

# SILENCE AND A WORLD- OTHERWISE:

AN INVESTIGATION OF SILENCE  
AS POLITICALLY ENABLING

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Gender Studies. Date of Submission: August 14, 2019

## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to break down and unwork the reductionist seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech that is prevalent in political discourses influenced by the liberal-democratic tradition. This constructed binary, in which speech is regarded as the liberating route to universal freedom, and silence is equated with invisibility, powerlessness and absence, influences the daily lived experiences of individuals embedded in these political systems. I propose a focus on the relationship between silence and speech by taking into account the entanglements between silence, speech, violence, and power. Departing from existing scholarship by most notably Sylvia Wynter, Nikita Dhawan, and Wendy Brown, this thesis is an endeavor to politicize silence, to explore how some sorts of speech and silence have been made possible and impossible by and for certain human beings, and, in turn, how this influences the relationship between silence and speech. This opens up space for a recognition that the lack of the spoken word does not inherently mean invisibility or powerlessness. Focusing on the forms of agential refusal inside these silences as deployed by liminal categories in a system created by the overrepresentation of Man, this thesis rethinks and challenges foundational approaches to the ways in which the liberal-democratic tradition regards the relationship between silence and speech. Working towards such a politicization of silence, this thesis asks the following question: How can the inherently violent and exclusionary seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech, as constructed for and by Sylvia Wynter's 'overrepresentation of Man<sup>2</sup>' rooted in the liberal-democratic tradition, be opened up by Wynter's 'liminal categories' towards an understanding of silence as politically enabling, creating a world-otherwise? This thesis thus provides a recognition that not everything that is not spoken, remains hidden – that not everyone needs to speak in order to exist.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been realized without the help, support, and affirmative critical reflection of many people who have contributed to continuously nourishing and inspiring my thoughts on the political potentials of silence. As I have come to realize, conducting a research project on the relationship between silence and speech is by many people regarded as compelling and fascinating, precisely because the connotations of silence and speech are so embedded and ingrained in everyday life. During the many conversations I had on my research topic, whether with people who know me well or not, so many have thought along, provided me with examples of silence they regarded as compelling, constantly challenging and inspiring me to think about this issue further. This repeated affirmation of the importance and richness of this research project has encouraged me to continue working on it. Even now, when I am about to hand it in, I can only hope this has only been the start of a greater research project. Even though the actual list of people is much longer, I want to mention and credit a few people in particular who have contributed to the realization of this thesis:

My incredibly talented and very dear friends Cyanne van den Houten and Vivian Klein, for creating the absolutely stunning design of this thesis, capturing the essence of its aim so well in a non-linguistic manner.

My fellow students and friends inside the Graduate Gender Program at Utrecht University, and the crazy ride we have been on during the two years of this program, resulting in many lasting friendships. In particular Sophie, Senne, and Aneesha, for providing me with emotional support and a great environment of learning-together throughout these years, and most notably, having turned this academic journey into an amazing and fun process.

The same goes for the teaching staff of the program, most notably Christine Quinan. I could not have wished for better supervision, continuously providing me with affirmative critique, challenging me to think further, calming me down at moments I did not know what I was doing or where I was going.

Besides, Christine's feminist/queer teaching pedagogies have helped me so much in coming to this research project in the first place, creating an environment in class that has been so welcoming, at ease, and encouraging as I have never experienced before. Thank you! I am forever grateful.

My time spent at MOED Museum of Equality and Difference in the past year has brought me many inspirations regarding the vignettes deployed throughout this thesis. Special thanks to Rosemarie Buikema, who has continuously expressed her interest in my research project, and Rosa Wevers, who has given me so much advice on how to write a thesis.

Last but certainly not least, the unconditional love and support of my family, who never failed to believe in me, who have continuously encouraged me to research this topic, and who have thought along with me on the relationship between silence and speech for such a great deal. The same goes for my dear friends, in particular Iris, Iza, Vivian, Cyanne, Tamara, and Kim, for coping with me in the many times I did not think I would be able to finish this thesis (ever), and when I was generally just not a nice person to be around. You are my kin and I could have not done it without you.

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# INTRODUCTION

The air is thick, filled with tension, precarity, vulnerability. Begging for attention, but unnecessary so – its presence is already unavoidable. Inescapable. You can feel it in the air, redolent with expectation and anticipation. Words cannot do justice, inexpressible through language. Sticky, pressing, loaded, sultry. Simultaneously visible and invisible, hidden and omnipresent. Loud and quiet, vocal and mute.

I am talking about silence. Not a silence that can be conflated with absence, invisibility, passivity. It is a silence that cannot be reduced to any of these simplistic connotations.

Usually, I am comfortable with my own silence. In most cases, my silence is a form of non-verbal communication. A way to observe what is happening, a space allowing for thoughts to appear.

Creating space for careful listening to others.

However, even though my own silence does not automatically provide me with a feeling of discomfort, often I find myself

being confronted with a nagging feeling surrounding my silence. A certain pressure to speak up. It becomes so when others experience it as being awkward or disturbing, or when they regard it as an absence. Thus, when others form an opinion on my quiet presence.

My silence, then, becomes charged, and demands to be broken by the utterance of words, begging for verbal expression.

*“Why are you so quiet?”*

*“No reason to be so shy.”*

*“Do you have nothing to say, nothing to share?”*

*“You haven’t said anything yet –  
so please contribute to the group.”*

These comments occur on a regular basis as a response when I’m quiet. They show how one is expected to justify why they are not using verbal communication, how speech is preferred above silence.

In some occasions, when I have not spoken (much), I leave the room with a feeling of disappointment and failure. Classrooms, social gatherings, work meetings – in many environments the expectation is that one contributes only through the spoken word. My silence, then, becomes unbearable. Rooted in an internalized understanding of silence – the idea of speech and discussion as the prime ways of learning – I start to define my silent present as absence, invisibility, as being a wallflower, having nothing to contribute. An even further exposure of my own internalization happens when I catch myself judging others for their silence. Ingrained and embedded in this reductionist, constructed binary opposition.

Of course, my silence is not always a result of my personality, of my own choice. Far from, even. My silences are often a result of fear: a fear of speaking out, a fear of words themselves, a fear of hurting people with these words and my thoughts, to say the wrong things. Not feeling confident enough to speak, too insecure. Silence is listening to that what others are capable of producing and speaking – sentences and stories and arguments – that seem light years away from the ability of what I seem able to produce. It can be shame; ashamed of talking about certain experiences – and a shame of how I have engaged with it. Often, my silence is a form of self-protection. Not being ready, or not wanting, to communicate with others through spoken language. My silences can result from a form of oppression: being raised/socialized as a girl/woman, with all their connotations, my surroundings have (consciously or not) taught me to be modest, to not take up too much space – eliminating and invisibilizing myself for the sake of others. But, also: in my silences I can be oppressive: they can be an easy-way-out, they can avoid the possibility of speaking about certain topics, not speaking out for someone, letting others down. Failing to be there for each other. They can be judgmental, inherently hurting others.

**As this opening vignette of my personal experiences with silence and speech suggests, the reduction of silence and speech to a simple dualist framework neglects any type of objectives and subjectivities that come forward when one is silent or verbally speaking. An attempt to break down this reductionist binary, that is so prevalent in mainstream philosophical and political discourses developed throughout the centuries in Western Europe influencing daily**

lived experiences in liberal-democratic political systems, and their broader socio-geopolitical impacts, forms the starting point of this thesis. However, this project does not stop by simply challenging this dualism by acknowledging the many inherent paradoxes and contradictions of silence. While a thorough investigation and theorization of these many ambiguous connotations of silence that enable for challenging and breaking down this seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech would make for a compelling research project, I instead propose a politicization of silence that challenges this binary construct. I am not merely interested in offering a simple reversal or resignification of this dualism. Rather, I propose a shift of focus by taking into account the relations between silence, speech, violence, and power.

This project is therefore an endeavor to politicize silence, to explore how some sorts of speech and silence have been made possible and impossible by and for certain human beings, and, in turn, how this influences the relationship between silence and speech. This opens up space for a recognition that the lack of the spoken word does not inherently mean invisibility or powerlessness. A recognition that not everything that is not spoken, remains hidden – that not everyone needs to speak in order to exist. The meaning of silence (and, automatically, speech) relies heavily on a powerful coming-together and context-situatedness of entangled complexities of who can speak, who must remain silent, who listens, and who gets to be listened to. An acknowledgement of all these entanglements holds the ability to create a richer, better, more critical and reflexive world. Similarly, as rhetoric scholar Cheryl Glenn has argued, silence can be something one does, something one experiences, or something that is done to someone (Glenn 2004, 9). However, silence is by no means always meaningful, communicative, revealing, politically enabling. Far from, even. Rather, I wish to focus on the situations when remaining silent is a choice, a strat-

egy, or when *mobilizing* silences into political enablement is a choice and strategy. My emphasis lies on the agency of those individuals who choose to remain silent.

Focusing on the forms of agential refusal inside these silences, this project rethinks and challenges foundational approaches to the ways in which the liberal-democratic tradition regards the relationship between silence and speech. Working towards this politicization of silence, this thesis asks the following question: How can the inherently violent and exclusionary seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech, as constructed for and by Sylvia Wynter's 'overrepresentation of Man2' rooted in the liberal-democratic tradition, be opened up by Wynter's 'liminal categories' towards an understanding of silence as politically enabling, creating a world-otherswise?

### **The liminal category and the construction of a world-otherswise**

Paramount for and inherent to this question are a couple of anchoring, defining and inherently tied concepts to whom I will return throughout this thesis. I borrow these notions from Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, who offers a decisive richness to the framework this thesis builds on. Wynter presents a historical and deconstructive theory of what she refers to as the 'overrepresentation of Man,' in which a certain subject formation became the representation for Man, going beyond the human, and as a result, installing subsequent violent dehumanizing practices and knowledges, defining what it *means* to be human and who *counts* as human. At the foundation of this historical structure lays a single genre of being human for the generic category of human being, kept in place because of structural historical guiding principles of pedagogical tactics, somatic violence and political economic techniques (Hantel 2018, 62). Wynter divides the overrepresentation of Man into two epistemic regimes, governed by the construct of Man1 and Man2. Currently, the world is situated in the re-

gime of Man2, in which the type of being human that has come to stand for all human beings is violently demarcated by colonial difference. Where the first chapter will provide a more thorough engagement with the concept of the overrepresentation of Man2 and its entanglements with the liberal-democratic tradition, I wish to highlight here another concept of Wynter that is inherently tied to the overrepresentation of Man and is paramount to the overall methodology of this thesis: namely, her proposition of the potential powers in imagining – and constructing – a ‘world-otherwise’ of the liminal category. Sylvia Wynter defines the liminal category as following:

The liminal category is the systemic category from whose perspective alone, as the perspective of those forcibly made to embody and signify lack-of-being, whose members, in seeking to escape their condemned statuses, are able to call into question the closure instituting the order and therefore, the necessary ‘blindness’ of its normative ... subjects (Wynter 1996, 305).

Wynter borrows her conception of the term liminality mostly from the Eritrean anthropologist Asmarom Legesse, who has stated “that the cognitive escape hatch is always to be found in the category of the liminal” (Wynter 1994, 66). This cognitive escape hatch lies in the fact that liminal positions hold the position of standing simultaneously *inside* as well as *outside* the system of the overrepresentation of Man. The liminal category is written by this system, falling simultaneously inside as outside the structure and is therefore incapable of truly escaping it. It is precisely because of this ability to work towards a ‘world-otherwise,’ a world not ruled and governed by the violent discursive mechanisms of the overrepresentation of Man, which is also what this thesis aims to work towards and contribute to. Instead of inscribing the liminal category in a negative and passive position, which is

often the case according to Wynter (Wynter 1994, 67), she engages with liminal spaces as a category that holds a potential power in revealing the truth of the system, holding the ability of tracing its outside:

That negative identity entails for us a spearheading role in the counter-exerting thrust to regain the new lost motives of the self-interest of the human species. In other words, it is the very liminality (on the threshold, both in and outside) of our category-structure location within the present “field of play” of the discursive symbol-matter information system that gives us the *cognitive edge* with respect to such a far-reaching transformation (Wynter 1987, 237).

