avoid explicitly and openly asking for money and help from their neighbours. Silence surrounds experienced acts of violence, for example to protect children and other family members, as such knowledge could hurt them (Han 2012, 88–90). In this sense, silence can be seen as a form of care.

Silent encounters do not necessarily preclude a shared experience or a shared affective space, but instead offer vessels for intersubjectivity[5]. In his discussion of intersubjectivity Duranti (2010, 3) reminds us that 'the absence of language does not mean that communication is not happening. People go in and out of social encounters, managing to maintain a joint focus of attention that entails some form of communication that does not rely on spoken or written language'.

The capacity of silence for harm, violence and as a response to trauma has been well documented (e.g., Ephratt 2008, Pillen 2016). The harmful silences can take form of silencing, or inability to communicate the unspeakable. In what follows, due to the nature of what I have found in the field, I am particularly interested in moments of shared silence and ways in which it offers opportunities for care. Silence spans time in a way that a cursory encounter or a quick visit might not permit—these might require vivacious sociality, a sense that a brief time has been well used, filled up.

[5] Similar experience has been described by Pagis (2010) in an article on meditators.

Sharing time in silence

We gathered at the front of the 'Lifework' NPO[6] door early, hoping to beat the impending heat of the early Osakan summer. Located south of Namba, in a neighbourhood with mixed cheap housing and affordable small one- or two-room apartments for young professionals and families, the space aimed to help people who were at risk of feeling alienated here, without their prior ties of high school friend groups, or neighbourhood connections. The name of the non-profit organization was chosen to avoid any connotations of volunteering, which was seen as deterring some who associated it with a particular form of social involvement that started in the 1980s and had either old-fashioned or feminised connotations for them. 'Men', I was told by one of the NPO workers, 'prefer to be associated with work'. The organisation provided some courses for independent employment (massage, aromatherapy), seminars for work in post-retirement and 'second life', as well as services to the community, e.g., knife sharpening and garbage collection. By involving local residents in these community-oriented activities, they seem to have been given opportunities for social interactions.

Twelve of us who showed up that morning were given gloves, and armed with pincers and bin bags, heads covered with hats and necks wrapped with small towels to absorb the sweat, we slowly walked the neighbouring streets together, eyes close to the ground, looking for rubbish in the gutters and bushes, keeping eyes peeled for chewing gum, cigarette stubs, onigiri wrappers and cigarette stubs. At first, we spoke a little, some who knew each other joked a bit, but for the most part, we kept busy. The atmosphere was calm and easy. After two and a half hours, we weighed our collected boon at the front door of the NPO and were invited inside to wash our hands and faces and drink cold tea. Again, after a few moments of banter and cheerful exchanges, a comfortable, weary silence descended as we sat gazing at out at our achievement, sipping cold tea. Minutes stretched out as we sat, comfortably sipping cold drinks and looking out of the window or gazing softly at the flower arrangement in the corner of the room.

Why would anyone turn up to such an event? Why collect cigarette stubs in the humid heat of Osaka with a group of strangers? How to best make sense of this quiet work? If in our ethnographic encounter we see various ways in which people face one another, such shared experiences of work that happen alongside one another, that do not require speech, are equally important. For some, particularly in 'Lifework', which prided itself on successfully reintegrating social recluses or hikikomori into the social worlds, facing others and reaching out, (or calling out 'koe o kakeru') and having conversations were challenging for many.

[6] NPO stands for not-for-profit organisation, a term similar to NGO used in the Japanese context. The name of the organisation has been slightly changed.

It appears that for these more or less isolated urban dwellers, corporeal presence facilitated by a shared activity is crucial, against a backdrop of an increased sense of social isolation. Based on research in Danshu dojo, a residential camp for people struggling with addiction, Chenhall, Kohn and Stevens (2021) describe a similar case in which silence plays an important role in wellbeing:

> silence is never empty of sound. . . . On the one hand, silence symbolizes the hard work the residents are engaged in which benefits the Danshu community and helps them develop a sense of gratitude to others. On another level, silence in the Danshu dojo represents the residents' engagement in the healing process and their reflection upon discovering their 'true self'. In this context, the body is engaged in a practical activity, a kind of 'proctognosis' or pre-linguistic understanding of the body, as in Merelau-Ponty's formulation (2022). In the Danshu dojo, ideally, the body and mind work together in reflective practice (60).