What I praise in Wynter’s deployment of the liminal category is how she does not reduce the notion to any physical characteristic (Hantel 2018, 70; McKittrick 2016, 4). Therefore, spaces of liminality are continuously in flow, dependent on their discursive and material contexts and political, economic, and societal systems that produce these spaces of liminality. This turns the concept into a profoundly processual and dynamic notion and holds no specific claim to any inherent knowledge perspective, enabling me to work with a large variety of spaces from marginalized positions in society in different contexts. As this thesis will show, the liminal category can range from the Zapatistas in southern Mexico, a black homosexual in the 1980s in the U.S.A., to Hispanic American students in the suburbs of El Paso, Texas. All these cases deploy silence in a way that becomes powerful, strategic, as a response to the construct of ‘Man,’ the category they do not belong to, proposing and working towards a world-otherwise.

Thus, working with the liminal category allows for the exploration of different genres of resistance that reveal the narrow and reductionist approach of the understand-

ing of silence and speech in the liberal-democratic tradition. The potential of the liminal category that is both inside and outside the system, embodying the shoreline, the shadow-existence, allows for creating space for opening up this constructed dualism by illuminating the way the binary is inherently violent and exclusionary. Deploying the concept of the liminal category offers a broader investigation that holds the potential of revealing, eroding and breaking through the foundation of the Western imperial, racial, patriarchal, and anthropocentric conception of Man and human, creating alternative imaginaries that open up a world-otherwise.

### **Methodology**

This thesis offers an almost haptic mode of engaging with silence, a mode in which silence is that what is felt, listened to, touches people, and moves people. Researching silence and its political potentials is a difficult yet pressing task to take on that demands for a rather unconventional approach and methodology, since it is full of inherent contradictions, challenges and paradoxes. One of the most important challenges this thesis faces, is how it engages with language when it is exactly the limits of language that is at stake. In the context of this project, this challenge can be divided into two questions: firstly, how to transform that what is inexpressible through language into language and words? And secondly, how to participate in the same discursive and epistemic violences of language that this thesis rejects?

Firstly, when one of the aims of this thesis is to address the power of silence precisely because silence is inexpressible in language and words, how can I possibly use language and the written word in order to demonstrate this power? One of the strengths of silence is its ability to reveal the gaps of language and the fact that it is so often an experience, unsayable through language. This work is undoubtedly complicit in this paradox and will therefore not be able to do justice to this particular strength of silence. However, one of the core methodological choices of this thesis, is

its deployment of vignettes. The vignettes allow the reader to be taken into a very specific spatio-temporal context for a brief moment – a moment in which the power of silence is fully addressed, outside of theory, focusing solely on the silence and its connotations and deployments of the case. Bringing a certain ‘softness’ in this thesis through creative writing, the vignettes should express this haptic mode of silence through language as precise as possible. Simultaneously, this leads to mainly discussing the deployments and mobilizations of silences, rather than providing a thorough analysis of their complex backgrounds and environments. The focus of this thesis is put on how silence can be a method of political resistance, and even though every single vignette could make for a whole thesis due to their complex situations, the scope of this research allows me to mainly solely focus on their approaches to silence.

Just as the opening vignette of this introduction, the vignettes consist of my own engagements with certain forms of silence that I find compelling and intriguing. However, the opening vignette above is a reflection of *my* silence, what the notion means to me and how the concept affects me on a daily basis. The vignettes in the succeeding chapters form, instead of ramifications of my personal experiences, my engagements with and reworkings of other’s experiences. The choice of which cases of silence to address has not been easy and the vignettes should not be understood as events that stand alone, as the only examples of political mobilizations of silence. The vignettes are therefore rather arbitrary chosen and form a selection of silences that speak to me. However, a careful selection has been made during the process. First of all, they are all silences turned into political resistances coming from Sylvia Wynter’s concept of liminal categories, created by her construct of Man<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the vignettes exist out of deployments and engagements with silence from whom the motives are known. Some of the cases I address in this thesis, have not been theorized (much) before. Therefore, I regard it as highly important to

turn to these silences in a manner that acknowledges how the communities or individuals have regarded the concept. I thus engage solely with cases from whom the individuals or communities have made public their motives for their deployment of silence.

The second challenge this thesis faces regarding to language, is how to deploy language when a substantial part of this thesis considers the possibilities of the spoken word as inherently violent. Some of the cases I address deploy silence precisely because they endeavor to reject this type of language, exploring the possibilities of silence as communication. How, then, can I do justice to these silences by placing them into language? However, in order to break down and overcome these violences of language, I regard it as necessary and inevitable to, up to a certain extent, reproduce these violences in order to unwork and deconstruct how it is that this violent dichotomy between silence and speech has become so ingrained in contemporary liberal-democratic political systems.

Another important reason for this research project to take on a rather unconventional methodology, is because I believe that a certain openness, reflection and flexibility is needed in order to commit to a research project that focuses on the agential aspects of liminal categories deploying silence. Therefore, this thesis engages with a wide field of theory making and writing, opening up space for different ways of 'doing' theory. This project, consequently, has been influenced by scholars who have taken up similar approaches to conduct their work, most notably gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam's proposal of scavenger methodology. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam introduces this methodology as a "methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (Halberstam 1998, 13). In conducting a research project that addresses silences deployed by liminal categories that have not always have been theorized in aca-

demia (and if so, often theorized in an entirely different discipline), Halberstam's approach to this different way of 'doing' theory enables me to not solely be limited to academic theory. As the reader will notice, this thesis builds heavily on a variety of sources including podcasts, documentaries, and manifestos, works that have not necessarily made it into the hegemonic discourses of academia.

Similarly, another important influence has been filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha's call for multiplicity, as a method for disrupting hegemonic thought, in particular. Multiplicity can be achieved once rhetors are crossing conventional categories and genres and thus resist simplistic attempts of classifying (Minh-ha 1991, 107-108). The subjects of the vignettes put forward in this thesis blur the boundaries of what resistance is supposed to be like, how they should be categorized and classified, opening up new possibilities of thinking about resistance and activism, and also, once again opening up different ways of 'doing' theory.

Besides Sylvia Wynter's work, who I already mentioned above, the work of philosopher, gender theorist and political theorist Nikita Dhawan forms one of the corner stones of this thesis. Her book *Impossible Speech: On the Politics of Silence and Violence* (2007) has inspired me to conduct a research project on the relationship between power, violence, silence and speech in the first place. In this thought-provoking work, Dhawan's endeavor is two folded. First, she carefully philosophizes silence, exploring its aspects and connotations in both Indian philosophy and continental philosophy. Secondly, Dhawan politicizes silence by exploring the relations between silence, violence and power, challenging the existing understanding of speech as emancipation and silence as censorship. Together, they offer an insightful theorization on how the notion of silence shapes and determines everyday understanding of silence and speech.

Other implicit important influences of this thesis have



been the concept of “border thinking” as developed by queer Chicana poet and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and decolonial thinkers that have followed, and French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1997). However, due to the scope of this research, these works are not referenced throughout the thesis, but not acknowledging their important contributions to the debates regarding liminality and linguistics that this thesis aims to contribute to, would be a mistake. First of all, border thinking, as introduced by Anzaldúa and adapted most notably by decolonial scholar Walter Dignolo (2000; 2006), is based on the idea that theories already exist at the borders of the colonial matrix of power, forming experiences of those who have been excluded from the knowledge production of modernity. As will become clear, Wynter’s conceptualization of the over-representation of Man and liminal categories hold strong foundations in decolonial thinking, and thus strongly influences my project.

Additionally, Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* forms one of the most prominent works in the philosophy of language and the theory of deconstruction. In order to come to a philosophical understanding of the relationship between silence and speech, turning to *Of Grammatology* and the many academic debates it has caused would have been of inevitable importance. However, since this thesis is an attempt to politicize silence, of which such a philosophical approach falls out of its scope, Derrida’s work will, besides a short reference in the first chapter, not explicitly be returned to throughout this thesis.

### Structure

This thesis is structured in two parts, the first entitled ‘Resisting Silence & Silent Resistances’ and the second ‘Silenced Bodies & Embodied Silences.’ By no means should the two parts be understood as a ‘classical’ comparative approach dividing the thesis that provides two separate approaches to the relationship between silence and speech, as

such a method would risk installing the very binary thinking that this thesis attempts to challenge and overcome. However, the two parts do differ from each other: the first part engages with silence in relation to discourse as a shield *for* power, and the second part works towards an understanding of silence in relation to discourse a shield *from* power. This difference is paramount since it highlights how, in the first part, freedom is institutionalized by the liberal-democratic tradition as a goal and an achievement. The second part challenges this schema, by working towards a consideration of freedom *as a practice*, holding many possibilities for the political enablement of silence. Nonetheless, the two parts are inevitably intertwined and should be understood through each other: they approach the relationship between silence, speech, power and violence from different perspectives that both provide equally interesting intersections, and both enrich each other’s motives by demonstrating different approaches to silence. They form a threaded continuation of one other, creating an endless dialogue, strongly entangled in each other’s ramifications.

The first part, ‘Resisting Silence & Silent Resistances’ traces the relationship between silence and speech to the liberal-democratic tradition, rooted in what has come to be known as European Enlightenment thinking. As I will argue, this is a pivotal moment in history in which the dualism between silence and speech has been reinforced in ways that still work through today’s liberal-democratic political systems. This discourse enabled speech to become a powerful concept, regarded as the discovery of truth, paving the way towards universal freedom. As a result, silence became a metaphor for censure, absence, powerlessness, and oppression.

This part is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, ‘Contesting the Liberal-Democratic Conception of Speech – *what stories make worlds and what worlds make stories*,’ I trace the roots of the dualism between silence and speech back to the liberal-democratic tradition that is

so prevalent in Western European history. The aim of this chapter is to create a relationship between the dualism between silence and speech and notions of imperialism and colonialism. By analyzing parts of John Stuart Mill's treaty *On Liberty* (1859), one of the leading texts in the development towards free speech and liberalism, I move away from the notion of free speech as a means to freedom. This chapter emphasizes how the grammar of these theories are immersed with violence, deeply engrained with imperialist and colonialist discourses. By building on Sylvia Wynter's concept of the overrepresentation of Man<sup>2</sup>, I will provide a deconstructive and decolonial reading of these theories and highlight how speech has been particularly politically enabling for a very specific idea(l) of human – the universalist premise of the white, bourgeois, European male – and how it has become inherently violent towards its liminal spaces.

Chapter II, entitled 'The Fifth Amendment as Political Activism – *subversive silence as resistance in an autopoietic system*,' continues this problematization of the violent understanding as speech being politically enabling as addressed in chapter I. It explores how silence has been institutionalized as political enablement in the form of the right to remain silent. Focusing in particular on how the Fifth Amendment has been deployed in the 1992 case of the Bowie High School in El Paso, U.S.A., it demonstrates the flaws of this institutionalization of silence that supposedly leads to protection and freedom. This case shows how, by turning to their right to remain silent, the students and staff of Bowie High School were able to reveal the truth of the autopoietic legal and political system of Border Patrol law enforcements, exposing its inherent violences and mistreatments that surface when one is not regarded as Man or a U.S. citizen. With the help of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's proposal of 'ab-use' of the Enlightenment, and Wynter's characteristic of the overrepresentation of Man as an autopoietic system, I argue how the Bowie's intervention can be regarded as a deployment of the master's tools dismantling the master's house,

working the system from within.

Before turning to the second part of this thesis, the brief interlude 'From Freedom as a Goal to Freedom as a Practice – *and what it can mean to Silence*,' will provide some concluding notes on the first part, creating a bridge to the second part. The interlude addresses the shift of focus, and its possibilities for silence, when freedom is regarded as a practice, instead of as a goal and achievement. It leads the way towards a critique on the notion of the speech act as being the route towards *universal* freedom. The second part of this thesis, 'Silenced Bodies & Embodied Silences,' focuses on how the imperative of breaking the silence has become so prevalent and embedded in many emancipatory movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By simultaneously acknowledging the importance of breaking the silences that have been enforced upon a variety of spaces of liminality, this part also challenges and questions this imperative by arguing how this tension of breaking the silence can also be a subjugating and exclusionary tool in itself.

Chapter III, 'The Presumed Evil of Silence in a Discourse of Breaking the Silence – *lethal, deadly silences*,' focuses on two canonical cases that have shaped many preceding activist movements: The Silence = Death Collective and Audre Lorde's seminal speech *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1977). Both these works deploy a strong and provocative rhetoric regarding the relationship between silence and speech, framing silence as a symbol for oppression, conflated with notions of invisibility and powerlessness, demanding to be cured by speech. This chapter thus traces how these strong imperatives are embedded in the violent liberal-democratic tradition, holding onto the premise of speech as a political and emancipatory tool that provides the much-needed route to societal transformation. However, as these cases reveal, the imperative of breaking the silence is not *necessarily* and *inherently* an act of liberation, granting one freedom in a discourse built for and by

the overrepresentation of Man. Instead, this imperative also holds the possibility of speech becoming exploited or devalued when annexed by the regulatory discourse of the overrepresentation of Man.

This paves the way towards chapter IV, 'Silence as a Practice of Freedom – *silence as alternative imaginary*,' which explores silence as a means of preserving and keeping certain practices and dimensions of existence from regulatory power and normative violence. Building on Wendy Brown, the chapter opens up space for staying silent out of free will, as a practice of self-care and freedom, allowing for a multiplicity and subjectivities of silence to exist. Brown argues how a discourse of compulsory discursivity holds the possibility of chaining individuals to injurious and violent histories, simultaneously perpetuating the power mechanisms inside the system that controls and regulates the life of liminal categories, namely the overrepresentation of Man. The chapter engages with two cases that explore and deploy silence as a practice of freedom: Marlon T. Riggs' documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989), and the communicative strategy of silence as deployed by the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico.

# PART I: RESISTING SILENCE & SILENT RESISTANCES

Traditionally, power and speech have been portrayed to be opposites, with power suppressing speech and in turn, speech as authentic self-expression; as the bold, subversive freeing of repressed voices from the clutches of power. This implies that those who speak are necessarily enlightened, emancipated and free and those who are silent are necessarily repressed.  
*Dhawan 2007, 311.*

In the quote above, Nikita Dhawan offers an on point analysis of how speech, power, violence and silences are (not) understood as heavily entangled in the liberal-democratic tradition. This chapter will investigate and deconstruct the meaning of speech as invoked by the rise of the liberal democracy in Europe and the United States in the 1800s that continues to work through in contemporary liberal-democratic political systems, thereby creating a relationship between the liberal-democratic conception of speech and imperialism. In order to deconstruct this entanglement, this chapter traces this liberal-democratic discourse that is rooted in what has come to be known as European Enlightenment thinking, and the way it created imperial notions on silence and speech that are still prevalent and dominant today. This discourse has been extremely powerful and influential due to its reinforcement of the seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech. The emerging ideal of liberal democracy, in which speech has become equated with being politically enabling, truth, and the ultimate route to universal freedom. As I will indicate, the development of liberal democracy was heavily embedded in and entangled with notions of imperialism and colonialism and can therefore not be separated from how the thinking of speech and silence that is still prevalent today has originated. This chapter thus aims to map out how the equation of speech with

# CHAPTER I: Contesting the Liberal-Democratic Conception of Speech –

**what stories make worlds and what worlds  
make stories**

political freedom and truth are not unmarked, unchecked, or innocent as one might think; rather, they are embedded in violent and exclusionary mechanisms of, as I will argue, Sylvia Wynter's overrepresentation of Man2. As the rest of this thesis will demonstrate, the imagination of the political powers of speech leading to truth and freedom work through in present political systems, academic theories, and emancipatory movements. As Donna Haraway argues in *Staying With the Trouble* (2016),

it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories (Haraway 2016, 12).

By revealing how the idea of speech as inherently liberatory is entangled with violent histories, it is important to mention that instead of providing solely a dismissal of the hollow myth of Enlightenment thinking, I prefer to reposition the Enlightenment thinking by *reclaiming* and *reconfiguring* the benefits of the Enlightenment. I agree with Nikita Dhawan who, following Michel Foucault's recommendation of freeing oneself from the "intellectual blackmail of being for or against the Enlightenment" (Foucault 1984, 45), explores the possibilities of a "re-enchantment" with the Enlightenment (Dhawan 2014, 11). The Enlightenment is then regarded as a process and entanglements of a route towards emancipation, rationality, 'progress', colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and many crimes against humanity. Instead of solely focusing on the 'good' or the 'bad' side of Enlightenment thinking, I aim to read them together, since they are not issues that can be analyzed uniquely without taking into account its complex entanglements and intertwinings. I will do this by revealing how these entanglements are embedded in the

liberal-democratic conception of speech. Eventually, through the work in the rest of this thesis, I aim to create space to open up this reductive seemingly mutual exclusivity between the two concepts.

The first part of this chapter will stretch out Sylvia Wynter's historical conception of the overrepresentation of Man and her constructs of Man1 and Man2 that are paramount for the way I will continue to deconstruct the liberal-democratic conception of speech. As I will argue, speech being the equivalent of political power, the unraveling of truth and universal freedom is embedded in a conception of the human that is the hybrid of Man2, shaped by the violent demarcations of colonial difference. After, I will map out why the rise of liberal democracy is situated in this construct of Man2 and its overrepresentation by focusing on one of its most prominent figures who laid the foundations of liberal democracy: the British philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and his canonical text *On Liberty* (1859) in particular. In dominant narratives representing the history of liberalism, this text is regarded as foundational. Throughout the text, the act of speaking achieves a pivotal role in the road towards emancipation, speech argued to be politically enabling, the installment of free speech as the route towards the discovery of truth, and universal freedom. Mill builds on an understanding of truth that has been dominant in the European philosophical discourse and was already prevalent in the time of Socrates, whose theories were highly influential to Mill's thinking. This understanding of truth claims a 'natural' priority to the spoken language above silence. Namely, an understanding of truth that regards truth as an authentic, self-present awareness seen to await its fulfilment in speech.

This consequently lead to the assumption that the possibility of a correspondence between words and the 'truth' can properly be used to represent a "reality out there" (Dhawan 2007, 230). In this sense, as I will argue, Mill argues how dialogue holds the possibility of establishing political

power. However, this conception of truth and how to reach it departs from the idea that all participants in dialogue are even and equal. I will question this assumption that is upholding liberalism's implicit language theory that vindicates the primacy of the (spoken) word. In the liberal tradition, violence and power are located outside of the domain of language (Hanssen 2000, 161). This conception of speech fails to take into account any consideration of violence that could possibly prevent people from participating in dialogue through the speech act or people who are *silenced* by others through the speech act.

Furthermore, I will address how Mill's conception of free speech as the route to individual freedom was only liberatory and enabling when performed by a very specific idea of the human subject: a universalist premise of the figure of the white, bourgeois, European male – the hybrid of Man<sup>2</sup>. Since the liberal-democratic ideals of individual rights and human dignity enabled both emancipatory movements such as suffrage, abolition of slavery and civil liberties, and simultaneously imperialism, colonialism, slavery, genocide, and many other crimes and violences against humanity, they form two sides of the same coin. By pointing out how Mill's influential conception of speech as politically enabling is strongly entangled with the violent legacies of imperialism and colonialism, I highlight how Mill's conception of speech as being liberatory and emancipatory only addressed a very specific way of being human. This distinction set out who had the right to reach freedom and who did not, and thus deciding for whom speech was politically enabling and for whom speech was inherently violent and silencing. Freedom was still considered as a universal concept to be enabled through speech, and thus placing notions of violence and power outside the realm of language. This rendered the notion of speech as *inherently* and *necessarily* politically enabling, which the succeeding chapters will challenge. Before doing so, this chapter will answer the following question: How is the liberal-democratic understanding of speech root-

ed in the discourse of Sylvia Wynter's construction of the overrepresentation of Man, and in what ways has this disregarded any notions of violence that can influence the understanding of speech as being politically enabling and the path towards truth and freedom?

### **The construction of Man and its overrepresentation**

Sylvia Wynter has dedicated her work to exposing and investigating the historical conceptualization of the overrepresentation of Man and the regimes of Man it created. These regimes of Man, in which a single genre of being human came to stand generically and universally for all human beings, resulting in an overrepresentation of Man, enables me to explore the paradoxes that are inherent to the rise of the liberal-democratic subject and their beliefs in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In an interview with anthropology scholar David Scott, Wynter explains how she started her periodization of history with the origin of the modern world, which she regards as going hand-in-hand with the origins of the construction of different categories of people (Scott 2000, 174). Wynter explains how, in this framework, she moves beyond resentment and a feeling of anger at the thought of how much the population to which she belongs has had to pay for the rise to world dominance of the Global West. Instead, Wynter asks the following questions:

What had been the nature of the vast change by which Latin Christian Europe, a religious entity, had come to reinvent itself as the secular West? What was it that had led to, then enabled, the sustained dynamic of the brilliant intellectual breakthroughs by means of which these people had gone on to take over the world, drawing all the rest of us willy-nilly into a new order that they still continue to define, categorize, and indeed, to control? What was it that they had done differently from all other

human groups? ... How did they do it?  
(Wynter qtd. in Scott 2000, 175)

She argues how, if one wants to transform this world dominance of the Global West, “you will have to be first able to appreciate the dimension of the kind of intellectual breakthroughs that they must have made to bring it into existence” (Scott 2000, 175). This perspective enables Wynter to shed light on what the nature of these shifts in the categorization of human beings have been. The construction and invention of Man and its Other have shaped the present struggles regarding race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, environment, severe climate change, global warming, and the sharply unequal distribution of the earth’s resources (Wynter 2003, 260). Wynter regards these crises as all being the result of this construct in which one form of being human has come to stand for all human beings. This is a process that she analyzed as starting with the secularizing intellectual revolution of Renaissance humanism, which turned into the decentralizing religious heresy of the Protestant Reformation, eventually followed by the rise of the modern nation state and its inclusion of the institution of the political state, commerce, and economic production (Wynter 2003, 262).