This reflection, the authors argue, combined with practical embodied activity, offers opportunities to the residents to rethink and reconstruct their life story, against the backdrop of 'verbal silence, although other sounds are always present. And these sounds, such as sweeping, polishing and eating with great gusto, serve as a reminder of [the importance of] gratitude, or selflessness and engagement with the broader community. Reflection through sonically rich 'silence' also supports the creation of new life stories . . . ' (Chenhall, Kohn and Stevens 2021, 60). Chenhall, Kohn and Stevens draw attention to the opportunities for moral development through work, especially cleaning and mundane housework.

If the effectiveness of silence for healing is constituted by the space for reflection it offers, I would also like to once again draw the attention to the side-by-side orientation that silent work allows for. This is what Jackson refers to as dia-praxis, in opposition to dia-logue (Jackson 2019). As I suggest in my work on wellbeing,

> living well together need not only refer to 'facing another', a stance that may be experienced as direct, intense, or even confrontational by some. Other forms of sharing time and space might involve walking or working side-by-side, viewing something together or listening, perhaps facing the source of the sound. An 'along-side' orientation, we might say, rather than 'across', or 'facing one another', is an important aspect of many convivial practices and often highly conducive for wellbeing. (Kavedžija 2021, 23).

The examples above seem to show how silence might be anchored in moments of shared quiet activity, creating comfort by focusing on something else, in an 'along-side' orientation. While we might not always turn to face our interlocutor in conversation, silent activity might make it particularly easy to share space and time alongside others. Therefore, the ability to sit comfortably in the silence or for it to

have positive qualities that facilitate intersubjectivity (rather than, say, feeling acutely isolated in the presence of another), depends on the circumstances, and on the attitudes and efforts of all of the involved, as 'intersubjectivity must be made or achieved' (Fabian 2014: 207), for all that it feels effortless.

Having considered some of the qualities of silence, I would like to suggest some thoughts on attending to the silence. On reflection, I have in the past written (and noted down in other ways) more about the words and actions of my interlocutors then about silences, no doubt often missing opportunities to describe some of the more 'ordinary' silences in the field, unless they were emotionally charged in noticeable ways—poignant or uncomfortable, and thus very obviously communicative. To allow myself, and the reader, to attend to silences in the field and not to miss the mundane, neutral and more ambivalent silent moments, I would like to offer some thoughts I have compiled with reference to rich anthropological literature on silence. By no means do I consider this to be a complete toolkit, but rather a collection of gentle methodological invitations.

Finding Methods in the Silence

In qualitative research, such as interviewing or other forms of ethnographic work, silence can be employed by the researcher as a technique for eliciting responses, or to avoid steering conversations too much by posing further questions. It can be uncomfortable at times, particularly in methods that rely on silent listening, such as the biographic narrative interviewing method (see Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Futing-Liao 2003). This method requires the interviewer to remain silent during the life story account, no matter how long this takes. Many interviewees find this disorienting and unpleasant, but any word repetition by the interviewer, intrusion, or additional questions are seen as undesirable steers, which interfere with the structure of the narrative. Undoubtedly, the ability to remain reassuring while being silent, depends, to an extent, on the rapport. The narrative form serves as the basis for the further interview sessions—any contradictions or, particularly, omissions, are potential spheres for further inquiry. Attention to silences in the form of omissions features prominently in this method, which attends to what has been said as well as what has not.