In order to investigate this reduction and negation of human into a singular notion of Man, Wynter scrutinizes these historical epochs, periodizing subsequent shifts from one regime of Man to another. She indexes in every particular epoch the “master codes of symbolic life/death” and the imaginary and material boundary projects that define the “spaces of otherness” (Wynter 2003, 279). These symbolic codes of life/death and space of otherness define what type of being human has come to stand for all human beings. Thus, demarcating who counts as Man, and who is its liminal other. In doing so, Wynter detects two shifts in regimes: the move from the “Christian” to “Man1”, and the move from “Man1” to “Man2”. The world as it is known today situated in the latter. These regimes form the foundations of how the

world continues to be structurally unequally divided:

These figures, both Man1 and Man2, are ... inflected by powerful knowledge systems and origin stories that explain who / what we are. These systems and stories produce the lived and racialized categories of the rational and irrational, the selected and the dysselected, the haves and the have-nots as asymmetrical naturalized racial-sexual human groupings that are specific to time, place, and personhood yet signal the processes through which the empirical and experiential lives of all humans are increasingly subordinated to a figure that thrives on accumulation (Wynter & McKittrick 2015, 10).

Wynter puts epochal significance on the year 1492, the year of Columbus’ voyage that marked the starting point of European colonization, asking: “can we therefore begin ... from a new view of 1492 based upon this still-to-be written history of *how the human represents to itself the life that it lives*” (Wynter 1995, own emphasis, 8)? According to Wynter, the year of Christopher Columbus’ voyage should be regarded as an epistemological break, since it challenged the Christian idea of cosmology that divided the world into habitable and inhabitable zones. Simultaneously, mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus revalorized the position of the earth by challenging the idea that it formed the center of the universe and was instead a star like any other, rendering earthly forms incommensurable from the divine, removing man from the center of the universe (Wynter & McKittrick 2015, 14-18).

These developments built towards a new tradition premised on a homogeneous earth and a planetary Christianity that would tie together the world’s population (Hantel 2018, 63). This figure of Man1 was therefore different from its predecessor, but not wholly separate: even though Wynter focuses on particular epochs and different descriptive state-

ments defining the overrepresentation of Man, her figures should be understood as palimpsestic, as hybrids, all continually build upon each other and rewrite history, rather than being clean-cut divides. The figure of Man1, defined by Wynter as *homo politicus*, the invention of Renaissance thought, formed a new worldview that remapped the earth, with rationality placed in its center. The overrepresentation of this figure of ratiocentric Man regarded certain populations as “natural slaves”: populations were placed along a scale where Europeans represented the highest order of being, standing on top of the hierarchy of reason, and dark Africans represented the lowest order, the final step towards “animality” (Hantel 2018, 63).

Man1 paved the way for Man2, Wynter’s *homo oeconomicus*, which she places in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the moment when life itself became an object of science through the work of evolutionary and anthropological sciences in for example the theories by Charles Darwin and Carl Linnaeus. Combined with the rise of economic production, for example the work of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, creating an economic view of the human, symbolic life for Man2 was (and hence, still is) defined through capital and certain genetic traits (Wynter & McKittrick 2015, 33-45). Regarding human origins as a process of evolution and natural selection, instead of the previous hierarchy of human categorizations based on rationality, created a discourse based on “selected” versus “dysselected,” and “evolved” versus “non-evolved”, Man becoming to be represented by a certain biologized and bourgeois conception of the human, its Other creating the violent categories of “natives” and “n\*ggers” (Scott 2000, 177). Thus, “in the bourgeois Western white male overrepresenting all humanity through the violent demarcations of colonial difference” (Hantel 2018, 64). This development went hand-in-hand with the rise of the construct of ‘race,’ for which Wynter detects on the one hand the Indo-European somatotype, and on the other the Bantu-African somatotype, with all other non-white populations

co-classified with the latter in less extreme and varying degrees (Scott 2000, 177).

Key to understanding Wynter’s conceptualization of the overrepresentation of Man is that she claims this system to be *autopoietic*, meaning that it auto-institutes itself and that its structure systemically survives. In this light, disruptions of the system (for example, liminal categories challenging the violent and hegemonic mechanisms of the overrepresentation of Man) are *essential* for the self-stabilization of the system, after which the system will self-correct again, according to the established codes of symbolic life and death and the relation between Man and human (Hantel 2018, 68). Chapter II will provide a more thorough analysis of this feature of the overrepresentation of Man in a discussion of how the right to remain silent has become institutionalized in the system of the overrepresentation of Man. However, the extent to which the premise of institutionalized freedom is actually materially enacted and validated by governmental institutions – even when taken up in the constitution – strongly differs in each context and cannot and should not be generalized or universalized. Similarly, the constitutional right of free speech is always limited, and its limitations differ in each context. It is not necessarily limited to the act of speaking but can refer instead to a broader understanding of communication, one that includes for example writing, singing, burning flags, slander, acting, yelling on the street corner, and advertising.

However, this characteristic of the system being autopoietic, also proves to be helpful when focusing on an important development that occurred in the context of Man2: the Enlightenment thinking and the way this process has been framed in many dominant historiographic accounts as a glorifying era. It has become a saga often failing to acknowledge and scrutinize the violent and coercive contexts in which Europeans came to think of themselves as the ‘redeemers’ and ‘ethical subjects’ that justified imperialism and colonialism. These violent histories of the former imperial



nations and their colonies is still profited from, responsible for a structural global inequality to which the former colonial regimes often fail to take proper responsibility for (Dhawan 2014, 9-10). It is in this light that I do not refer to the Enlightenment as a particular historical project or an era. Rather, I regard it as an unfinished process that still heavily influences today's socio-geopolitical situations regarding neo-colonialism, patriarchy, racism, capitalism, neo-liberalism and anthropocentric worldviews. These discourses have installed structural somatic violence and political economic techniques that structurally uphold practices that violently create dominant frameworks, creating the symbolic life/death and hence categories of liminality. Therefore, Enlightenment thinking has become essential in the overrepresentation of Man that continuously auto-institutes itself and the way it presents itself in the legacies it has produced. One of these legacies of the Enlightenment thinking, the political system of liberal democracy, has formed the foundations of the connotations of speech being regarded as "the privileged route towards the discovery of truth" (Dhawan 2011, 229). The next section will provide a thorough analysis of how the origins of liberal democracy is situated in Man<sup>2</sup>, creating a valorization of speech that is still prevalent today.

### **Free speech and its promise of political enablement and universal freedom**

Comparative literature scholar Beatrice Hanssen and Nikita Dhawan have both addressed how the liberalist conception of language regards speech as the ultimate medium of transparency and truth, political power, and the advancement of universal freedom (Hanssen 2000; Dhawan 2007). In most democratic political systems, free speech is regarded as one of the cornerstones of liberal democracy, with the constitution protecting the ideal (Dhawan 2007, 229). John Stuart Mill is regarded as one of the most prominent figures who has laid the foundation for this understanding and valorization of speech. His canonical text *On Liberty* (1859)

thoroughly described the possible restrictions of individual freedom that could occur in the transformation of aristocratic political systems to increasingly democratic political systems, a shift occurring in many European nation states at the time. Many political theorists regard Mill as the embodiment of the entanglement between liberalism and imperialism, describing him as "the apotheoses of imperial liberalism" (Bell 2016, 30), having "racial views that arguably shaped how they [he, ed.] intended their principles to be applied to the nonwhite population" (Mills 2017, 153), and whose work provided "the intellectual scaffolding for enduring liberal justifications of empire" (Bell 2016, 27). Constructed in an overrepresentation of Man that demarcated the universal type of human on the basis of colonial and economic difference, as will become clear, John Stuart Mill was a prime figure in this construction. His work still forms (in)directly the foundations for many liberal-democratic political systems, with his biases and worldviews, that still work through today, often left unchecked and unquestioned. This development raises the question for who speech is politically enabling, as suggested earlier, even though Mill is remembered as one of the greatest advocates of emancipation, freedom, and democracy, his ideas were strongly embedded in a political theory of European imperialism (Tully 2008; Pitts 2005). In *On Liberty*, Mill made it clear that his theories were not suitable for non-Europeans, establishing a crude dichotomy of only two sorts of societies, namely "barbarous" and "civilized":

We may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage ... Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind

have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one (Mill 2012, 23).

This excerpt is important since it shows how he justified despotism because he held the rational capacities of individuals in these societies as immature and regarding them as incapable of being “guided to their improvement by conviction or persuasion” (Pitts 2005, 143). Political scientist Jennifer Pitts has written extensively on Mill’s liberal imperialism and contends how Mill believed “that all diversity in social practices and institutions could be ranged along a scale of progress”, making it “the challenge for political thinkers and actors was to draw backward societies toward the state of the most advanced society” (Pitts 2005, 140). Thus, Mill clearly reinforced the ideal of Man2, violently excluding certain groups of people on the basis of colonial difference. Throughout his work, every particular society was reduced to a single and narrow set of criteria, placed along a particular scale of progress. Pitts recognizes how *On Liberty* “is a paean to human diversity and even eccentricity, and yet never without the condition that such diversity is desirable only within the limits of “civilized” society” (Pitts 2005, 142). Mill’s worldviews on who was able to speak and who was not, an assumption based on colonial difference, demonstrates very well who was taken into account in his theories that had as its premise to reach universal freedom, and who was not. This seemingly paradoxical view – establishing political agency and universal freedom by denying others of these ideals by silencing them – is paramount for the way I understand Enlightenment thinking and the overrepresentation of Man as I argued earlier in this chapter. It is exactly this apparent paradox, here embodied by John Stuart Mill, that has created structural global inequalities that are still prevalent

today, and, very important, contributes to why the histories around (for example) colonialism and liberalism are often regarded as being separate instead of heavily entangled.

Besides, by denying others from individual freedom and political agency by stating they should be subjected to despotism, Mill was implicitly constructing a very strong binary between silence and speech by silencing Man2’s Other and providing Man2 with speech, which I will address in more detail in the next section.

### **The logocentric prejudice in liberalism**

Mill’s work was influenced by his fear of the potential dangers that could arise in the occurring transformation of different European political systems from being aristocratic to increasingly democratic. Although the shift brought many opportunities, Mill saw potential threats of tyranny for the individual subject and freedom when mass-society was in power. For Mill, freedom was not necessarily and inherently exercised with a dominance of the majority. Mill’s concerns were formed around a broader sense of compulsion and control that could take shape as physical force (for example legal penalties), or moral coercion of public opinion (Mill 2012, 21). According to Mill, his mechanism of public opinion, social pressure, and expectation could become all-controlling and lead to self-repression and potentially to conformism, uncritical towards other’s opinions, or becoming just one of the many bodies in the crowd, “their human capacities ... withered and starved” (Mill 2012, 110).

Mill was a great admirer of Socrates and his theories were strongly built upon the so-called Socratic dialogue, the dialectic of speech and counter-speech. This Socratic dialogue forms a prime example of the logocentric prejudice in European philosophical discourse. This model of speech is commonly known as a concept developed and deployed by Plato, in which Socrates played one of the characters. In this concept, speech is considered to be the authentic unveiling of truth: all that is expected is the submission of

oneself to the ultimate authority of the logos (Dhawan 2007, 230). These dialogues usually begin with Socrates professing ignorance on the subject of the conversation. He asks questions to his fellow conversation partners, having a fuller understanding of the subject as a result. This understanding of dialogue has been highly influential for the development of rhetoric and argumentation throughout the centuries that followed. Socratic dialogue has enabled the influential Socratic method, an educational approach that takes place exclusively in the realm of dialogue. Spoken word enables this truth to arrive in the mind of the students (Dhawan 2007, 230). Throughout the development of European logocentric thought, this narrative has repeated itself, and was strongly reinforced by John Stuart Mill who concisely defined the benefits of this type of dialogue for deliberative democracy. Socratic dialogue has as its core the understanding that only an egalitarian and utilitarian free market place of ideas could blossom with consensual acceptance. As Mill contends, the best form of consensual acceptance is reached when organized around free speech and discussion, creating space for the most persuasive argument. Consensual acceptance, then, triumphs over subordination, the use of brute force, and tyranny (Hanssen 2000, 160).

Key to this understanding is that speech is, rather than merely representational, also performative. In Socratic dialogue, speech is not only seen as the transparent vehicle for the communication of ideas and principles (indicating a one-to-one relationship between word and idea), but, simultaneously, speech is regarded as “the privileged medium *within* which – not just through which – such freedom is executed or performed” (Hanssen 2000, 160). This movement towards a performative understanding of speech is important, since it demonstrates how the understanding of speech has become discursive and ontological. In mainstream discourse of political theory often being left unquestioned and unmarked, this understanding is enacted over and over again the act of free speech as a method of sovereign self-control of the in-

dividual, the path towards political enablement, and thereby paving the way towards freedom. Silence, then, is rendered as the opposite of all the above, since it is not regarded as the articulation of one’s inner truth, being non-communication, standing in the way of the revelation of truth.

### **The Presumption of truth in logocentrism**

The presumption in logocentrism and Socratic dialogue is that the participants in the dialogue have an equal relation. This logocentric bias in European thought, already prevalent in the time of Socrates, comes from the presumption that spoken words directly symbolize ideas, and that speech has an unmediated relation to truth (Dhawan 2007, 230). This equal relation is a pivotal understanding to take for granted and illuminates at a glance the problematic connotations of the Socratic dialogue. This logocentric bias results in the idea that spoken word is preferred above, for example, the written word, because the speaker and listener are presented with the speech at the same time: the immediacy, the lack of temporal and spatial distance, seemingly guarantees that the spoken word stands directly for what is meant, what is said is meant, and that is known what is said, as an apparent perfect coincidence of meaning and present intent (Norris 1988, 71). According to Nikita Dhawan, even though perfect understanding does not always occur in fact, this image of meaning is the underlying ideal of European culture (Dhawan 2007, 230-231). Philosopher Christopher Norris notices: “Hearing/understanding oneself talk is a *de facto* truth in our experience of language that appears so massively self-evident as almost to brook no question” (Norris 1988, 71). Related to the speech act, the act of *hearing* is also understood as a privileged form of understanding, holding to power to bring speech “home” (Dhawan 2007, 231). However, as will be argued in the following chapters, the importance of hearing in dialogue is often overlooked due to the focus on speech as being politically enabling, and simultaneously neglecting how the *willingness* to hear, to actually

listen, is perhaps even more important. Thus, the liberal tradition based on logocentrism is premised on an originary use of language, aspiring to interpersonal understanding that is expressed in dialogue and debates, creating a space that is at the heart of liberal democracy (Dhawan 2007, 241).

This logocentric prejudice and the value of speech as being the immediate connection to truth, forms the foundation for a whole philosophical tradition, speech conceived as giving access to truth, offering a self-present consciousness with the speaking subject whose experience is articulated (Dhawan 2007, 230). However, there are two notions of truth that have come to govern philosophical inquiry: the previously mentioned correspondence-theory, assuming that truthful statements can be verified by determining their 'fit' with an outside reality, and secondly the concept of mimesis, a form of "inward revelation" (Norris 1988, 54). Both ideas have strongly influenced the continental philosophical discourse. Due to the scope of this research, I do not have the space to provide an in-depth analysis of the different approaches to truth and how they have influenced liberal-democratic thought.<sup>1</sup> However, I wish to point out that both perspectives regard speech as the ultimate route of unveiling this inner truth, and thus hold the presumption that speech is politically enabling, disregarding the idea that language is inherently violent. This idea has been adopted by several prominent scholars that have followed, such as philosopher and political scholar Hannah Arendt, whose work on the space of appearance is regarded as canonical in mainstream discourses of political resistance.<sup>2</sup> In *On Liber-*

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1 For a more thorough analysis of the different concepts of truth, I recommend looking into Christopher Norris' work *Derrida* (1988), in particular the chapter "Speech, Presence, Origins: From Hegel to Saussure," pp. 63-97.

2 For Arendt, violence was located outside the realm of democratic politics and the precinct of language (Hanssen 2000, 162). Arendt's work on who counts as a political subject and who is included in her concept of the space of appearance has become canonical in mainstream discourses of resistance and activism and has therefore very much shaped and contributed to the idea that emancipatory activism and politics needs to happen in the public

ty, Mill advocates clearly how he gives a primary role to the speech act in liberal-democratic society, speech paving the way to freedom of thought and discussion. In particular, in the chapter entitled "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion," Mill expresses his thought, rooted in the Socratic dialogue, that there should be no attempt "to control the expression of opinion" (Mill 2012, 32). Speech is here considered to be the authentic unveiling of truth: all that is expected is the submission of oneself to the ultimate authority of the logos (Dhawan 2007, 230). Nikita Dhawan argues how spoken language in this Socratic tradition, repeated throughout the history of Western logocentric thought, has created the value of speech being the positive and self-authenticating truth (Dhawan 2007, 230). This equation between speech and truth brings Mill to analyze three sorts of arguments that should always be articulated by spoken language, because they are otherwise suppressed: ones that are true, ones that are false, and ones that are partially true. For Mill, any of these arguments should be articulated through speech. He argues how, even though "the silenced opinion [can] be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth," and since an opinion is never able to capture the whole truth, "it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied" (Mill 2012, 95). He regards the suppression of argument as a dangerous evil:

Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it, is the formidable evil: there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they at-

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space. Due to the scope of this research project, I am not able to reflect on the exclusionary and violent mechanisms reproduced by Arendt and how this has influenced mainstream understandings of what political resistance should look like. However, I recommend amongst others the book *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, and artist Johanna Hedva's essay "sick woman theory" (2015). Both works have argued against the narrow and exclusionary understanding of political activism as put forward by Arendt.

tend only to one that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect of truth, by being exaggerated into falsehood (Mill 2012, 94).

In order to demonstrate how Mill's emphasis on spoken language, argument, and dialogue is rooted in Man2, I will shortly summarize how Mill envisions the argument-based dialogue in the freedom of thought and discussion, shaping the understanding of speech being politically enabling. Mill identifies three types of arguments. The first two arguments are strongly linked to each other. Mill contends that even when an argument is true, they are in general suppressed, because they are thought to be false. This suppression comes from the assumption that human beings can be capable of infallible knowledge, which they are not (Mill 2012, 95). Departing from an understanding that there is no a priori insight into truth, Mill asserts that every opinion and argument will be useful for maintaining and discovering truth, and thus should be articulated and not be suppressed and remained silent. Along similar lines, the refusal of hearing or articulating an argument because of the assumption that it is false, is rooted in the assumption that the other's certainty is the *absolute* certainty (Mill 2012, 34). Even when the belief is regarded as false, the argument should be received as it holds the truth, since this leads to debate, and in turn, to a greater understanding. Mill states how, when a topic is "not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth" (Mill 2012, 64). Counterarguments are equally important to truth as repetition of the truth; a conflict with the opposite, whether deemed false or true, is essential for achieving a clear perception and deep felling of its truth (Mill 2012, 82-83).

Mill's third option, doctrines being partially true, is the result when conflicting arguments, instead of being one true and the other false, "share the truth between them" (Mill 2012, 83). In most cases, the truth has many sides and all sides contain part of the truth. The whole truth can nev-

er be understood from only one perspective, and the only way for it to emerge, is by "the reconciling and combining of opposites" (Mill 2012, 86). His profiling of the spoken argument, building on the Socratic dialogue, affirms the primacy of the spoken word that holds the fruits for deliberative democracy.

Mill's liberal framework, that privileges speech, Socratic reasoning, and public deliberation, is strongly rooted in the construct of Man2 since it takes any notions of power and violence, that could potentially disrupt this framework, for granted. The argument Mill makes in the case of free speech, fits perfectly in liberalism's implicit logocentric bias that regards notions of violence and power as standing outside of speech. Liberal political theorists thus often equate voice with power, political agency, truth and freedom, and conversely, the absence of voice becomes an absence of power (Dhawan 2007, 249). Beatrice Hanssen contends how legal scholars and critical race theorists have pointed out how this understanding of free speech and the value of dialogue in order to reach a 'truth' leads, as a consequence, to discriminatory gestures of exclusion towards minorities (Hanssen 2000, 160). Hanssen is not the only one addressing how violence and power are inherent to the realm of language, which has been critiqued by many poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial scholars (Butler 1997; Matsuda et al. 1993; Spivak 1988; Brown 1996; Foucault 1984). Hanssen argues how the definition of 'speech' in the liberal-democratic ideal of free speech is in many political systems broadened to inclusion of other forms of communication, the boundaries between violent action and speech are often blurred. She refers to how for example the atrocious act of cross-burning by the Ku Klux Klan has, in court, been judged as being a mere expression of (free) speech; and was therefore an indirect state support to violent hate groups such as the KKK (Hanssen 2000, 160). The right of free speech is often so engrained in the constitution, left unmarked and unquestioned, that groups initiating to regulate hate speech

are often considered as “first amendment revisionists” and “thought police” (Matsuda et al. 1993, 1). Mostly, these attempts come from categories of liminality, who are affected by this hate speech in the first place, and thus are subjected to the violence that speech and language can constitute.

To a certain extent, Mill does acknowledge the limits of free speech. He contends how one is free to say what one wants, but external factors (such as other individuals and the state) can make that freedom more or less costly to exercise (such as forms of social control, financial penalty, imprisonment). These restraints and rules of conduct take in his theory the form of the harm principle, about which he states: “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (Mill 2012, 22). However, Mill argues one should be careful with turning to this harm principle, even when legitimate, providing no definitive insights in which cases turning to the harm principle is desirable, upholding his belief that the speech act leads to truth and individual freedom, standing above violence and tyranny.

### **Concluding remarks**

As this chapter has demonstrated, the exposure of the entanglement of the liberal-democratic presumption of speech that is still prevalent in today’s discourses created by these political systems with Sylvia Wynter’s concept of overrepresentation of Man, has been created for a very specific type of human, namely Man2. In this discourse, Man2, having become the overarching, universal ideal of human who is defined through colonial difference, finds freedom through speech. The speech act, regarded as the ultimate medium of transparency and truth, becomes in this framework politically enabling and has strongly reinforced the logocentric prejudice that was already present in European philosophy since Socrates. This idea has rendered silence as the opposite of speech, hence referring to powerlessness, censure, and absence. However, due to the universalization of Man2,

inserting one way of being human that has come to stand for every human being, this presumption of speech has failed to take into account any notion of violence. When all that is expected from one is the submission of oneself to the ultimate authority of language, speech considered to be the authentic unveiling of truth, resulting in a Socratic dialogue that regards all participants as equal, violence can indeed be regarded as standing outside of the realm of language. However, as the rest of this thesis will demonstrate, when the speech act is conducted by certain categories of liminality, speech is far from inherently politically enabling and is instead inherently intertwined with violence. The next chapter will engage with another constitutional right in the U.S. legal system that has also gained a prominent role in the liberal democracy, namely the Fifth Amendment: the right to remain silent. Meant to serve as offering protection to U.S. citizens in the context of coercive law enforcement practices, as the deployment the right of Hispanic Americans and Mexican immigrants have shown in El Paso in the 1990s, the opposite happened, demonstrating even further how the political system of liberal democracy has been built for and by the universal construct of Man2.