Silence can be used intentionally, to extend the sequence or elicit further response in an interview, or it can be a reflection of the interviewer's confusion, sometimes replicating the typical power relations between the interviewer and the interviewee, and on other occasions creating new complex configurations of power (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2017). The use of silence in ethnography, data collection and interviews is not without a troubling history, particularly in those contexts where being visible, or legible to authority, is resisted. Silence is entangled with power in instances

when people's silence is a form of protection, or resisting ethnographic intrusion in contexts where the ethnographer tries to 'make people speak' (see Whitehead 2012). It is against this backdrop of power relations and communicative expectations, all context dependent, that the researcher can use the methods of being silent together in an endeavour to open up a space.

Exploring the spaces of silence, or conveying it to the reader of our work, might require less to describe than to circumscribe, less to fill in the space, but to become aware of the silences as spaces that are full.[7] This process recalls the practice I was taught in an ink-painting class with a Chinese teacher. To draw the moon, before loading one's brush with ink, one first needs to outline and fill the imagined and still-invisible bright lunar shape with water, soaking the paper, white on white. Only then can the diluted ink, a wash, be spread out across the surface of the sky in a place where the moon might be, where the cloud cuts across it or envelopes it gently. The light disc of the moon emerges through the grey shadow, as if it were empty, but only because it is already saturated.

In order to attend to silence, not only when it is conspicuous, 'loud', or uncomfortable, I suggest exploring not only 'pitch' of the silence (the communicative intention of the silent party, or the meaning), but also its temporal qualities (duration or emplacement), which could also be understood in terms of 'rhythm' (see Weller 2021). Furthermore, silences create particular sensations or feelings, they might be said to have a particular 'tone': grave or light, tranquil or uneasy. Finally, silence can be considered in terms of the persons present, as 'harmonies.' Consider for instance not only the different qualities of shared silences, but also the distinct feelings of lone stillness, group quietude or collective silence.

Pitch: Meaning and intention

What does the silence do? How is it intended (if at all), and how is it perceived? As mentioned above, silence is not merely the inverse of speech, or an absence of communication. Some authors consider silence as communicative, or 'eloquent', when utilised intentionally by the speaker (Ephratt 2008). The degrees of intentionality might depend, Susie Scott argues, on whether one is using silence as an 'act of commission', when deliberately choosing to say nothing, lying, keeping secrets or avoidance, to save face or to protest, for instance; or as an 'act of omission', neglecting to state something: 'Omissive silences are less consciously intentional, lacking the performative, demonstrative motives of their commissive counterparts. Nevertheless, they can still be meaningful through their effects upon the individual and the reactions they evoke' (Scott 2019, 49).

[7] Dragojlovic and Samuels (2023) imply a similar sentiment when they refer to 'tracing' silences.

This ‘negative ontology’ of silence has also been described as a process through which it acquires its meaning: As Chenhall, Kohn and Stevens argue, ‘silence only becomes meaningful when it is constructed in relation to other things, whether they be commodities, bodies, institutions, or cataclysmic events’ (2021, 53). It might, therefore, be possible to attend to communicative qualities of silence, the meaning and the intention of the speaker, and the perceived meaning. Eliciting responses on the intention of the silence, as well as interpretations of perceived silences, or their effects (what it is ‘doing’; Guillaume and Schweiger 2018), could be fruitful avenues for exploration.

However, there are also other types of silence—if the silence is not intentional, for instance, then perhaps one is prevented from speaking, or ‘silenced’ (Ephratt 2008). Ephratt also distinguishes stillness (for example in quiet places, such as a library, or when meditating, or asleep), and pauses and breaks in the narrative (Ephratt 2008, 1912). These other forms of silence, which might not be as clearly or deliberately intended as communication, seem interesting, because they trouble the model emphasising intention and meaning. Indeed, some argue that silence itself remains ‘between the offering and withholding of meaning (MacLure et al. 2010, cited in Schweiger and Tomiak 2022). It is therefore important not to fill in the space of silence (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021, 2), or to merely translate what is ‘not being said’ into words, leading to loss of ambiguity. In another collection, Dragojlovic and Samuels (2023, 880) describe ‘silences as forces of affective reverberation that resonate through, within, and across social, political, and intersubjective relations of turbulent pasts and uncertain futures, as well as forms of care and layers of structural oppression.’ As a method, they suggest ‘attuned listening’, not reductive ‘filling in’ but aiming to show ‘how silences do things, like speech does, and how they open up and foreclose intersubjective relations and political possibilities’ (880), offering a focus on silences as affective forces, as well as silences in/as narrative (882). In this sense, listening to silence might be less about meaning (or intention), and more about ‘feeling’.