# CHAPTER II: The Fifth Amendment as Political Activism –

**subversive silence as resistance in an auto-  
poietic system**

As addressed in the previous chapter, the institutionalization of speech leading to freedom through the right of free speech forms one of the cornerstones of contemporary liberal democracies. However, the right to remain silent has also been institutionalized, with the same presumption of reaching freedom. In the context of the U.S.A., the Fifth Amendment supposedly offers protection. This chapter addresses this institutionalization of silence and these promises of silence being politically enabling. It will show how, when deployed as a method of subversion supposed to expose and overthrow the overrepresentation of Man<sup>2</sup>, turning to the right to remain silent can create a resignification of the hegemonic concept of silence. It engages with the following question: in what ways can turning to the right to remain silent be politically enabling, subversive and resisting towards the structural abusive practices of government systems, ruled by the autopoietic system of the overrepresentation of Man?

I go about responding to this question by focusing on a specific movement that took place in the early 1990s in the southern city of El Paso (Texas, U.S.A.), centered around Bowie High School, a school located just meters from the Mexican border. The Bowie case, as I will refer to the movement throughout this chapter, has been a historical mobilization of students, forming a vivid instance of a liminal category standing up to structural abusive and violent power structures by the overrepresentation of Man, challenging the seemingly untouchable power and authority of U.S.' Border Patrol officers. Border Patrol was excessively abusing their rights upon people who appeared to be Hispanic and from a low-income background, with the purpose of detecting undocumented border crossers. However, in practice, their ethnic profiling led to abusive, violent, and humiliating interrogations towards Mexican American residents and Mexican immigrants of El Paso. As an intervention towards these structural abusive practices, students of Bowie High

turned to the Fifth Amendment, the right to remain silent. Turning to this right, intended to protect the suspect from coercive and possibly violent police interrogations, resulted in a subversion of this right and exposed the failures of law enforcement due to the fact that it reversed the common power mechanisms inside these systems. Instead of leading to protection and a recognition of the students' U.S. citizenship, their actions were met with even more violence, abuse, and humiliation than before. In order to provide a proper analysis of the students' experiences, this chapter heavily relies on two accounts that have documented the events of Bowie High School in the early 1990s. Theorization or reflection on this case has not been included in many studies. Therefore, I wish to acknowledge two important influences in realizing this chapter: firstly Radiolab's podcast entitled *Border Trilogy Part 1: Hole in the Fence* (2018), which reflected on the event by inviting students, teachers, and scholars to talk about what had happened and specifically on how their turn to the Fifth Amendment was met with even more abuse. Secondly, sociologist Timothy J. Dunn's book *Blocking the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation that Remade Immigration Enforcement* (2009), provides an extensive account of understanding U.S.' border enforcement that regards the Bowie case as playing an imperative role, has been incredibly helpful in this chapter due to the fact it constructively analyzed the lawsuit that followed the Bowie case and also contains interviews with the people that were involved.

As I will argue, the turn to the Fifth Amendment in the Bowie case was extremely powerful and politically enabling, mobilized as a means that directly overturned hegemonic power structures, reclaiming the silence that had been enforced upon them by the structures of the overrepresentation of Man. Their turn to the right to remain silent illuminates, disrupts and resists the exclusionary mechanisms of the overrepresentation of Man ruling who gets to speak, who gets to be listened to, and who is silenced. The over-

representation of Man2, identified in the previous chapter as a hybrid that violently creates the spaces of liminality based upon demarcations of colonial difference, is a system that automatically self-institutes, and, even more decisive, depends on disruptions of the system in order to reconstitute itself.

This chapter aims to highlight how the Bowie case's potential of overthrowing the system is two-layered. As touched upon in the first chapter, one of the characteristics of the overrepresentation of Man is that it is defined as autopoietic and self-installing. Even though the mobilization and politicization of silence in the Bowie case subverted and challenged the hegemonic law enforcement and the hegemonic meaning of silence, meant as an offer for alternative ways of co-existence, they did so in order to participate in the system of the overrepresentation of Man. With their profound deployment of silence, turning to the Fifth Amendment which eventually led to federal judicial review, they willfully participated in a system that actively creates the "spaces of otherness," and the "symbolic death," using the terms of Sylvia Wynter. Nikita Dhawan and literary theorist Gayatri Charkavorty Spivak have both argued how an 'ab-use' of Enlightenment thinking hold the possibility to reconfigure the institutions created by the overrepresentation of Man. This approach offers ways to open up this prospect of Man2 constantly reinventing itself, turning the system against itself, making it 'work' for themselves, working the trap one is inevitably in.

However, as I will argue, the plaintiffs in the Bowie case were clearly working within a nationalistic-citizenship framework (Soysal 1994; Dunn 2009), working with a very exclusive and conditional nature by not explicitly questioning the abusive Border Patrol interrogations towards undocumented border crossers and not questioning border enforcement per se. Sylvia Wynter recognizes this by stressing how liminal categories do not *necessarily* inhabit the potential to radically transform hegemonic discourses since they are written by



the very same system, complicating the political potentials of the liminal category.

### **Border Patrol law enforcement and El Paso**

The Rio Grande, the river dividing the United States from Mexico, separates the city of Juárez, Mexico. The two cities combined constitute the second-largest metropolitan area of the border (following San Diego and Tijuana). El Paso is known as a large, poor city, where the poverty rate was around 25 percent in 2009, more than twice of the national average. The population of the city is mostly Hispanic (either Mexican American or Mexican immigrants), forming around 75 percent of the population. Non-Hispanic white people form nearly the rest of the population, apart from a small percentage making up African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans (Dunn 2009, 16-17). In tracing the border crossing history of El Paso, Dunn has argued how El Paso is surrounded by a sparsely populated desert and dry mountains that run hundreds of miles in all directions, aside from the Rio Grande Valley, in which the border between the U.S.A. and Mexico is no longer the Rio Grande but instead evolves into a land border. Dunn argues how El Paso holds a structural, continuous and long history with border crossings and specifically with purposes of large-scale Mexican migration crossers who wanted to settle in the U.S.A., starting mainly in the beginning of the twentieth century (during the era of the Mexican Revolution). However, in the decades preceding 2000, perhaps due to the isolated location of El Paso, most undocumented border crossings had been of local, temporary crossers, mostly Mexicans living in Juárez and surroundings coming to work in El Paso (Dunn 2009, 18). This was particularly necessitated when the Mexican Peso devalued heavily in the 1980s, eventually leading to a Mexican financial crisis, which left many Mexicans without occupation (Abumrad et al. 2018). The river dividing Juárez from El Paso turned into a popular crossing area for undocumented Latin American border crossers looking for partic-

ipation on the labor market in El Paso for which the El Paso Border Patrol was not prepared. Former Chief Patrol Agent Silvestre Reyes of the El Paso Border Patrol sector has stated: “We were seeing between eight to ten thousand illegal or undocumented people crossing every day in between El Paso and Juárez ... *You had chaos on the border*” (Reyes qtd. in Dunn 2009, 56). On average, the El Paso Border Patrol sector was during the time responsible for 200.000 apprehensions per year.

Border Patrol managers had stressed the importance of generating as many apprehensions as possible since this would justify future budget requests (Dunn 2009, 18). Thus, incidents of apprehension, questioning, stopping, and interrogating ‘suspects’ became more and more normalized. Federal regulations<sup>3</sup> decided that Border Patrol had a broad formal authority: in particular, immigration officers and employees had the power to interrogate, within a reasonable distance from any external boundary of the United States, any person believed to be an ‘alien,’ as was stated in the law. In a zone of 25 miles from the border, Border Patrol had the right to stop and search people, without a warrant, when suspected to be ‘alien.’ In practice, this authority was used against people of Hispanic appearance, especially those appearing to be from lower-income backgrounds (Dunn 2009, 18-21).

This structural ethnic policing accumulated in a normalized climate of fear, unsafety, tension, and anxiety among the residents of El Paso, and the neighborhood El Segundo Barrio in particular. El Segundo Barrio forms the south central section of the city, mostly populated by poor and working class Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. Juan Sybert-Coronado, teacher at Bowie High School at the time, has stated: “When you live on the border and work in El Segundo Barrio, you are never optimistic that a governmental

3

Specifically: 8 U.S.C. 1357, Powers of immigration officers and employees, supplement 5, Title 8 - ALIENS AND NATIONALITY. See: <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2011-title8/USCODE-2011-title8-chap12-subchapII-partIX-sec1357/summary>.

system is going to work for you” (Sybert-Coronado qtd. In Abumrad et al. 2018). Border Patrol officers asked U.S. citizens on a daily basis for passports, immigration documents, birth certificates, obliging them to offer an explanation when they could not identify themselves. If they were unable to, the suspects were facing the prospect of arrest, detention, or even deportation (Dunn 2009, 21).

### **The promises of the Fifth Amendment**

In U.S. criminal jurisprudence, the right to remain silent has been valorized as one of the most fundamental and most cherished principles, regarded as laying the foundations for human dignity and human expressive freedom. Additionally, it is arguably the most widely recognized principle of criminal law among the general public due the many references to the famous phrasing “you have the right to remain silent” in popular culture (Ainsworth 2013, 371). As I will address later, this was also the case for Bowie High, whose students associated the right with Hollywood-produced movies in which rich, white men working on Wall Street would turn to their right to remain silent once they had committed a crime.

The installment of the right to remain silent originates from the Supreme Court’s struggle of how to constitutionally regulate structural coercive abusive, both physically and mentally, police practices that that led to convictions of persons who were probably entirely innocent (Ainsworth 2013, 372). Law professor Janet Ainsworth has argued how, in the 1960s, the United States started to define its national mission as the international promotion of freedom and human rights, and the exposure of brutal police interrogations was troubling and complicating this pursuit and did not fit into this narrative of liberation, freedom, and human rights (Ainsworth 2013, 372). Prior to the installment of the right to silence, U.S. law enforcement was heavily reliant on a manual for law enforcement interrogation known as the ‘Reid technique,’ based on the presumption that the suspect

was guilty. This assumption resulted in the interrogator’s job to procure a confession, rather than investigating the facts of the case (Ainsworth 2013, 373). The 1966 case *Miranda v. Arizona* that led to the installment of the Fifth Amendment, expressed alarm towards the coercive, deceptive, and manipulative interrogation techniques recommended in what had become the ‘bible’ of interrogation for American law enforcement (Ainsworth 2013, 373). Thus, the right to remain silent would provide any suspect with the possibility to end coercive and abusive interrogations at any point.<sup>4</sup> However, as the Bowie case will reveal, this sudden asymmetry reversing the power relation between interrogator and suspect can be met with even more violence, abuse, and humiliation.

Because their turn to the Fifth Amendment led to even more violation and abuse instead of protection, some of the students and staff of Bowie High School decided to sue Border Patrol. It is important to acknowledge that the eventual federal lawsuit of Bowie High in 1992 did not stand on its own and had many points of origin. The case was a culmination of several grassroots challenges that had begun in the 1980s that already challenged these far-reaching exercises of border enforcement authorities.<sup>5</sup>

### **In the run-up towards the case of Bowie High, the plaintiffs**

**4** Many scholars have engaged with the limits of the right to remain silent, exploring its boundaries and whether the right actually exists – in what cases it does and what cases it does not. For thorough engagements on this topic, I recommend Janet Ainsworth’s article “You Have the Right to Remain Silent ... But only if you ask for it just so: The Role of Linguistic Ideology in American Police Interrogation Law” (2008), and the book *Is There a Right to Remain Silent?: Coercive Interrogation and the Fifth Amendment After 9/11* (2008), edited by Alan M. Dershowitz.