Duration and rhythm: Emplacement of silence

Where do the silences occur? Which stories are missing, what narratives are absent? Silences can be seen as erasures and omissions of certain perspectives, missing parts of life stories, absences of discussions of traumatic events, avoidances of certain topics. Power and silence are entangled in numerous ways. On the one hand, hegemony can be understood as the order that relies on ideas which are taken for granted and hence, often unspoken. On the other hand, some ideas or perspectives are effectively erased from the discourse, like, for example, conversations about race in Brazil described by Sheriff (2000, 115). Some voices, too, are seen to be silenced, and not ‘all parties are safe to speak’ (Scott 2019, 72).

Furthermore, we can attend to silences within the discourse, omissions or pauses in the narrative. In 2010, Ueda-san, a vivacious and strong woman who I got to know well in the salon (Kavedžija 2019a), told me her life story, starting from childhood and ending in recent years, struggling with care for her parents in her and their older age. These interviews, under the watchful eye of her late husband, whose black and white photograph was displayed prominently in the *butsudan*, a Buddhist home altar, did not contain a single mention of him. I have never learned what precipitated this silence, was it a sense of enduring loss, or an relational problem or worse, that led Ueda-san to omit this story so thoroughly, even after many years of our acquaintance. It is Ueda-san's prerogative not to be written about in a way that makes it seem like her story is fully known to me[8]. Attending to the silence and its ambiguous qualities acknowledges that.

When contrasted with speech, silence has often been associated with the 'unspeakable': trauma and the inexpressible horrors of violence, reflected in the 'silence of survivors and perpetrators alike' (Pillen 2016). Silence can often be a reaction to unspeakable and dangerous, like in the case of reproductive vulnerability in Mozambique (Chapman 2006). In this context, people avoid mentioning their pregnancies for fear of being a target of witchcraft or sorcery (Chapman 2006, 497), but people also avoid making any comments or asking questions about the health or change in appearance of others, lest they be suspected to have caused the misfortune, such as a sudden miscarriage (Chapman 2006, 499). A 'heavy weight of silence' surrounds mental health problems among Sikh community in Kent, UK, who keep quiet for fear of 'community gossip' (Dikomitis, Shergill and Dikomitis 2024).

How does silence intersect with temporality? In a chapter about self-silencing of difficult historical truths and past experiences across generations, Sider draws attention to temporal aspects of silences, as they shape the present though specific portrayals of the past (2005, 150). Replacing these silences with words, like giving an account for therapeutic or healing purposes, may not always be welcomed or seen as the best course of action. Similarly, grandchildren of Holocaust survivors' (Kidron 2009) reactions to the silences surrounding their grandparents experiences were complex, and while they oftentimes entailed frustration, they also entailed the recognition that they were important and 'more authentic than the public, logocentric voices that 'flatten' this affective transmission' (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021, 421). In extreme situations of loss and grief, silence may take the form of complete refusal of meaning (Delaplace 2009). This type of enduring silence 'of loss' could be contrasted with rhythmical silences, argues Robert Weller (2021), in his work in a Jiangsu province in China,

[8] Arthur Frank (2010) criticised social scientists for their propensity for finalisation, for writing in a way that implies 'this is all that there is to be known about you'. See also Author 2019.

contrasting examples of silent villages in the wake of bulldozers razing buildings with the pulsating silence of life, like a heartbeat, rhythmical—not perfectly even, but predictable. To this it could be added that silences are themselves distinctly temporal—their very duration brings them about.

My favourite example is perhaps the space of silence in the life story accounts that I described as ‘the pause of gratitude’, where the pause is not an empty space, but rather an interpersonal one. Over the years, as I have spoken to people in Kansai about their lives, or asked them to recount their life story for me, I noticed that as they finished speaking, they often fell into a silence. After a longer pause, many then spoke again. Almost invariably, they expressed their gratitude (Kavedžija 2020) for the lives they lived, no matter the challenges and ordeals they had just described, sometimes over the course of several days. The pause did not feel like a break in the narrative, so much as a very important part of it. Rather than merely an absence, the pause could be seen as an instance of *ma* (間), a space in between. In an everyday sense, ma can refer to the interval (between sounds, for example), or a room, as it is the space between the walls. In art and religion, its examples can be seen in the pauses of the Noh theatre, singled out as one of its distinctive features, or in the ‘negative space’ in calligraphy, embodying the tension in the movement. As such, ma has been described as pertaining to religious and aesthetic domains and referring to both space and time (Pilgrim 1986, 255–6). As such, it is a potential space, rather than merely an absence.

The same character can also be read as *aida*, which has a similar meaning, but places emphasis on the relationships between the entities (Innami 2016, 114). This is also the second character in the word *ningen* (人間) or ‘human’. In this sense, it points to the human beings as always implied in relationships with one another, or ‘among’ others (Pilgrim 1986, 252). It is this understanding of human that is at the core of Rinrigaku, or Watsuji Tetsuro’s Ethics. This prominent philosopher, a member of the renowned Kyoto school, places emphasis on the space-in-between as the realm of ethical action, as opposed to its location in the mind or consciousness of a lone individual. Ningen is always already relational, and elaborating on ‘ma’, Watsuji focuses on ‘aidagara’, often translated as ‘in-betweenness’, which ‘consists of the various human relationships of our life-world. To put it simply it is the network which provides humanity with a social meaning, for example, one’s being an inhabitant of this or that town or a member of a certain business firm. To live as a parson means . . . to exist in such betweenness’ (Yuasa 1987, 37, cited in Krueger 2019, 4). While not part of the common parlance, Watsuji’s use of aida draws attention to the importance of relationships and in-betweenness in the constitution of self, and of any given entity.

The pause in the telling of a life story seems to recall this relational productive space. The interval itself is a space where one comes to see how one's interactions with others (human and non-human) shaped the course of one's life (see Kavedžija 2020). Other examples might, of course, point to the opposite, but the silence at the end of my interlocutors' stories was not simply a rupture or an empty gap.

Tone and harmony: Affect and being silent together

How does the silence feel? Is it lonesome or collective? It might make sense to attend to affective tonalities of silence. An interesting example can be found in the work of Rupert Cox in Okinawa, near military airbases. He attends to phantom sounds experienced by the local inhabitants, in the in expectation of the visceral reaction to unpleasant sounds of aircraft even at times when there is silence. Silence here opens up space for tense expectation, a suspense: 'acoustic signatures of the aircraft taking off and landing in this place exist as phantom sounds, present in the anxiety produced by the constant state of expectation and knowledge that its arrival will produce involuntary, unpleasant physical sensations as muscles tense, hairs stand up and the stomach turns' (Cox 2013, 67). When silences are uncomfortable, exploring its visceral qualities and feelings of disquiet is important.

Another question worth posing is: how is the silence evaluated? Is it seen as a form of evasiveness or deceit (Scott 2019, 53), or is it perhaps seen as positive and virtuous, a form of deference (Scott 2019, 60)? In her work on family care, Shohet (2021) shows how silence can render suffering moral, not too dissimilar from the endurance embodied in the idea of *gaman* (glossed over both as perseverance and self-restraint), a feeling of resilience with which my older interlocutors bore their fate, quietly, without complaint. Restraint, avoidance of saying too much, burdening others with one's problems, all featured prominently as motivations for creating a comfortable space in the salon for others. Not speaking, then, sometimes making light conversation or being silent, facilitated a comfortable space, one that would be inclusive and welcoming for others, but also a companionable, shared silence could offer a respite from loneliness, and one's own problems (that needn't always be foregrounded and discussed). These shared silences, as they unfold in time, can be used therapeutically and can offer a space of care.