**5** Such as the League for Immigration, Border Rights, and Education (LIBRE), formed in 1986, who critiqued and challenged the border more generally and regarded border enforcement as a form of labor control: a closed border policy for works, versus an open border policy for capital and goods. Growing out of LIBRE was the organization the Border Rights Coalition (BRC), established in 1989, urging for a new, border-region-wide human rights organization. Then there was the Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project (ILEMP), established in 1987, the first group to promote efforts to systematically monitor human rights concerns in the border region in relation to border enforcement. Another initiative that was pivotal for the Bowie Law Suit, was the Movimiento Estudiantal Chicano de Atzlan (MECHA), a Chicano student political and cultural group, who had formed a chapter at Bowie High School.

heavily relied on these initiatives, taking inspiration from them and receiving help from some. Therefore, the students and staff of the school challenging their treatment by Border Patrol should not be regarded as the *only* point of origin of the lawsuit. However, Dunn has argued how the bringing and working together of the students and staff of Bowie High to challenge Border Patrol law enforcements, has proven to be historic, since it resulted in being one of the most successful – in the juridical understanding of the word – large-scale challenges to Border Patrol law enforcement excesses and rights abuses in local history, and arguably along the entire U.S.A.-Mexican border (Dunn 2009, 20).

It is 1992.

Bowie High School, El Paso, Texas, U.S.A.

El Segundo Barrio.

Hole in the fence: Building up to the Bowie Lawsuit

Turning to the Fifth Amendment for protection

AKA

*The right to remain silent revealing the overrepresentation of Man, A particular type of being human as the foundation for all human beings – Revealing the demarcation of who is considered Man.*

Only meters from the border fence was Bowie High School located. Border Patrol intentionally left holes in the fence unrepaired, as a means to catch undocumented border crossing traffic before they could have a chance to enter the nearby neighborhoods (Dunn 2009, 25).

Resultingly, the high school turned into Border Patrol's hunting ground. Officers started taking spots in the school, across the school, on their sport fields, on the parking lot.

Rumors even spread that the agents would go undercover as students, that they would wonder the halls of the school and go inside the locker rooms (Abumrad et al. 2018).

Stopping cars, demanding proof of identification, threatening with violence. They were always there.

The new sociology teacher Emiliano Sybert-Coronado felt the need to do something about the normalized culture of being stopped, scrutinized, always having to be ready to be able to show papers. It was a normalized culture in which the officers became part of the school, of everyday life, almost achieving an unquestioned and unmarked presence.

The normalized mistreatments included:

Hostility and rudeness; disruption of an educational environment; sexual leering; false arrest; false deportation; reckless driving and endangerment of students; unprovoked physical battering; aggressive and capricious searches; invasive surveillance based on overly broad criteria for suspects; threats of use of excessive force (including deadly force); a sense of impunity (Dunn 2009, 135).

Female student Sylvia, who had experienced sexual leering and physical battering by the police offers, has stated: "it was a period that if I didn't walk with somebody a little bit whiter than me, I wouldn't feel comfortable" (Sylvia qtd. in Dunn 2009, 138).

The new teacher decided to found the school's chapter of MECHA, organizing activities that raised the consciousness on the abusive practices committed by Border Patrol and made them aware of their rights in relation to these abuses, and started teaching his students about civil rights in relation to Hispanic and Latino history.

Eventually, the students started to comprehend these actions as a violation of their Fourth Amendment: the right to be protected from unreasonable searches and seizures. Hence, as a result, they decided to call upon their *Fifth Amendment: the right to remain silent.*

Which they associated with Hollywood movies and TV-series in which "*rich, white dudes*" would get in trouble, declining to answer during interrogations (Kielty qtd. In Abumrad et al. 2018).

When border patrol agents would stop students and would demand proof of identification, the students would reply: "No! I want to use my Fifth Amendment right to remain silent." More and more students would take over this strategy (Abumrad et al. 2018).

*Deploying silence as a constitutional right leading to violence, abuse.*

Expecting the structural harassment and coercive interrogations to stop once invoking their constitutional right to *which they had access and were part of*, which *should have been designed to offer them protection* instead of dehumanizing treatment, the power reversal the right was expected to bring, did not occur. On the contrary, the abusive interrogations heavily increased. They were still being forced with abusive methods to provide information.

One Border Patrol agent said if we didn't stop they were going to beat us up real bad, to the point where we wouldn't be able to move ... I felt the agent's hand on my elbow. . . . When he jerked me around, *he spat in my face*. . . . He started *pushing me*. He wanted to see some ID ... He started asking me, "Where were you born?" I told him *I was exercising my right to remain silent*. He told me I couldn't because he wasn't placing me under arrest. My friend then showed ID and told him where we were coming from and everything else. We had certificates with a list of the graduating seniors. The other agent took my friend's and crumpled it up. The agent next to me asked for mine . . . and I said, "I want to see you try it." That's when he said, "I think you have a weapon on you." *He got me and slammed me up against a fence, put his left forearm on the back of my neck, started slapping me with an open hand on my back and legs*. . . . *He kicked my legs*. . . . He said [to another agent] . . . "The Bowie kid thinks he's a lawyer." . . . The other agent told my friend he could go. I told my friend to get my mom and brother. . . . The agent responded [to his mom and brother] . . . that I was rude, that *I have to understand that they were federal agents doing their job and that I was making their job harder by having a bad mouth*. My mom got mad. Two or three days afterward my brother and I were standing in front of the apartment. . . . My brother saw the agents. . . . Then they moved forward a couple yards, opened up his window, and *spat towards us* and took off (Juan qtd. in Dunn, own emphasis 2009, 135-136).

Juan's experience reveals how there was a strong *unwillingness* of the officers to accept any questioning of authority, whether or not this was legally allowed. The spitting, the following home, the slamming, the kicking, the words that were said; evidently not behavior that seems appropriate for *federal agents*. This abusive and violent behavior did not change the fact that the officers refused to rethink their

authority, their right to interrogate and question.<sup>6</sup>

What stood out in all cases is the inability of the officers to handle situations in which their authority was questioned, while justifying their abusive behaviors on the basis of being a 'federal agent', allowing him 'to do anything he wants.' This acute switch in power leaving the officers without any, led to frustration, incapable of dealing with the situation.

**The primacy of vision and the primacy of speech**

As this vignette clearly demonstrates, the Bowie case and their turn to the Fifth Amendment exposed how the U.S. legal and law enforcing system has been created for and by a specific type of human, namely Man2 with all its connotations of the normative white, bourgeois male. Similarly, it addresses the responsibility of the knowledge producing institutions that are responsible for the education of those individuals working within and across these institutions. Because, as mentioned earlier, Border Patrol officers were legally allowed to interrogate people close to the border, in practice this led to an enforcement of institutional racism and ethnic profiling, Border Patrol failing to take responsibility for their actions. In her seminal text "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to my Colleagues" (1994), Sylvia Wynter addresses the systemic violence against black subjects and communities in the United States and the structural failure of institutions to take responsibility and accountability, eliminating any possibility of transformation of these abusive systems.<sup>7</sup> Wynter published her text after the beating of

6 For more testimonies of similar abusive mistreatments done to the Bowie High School students by Border Patrol officers, see Timothy J. Dunn's subchapter "Border Patrol Human Rights Abuses against South-Central El Paso Residents in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s" in *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation that Remade Immigration Enforcement* (2009), pp. 134-146.

7 I am aware that Wynter specifically refers in her text to black subjects and communities in the US context and investigates how they have come to the position of "the least equal of all minorities" (Wynter 1994, 42), and thus installed a certain hierarchy that led her to her investigation. However, without wanting to generalize the differences in oppressions between African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, I still think that some points of her analyses hold the possibility to transcend the liminal category of the black subject in the United States and can, to a certain extent, be implied on a broader variety of non-conforming subjects in the discourse of the construct of Man2.

Rodney King and the subsequent riots happening in Los Angeles in 1992 that were sparked by the failure of holding King's perpetrators – police officers, notably – responsible for their actions, even though the event was recorded on tape. Wynter focuses on how knowledge-producing and law-enforcing institutions have come to

conceive of what it means to be both *human* and *North American* in the kinds of terms ... within whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be *perceived*, and therefore *behaved towards*, only as the Lack of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American?" (Wynter 1994, 43).

Illuminating the relation between what it means to be Human in the construction of the overrepresentation of Man and the epistemological grounds of how the world, including its individuals and institutions, function, Wynter thus incorporates the dominance of visual mechanisms in analyzing the world. Referring to the concept of the 'inner eyes,' a term she borrows from Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Wynter deploys the term as a call for reflection on one's internalized structures and one's cognitive behavioral structures. This has the result of creating an assumption of the primacy of vision:

What is our responsibility for the making of those "inner eyes?" Ones in which *humanness* and *North Americanness* are always already defined, not only in optimally White terms, but also in optimally middle-class, variants of these terms? What have we had to do, and still have to do ...? (Wynter 1994, 44).

The 'inner eyes' become the eyes with which one's physical eyes look, the eyes that define *how* one looks at the world.

Donna Haraway raises a similar question in her already mentioned article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in which she asks: "Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?" (Haraway 1988, 585). What Wynter and Haraway both succeed in doing, is making their audience aware of their own subjectivity, positionality, responsibility, complicity, and privilege. The perception of *any* situation is a matter of a located, embodied subjectivity and their specific historical and geographical perspective. Situated knowledges advocates against the irresponsible, the unlocatable, and the disembodied knowledge productions and authority claims. The way one sees the world is *always already* embodied and located.

Their emphases on sight presumes a primacy of vision that is (co-)responsible for determinization of how one is situated in the world. The ethnic profiling of the Border Patrol officers who stopped everyone with a Hispanic and low-income appearance in the area around Segundo Barrio strongly relies on vision, and especially how this vision of the officers came to stand and developed, demonstrates how vision can be a tool of power and domination once in the hands of Man<sup>2</sup>.

Then, the combination of the primacy of vision and the primacy of speech, two characteristics that define who is in power and who constitutes as Man, when dismantled simultaneously, reveal how this ideal of Man is an inherently violent and exclusionary construct. When written by a system that relies on a primacy of vision and a primacy of speech, turning to the right to remain silent when one matches all the boxes of ethnic profiling, opens up space for political subversion, turning the system against itself.

### **Subversive revelations of the Fifth Amendment right**

By turning to their Fifth Amendment Right, in order to make an end to the abusive, violent and humiliating police interro-

gations they were structurally subjugated to, the Bowie students were, instead of the right's promise of protection, met with even more abuse, violence and humiliation. Their case led to a revelation of the shortcomings of the law, highlighting the question of who is included in being a legal subject, who is able to profit from the constitutional rights of the U.S.A. and thus, not only who is conceived as *human*, but also revealing the horizon of who is perceived as *Man* is the system of the overrepresentation of *Man*: who is perceived as citizen and included in the legal system of the U.S.A., and who is not. Far from confirming to the ideals of this regime of Wynter's overrepresentation of *Man*, their demand to the Fifth Amendment subverts the U.S. legal system by revealing the exclusionary and violent demarcations of who is regarded as U.S. citizen and who occupy these spaces of liminality in this autopoietic system. I depart from Nikita Dhawan's perception of subversion, who understands the concept as a method of resignification and reversal, overthrowing and undermining the values and principles of the hegemonic system they are embedded in (Dhawan 2012, 58). Their turn of the Fifth Amendment, which, due to the combination of the primacy of vision and speech embedded in the behavior of the Border Patrol officers, led to subversion because it reversed the power mechanisms, and instead of their demand to protection, they were met with more violence, abuse, and humiliation, revealing and eventually overthrowing the exclusionary mechanisms the Fifth Amendment brought along.

Building on Michel Foucault, linguistic and anthropology scholar Susan Gal has explored how silence holds the ability of holding a paradoxical power in institutional settings of amongst others religious confession, bureaucratic interviews, modern psychotherapy, and police interrogations. When staying silent, the relations of coercion are reversed, creating a subversive defense towards the exercise of power (Gal 1991, 175-176). In *History of Sexuality Volume I* (1978), Michel Foucault has elaborated on these essential power relations in confessional discourse:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence ... of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation (Foucault 1978, 61-62).