Unlike those forms of silence that are seen as negative (pertaining to traumatic or the unspeakable), silence can also be seen as a creation of space. In response to the introduction of increased self-monitoring of mental health and psychotherapy in Japan, some patients and psychologists alike have resisted the increased disclosure of past experiences, conflicts and distressing emotional content by

recognizing the importance of a ‘secret’ inner self, and of protecting spaces of silence for the patients (Kitanaka 2015).

Silence seems to be particularly suitable for holding situations of ambiguity and uncertainty. In his classic discussion of silence among the Western Apache, Basso (1970) describes three situations in which remaining silent is seen as positive or virtuous. For instance, not introducing people who do not know each other, letting them start speaking when they are themselves ready (217); reuniting with a family member, who at first appears unfamiliar after a long period of separation (220); being shouted at, when taking time to allow a person who is angry to settle down (221), to mention but a few. Basso argues that in all these cases the status of the participants is either unknown, uncertain or ambiguous, so silence is seen as the most appropriate way to navigate these spaces of uncertainty (227). In these examples, silence is not merely an absence of words.

Conclusion: Silence as a Presence

Silence, then, is not an absence or a void. Silences differ in their communicative qualities and their intensity (the pitch): ranging from ‘loud’ silences of ostracism, violent and intentional ‘silencings’, to mundane quietude. Temporal qualities of silence are interesting, they can occur rhythmically, and feel just right, they can offer a respite from bustling and busy qualities of the everyday, punctuating it: or they might feel like a rupture—a silent house when a loved one has departed.

At times, the space that opens up, far from being empty, holds persons, relationships, things together. Might it therefore make sense to think of silences as affective vessels, brought into being by their duration and the passing of time? In these spaces, on occasion, feelings of distress or other unpleasant affects might spread, pooling in the bitter or tense silences. At other times, perhaps silence might offer opportunities for emotions to unfold over time, to be observed in the company of another. If this company is supportive, then those silences can afford care. Caring silences might emerge when one is not required to ‘give an account of oneself’ (Butler 2025), when demands are not placed on making oneself legible and for ones’ experiences to be articulated clearly, instead allowing for ambiguity and a feeling of being accompanied, in a broad sense of the term. For silence to be understood as a shared space of care, one would assume that other people must be present. This might not be strictly necessary, for the presence of other

non-human entities and environments could be understood as companionship or presence[9].

What transpires from the examples I have encountered in the field is an understanding of the importance of the room created in the duration of silence, in the affective space of silence. These spaces are inhabited together and offer opportunities for care in their duration, and beyond. Not all silences are omissions or indicate discomfort or disagreement. The silences that stayed with me most were the companionable ones, inhabited alone or with other people, working or resting. In this sense, silence is presence.

Authorship statement

This article is authored by Iza Kavedžija based on research conducted by her.

Ethics statement

The data for this article was collected over the course of several of the author's research projects: the doctoral project was covered by the ethics approval processes at the University of Oxford, the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology; the following work on work in post -retirement has been conducted as an employee of the University of Exeter, and approved by the SSIS Ethics (ref 201819-106).

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[9] Memories, absent presences and non-hostile hauntings also come to mind. In his work on spheres as a way of inhabiting the world in a dual fashion, always already accompanied (first by the placenta in the womb, later with other spheres), philosopher Sloterdijk (2011) focuses on the idea of the 'With': 'We are accompanied so naturally by the With that scarcely any idea of its indispensability can form in either the personal or general consciousness. As the humblest, quietest something that will ever have come close to us, the With immediately retreats as soon as we seek to fix it without gaze' (356). Silence may offer for spending some time in the accompanied space, even if we are ostensibly by ourselves.

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