This confessional discourse, in which the setting of a regular police interrogation is clearly situated, automatically reinforces the dualism between silence and speech and the power relations it includes: the speaking/confessing subject speaks the truth, holding power over the interrogator who requires the truth in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, or reconcile. Thus, when the suspect who is required to speak remains silent, the power the interrogator holds over the suspect to judge, punish, forgive, console, or reconcile, ceases to exist – and thereby strongly reverses the dominant discursive power hierarchies at play between police officers and suspects, the former holding power over the latter. In combination with the primacy of vision – the inner eyes with which one sees and is situated in the world – co-established by the discourses and narratives around undocumented people crossing the border, the lack of jobs in El Paso, the supposed amount of drugs brought into the U.S. by these border crossers, the legal framework Border Patrol was

working in allowing them to interrogate anyone, co-created the structural ethnic profiling of Border Patrol. Choosing silence over speech in this context *can* be a strategic choice, a choice that, once executed from a position of liminality, reveals the violent discursive mechanisms that define who is included in the overrepresentation of Man. In the Bowie case, turning to the right to remain silent for protection exposed and subverted the ethnic profiling of the officers, whose power mechanisms have been defined by discursive practices foregrounding the combination of the primacy of speech with the primacy of vision, especially because their demand for protection brought them everything but protection. Instead, they were met with more violence and abuse, due to resentment and frustration from the side of Border Patrol and an unwillingness from the Bowie side to passively allow the old status quo to continue. The sudden switch in dynamic of the two-way relationship led a subversion of the system precisely because their turn to the right to remain silent reversed the existing power hierarchies that were in place between the officers and students, leading to frustration and ultimately violent, abusive interrogations by the officers, when it was meant to provide them protection.

### **Turning the system against itself**

Due to the sudden shift in power, media attention from (local) media increased, which eventually led to a lawsuit that resulted in a historical validation against Border Patrol mistreatment of Hispanic citizens and residents in the United States (Dunn 2009, 42). In juridical sense, the interventions by Bowie High were successful since it resulted in a legal recognition of abuse and prescribed direct change in the strategies of Border Patrol. The presiding federal judge, Lucius Bunton, essentially found that nearly all the claims put forward by the plaintiffs had merit (Dunn 2009, 42). Not swayed by the denials and vague assurances made by the agents, the judge made two validations of the complaints against the abusive mistreatments of Border Patrol agents.

Firstly, he recognized how “the stopping, questioning, detaining, frisking, arresting, and searching of individuals based solely upon racial and ethnic appearance reprehensibly violates the Fifth Amendment” (Bunton 1992, 13), and how agents were only in the position to conduct such activities if they had “a reasonable suspicion, based on specific articulable facts involving more than mere ethnic appearance” (Bunton 1992, 11). The lawsuit led to a spreading awareness around the issue of rights abuses in border enforcement among a broad array of social actors in the area of El Paso. Many grassroots initiatives that aimed to increase consciousness on the constitutional rights emerged in the form of neighborhood associations, churches and community groups. Furthermore, the court would supervise the settlement made between Border Patrol and Bowie High School for a period of five years and insist on training in civil and constitutional rights for all Border Patrol officers in the El Paso sector (Dunn 2009, 47). The reforms thus led to an altered one-sided relationship in which Border Patrol was almost in total sway, to a more a dynamic, two-way relationship, albeit still unequal. By turning to the Fifth Amendment and eventually to federal judicial review (both prominent components of U.S. democracy), they took on the undemocratic and bureaucratic power structure of Border Patrol.<sup>8</sup>

Even though they were meaningful reforms, it can be questioned whether they also made actual, changes in the lives of the people embedded in them and whether the reforms improved the climate of fear they were embedded in. As addressed earlier, Dunn has pointed out how, despite Judge Bunton’s preliminary rulings and injunction against ethnic profiling, it was met with so much resentment by officers that actual implementation leading to direct change was far from flawless (Dunn 2009, 44-45). Besides, the law-

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<sup>8</sup> This eventually led to “Operation Blockade” in 1993, which changed Border Patrol enforcements along the whole border of the United States and Mexico. The operation shifted the focus of Border Patrol enforcements from apprehending unauthorized border crossers, to deterring these border crossers by posting more officers directly alongside the border.

suit and Bowie's motives depart from a strong nationalistic-citizenship framework: in their struggle to claim recognition as U.S. citizens, the Bowie students and staff excluded undocumented Mexican immigrants from their case, even though the violent and abusive mistreatment enforced upon them by Border Patrol was also illegal (Dunn 2009, 49). Secondly, the lawsuit did not question the existing border itself and instead only focused on their experiences with border enforcement – and thus working within the nationalist framework of the U.S.A. The lawsuit was very much focused on the civil rights of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, and excluded people who did not obtain this status (yet) (Dunn 2009, 49). As I will argue below, liminal categories hold the possibility to reproduce the dominant hegemonic framework since they are written themselves within this system and are working within it.

The constant oscillation between the demand of belonging and recognition in a system that is built and dependent on excluding categories of liminality, is, as argued in chapter I, characteristic for Sylvia Wynter's theorization of the overrepresentation of Man. Wynter contends that every human order, hence also the order of Man<sup>2</sup>, is autopoietic: “[an] autonomously functioning, languaging, living system” (Wynter 2015, 32). The autopoietic system is a term introduced by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in their work *Autopoiesis and Cognition: Realization of the Living* (1980). Key to this understanding of the autopoietic system is its systemic survival. The systemic survival of a certain descriptive statement happens autonomously, and automatically, through the self-organization of human society. Disruptions of this system are essential for self-stabilization of this system, after which the system will self-correct again, according to the established codes of symbolic life and death and the relation between Man and human (Hantel 2018, 68). Spaces of liminality are therefore essential for the system to constantly fix itself. The liminal subject is stuck in the autopoietic system:

It follows that an autopoietic machine continuously generates and specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components, and does this in *an endless turnover of components under conditions of continuous perturbations and compensation of perturbations*. Therefore, an autopoietic machine is homeostatic (or rather a relations-static) system which has its own organization (defining network of relations) as the fundamental variable which it maintains constant (Maturana and Varela 1980, 79).

Wynter takes up the notion of autopoiesis but provides it with a political dimension, arguing that one cannot be excluded from the overrepresentation of Man. Liminal categories are not kept outside of the system and do not reproduce the narrative of ‘looking at’ something. Far from being passive agents and receivers in the discursive practices of the overrepresentation of Man, they hold the possibility of disrupting the system exactly due to their liminal position in the autopoietic workings of the overrepresentation of Man, as the Bowie case shows. Since they are neither inside nor outside the system, they have the advantage of having multiple perspectives inside the system. The system does not work without the perturbations, the disruptions, the liminal space, its shadow existences. In order to survive, the system needs them to consequently incorporate them into its dominant ideologies and discourse, and simultaneously, the very fact that one is written by the system, challenges their responsibility of changing the system, since they also risk reproducing exactly these violent mechanisms that they are challenging. The Bowie High students and staff exemplify the power of liminal categories by revealing the truth of the system and to trace its outside, creating chaos in the established order. Simultaneously, they do so by turning to exactly



these structures created by the overrepresentation of Man, and are therefore complicit in these exclusionary and violent structures themselves.

Offering some fruitful insights in overturning the system of Man from the position of liminality, I want to turn to Spivak's insights and propositions on the possibilities of dismantling the master's house from the inside. By demanding space within and recognition by the legal system, the students and staff of Bowie High School turned the liberal-democratic ideals of the American political and legal system against itself by exposing its flaws and underlying connotations and prejudices of who is regarded as a citizen and who is not. Their demand for civil and political rights, is actually a demand made in order to be part of this violent (liberal-democratic) Enlightenment discourse as discussed in the previous chapter. In an attempt to break through the normalized climate of fear and shame, Bowie High used the legal system in a way that what was supposed to work for them and protect them from the violent interrogations.

In a discussion of Spivak's work in relation to dismantling the master's house from the inside, Nikita Dhawan points out how Spivak advocates an 'ab-use' of Enlightenment thinking, which advocates modes of "loving the child of rape" as she refers to the institutions, systems of knowledge production, and discourses that have been installed as a result of this discourse (Dhawan 2014, 70). Spivak demands not a rejection of the Enlightenment but asks her readers to instead strategically use the "beautiful tools" of the Enlightenment, using them from below (Dhawan 2014, 69-70). She analyzes the Enlightenment legacies of modernity, democracy, liberalism, and human rights as a "double bind", for which she advises neither to accuse European philosophers, nor excuse them. Instead, she proposes the strategy of entering the foundational texts of the Enlightenment with the idea of seeing how it can be used when it is turned around on its own terms, towards a more democratic and just postcoloniality (Dhawan 2014, 69-70).

Spivak notices how the meaning of the Latin prefix *ab* refers to "from below", but simultaneously stands for much more than that: it indicates a "motion away", "agency, point of origin" and "supporting", as well as "the duties of 'slaves'" (Spivak 2012, 3-4). She argues how the Enlightenment positive outcomes are countered with the establishment of colonization (and the accompanying dualism between colonizer and colonized), the rise of "free trade" that is leading to destruction, and top-down policies (Spivak 2012, 4). As addressed in the previous chapter, violences of colonialism and imperialism are deeply entangled with the liberal-democratic thought rooted in the Enlightenment discourse. Rather than a complete rejection of the violation of this discourse, Spivak notes that the violation contains an enabling potential. Reflecting on this "enabling violation," as she calls it, she states: "one cannot write off the righting of wrongs. The enablement must be used even as the violation is renegotiated" (Spivak 2003, 15). One should not celebrate an innate historical enablement but should hold a deconstructive position towards it. Nikita Dhawan argues how this would entail preserving the best of Enlightenment and rethink its relation to knowledges that have been delegitimized, produced as liminal, rendered invisible (Dhawan 2014, 70). Spivak recognizes the complex structures of colonialism and very well sees their complicity in violently established structures in the overrepresentation of Man. Ab-use of this discourse demands a critical relation towards and reflection of the structures that are inhabited, internalized and are embedded. Dhawan adds to this that when oppressed minorities demand civil and political rights, that demand is rooted in the (liberal-democratic) discourse of Enlightenment (Dhawan 2014, 70). Taking her cue from seeing how the "beautiful tools" of the Enlightenment can be used from within and how its structures can be used when they are turned around on its own terms, Spivak aims to critically open up the Enlightenment to those it has excluded, in a critical manner (Spivak 2003, 259). The Bowie case, working from the inside

of the U.S.' legal system in order to reach protection and freedom, even when the system was excluding them, can be regarded as a practice of what Spivak refers to as ab-use.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Bowie case forms a clear example of how turning to institutional silence in the liberal-democratic tradition, in the form of the Fifth Amendment, can open up many possibilities and leading to recognition, and freedom. Meant as an institution that regulates structural coercive abuses law enforcements, the Fifth Amendment was supposed to install protection. However, as the Bowie case has shown, when deployed from a liminal category, can also lead to the opposite. The primacy of vision at play in the ethnic profiling, together with the primacy of speech, defined the power structures at play in situations of confessional discourse. When these abusive interrogations were revealed by their own institutional tools, the Border Patrol officers responded with even more abuse, violence, and humiliation, instead of offering protection. The Bowie students' ab-use of the tools of the U.S.' political system thus led to a revelation of who counts as Man in the system of the overrepresentation of Man, even creating change in legal regulations regarding future Border Patrol enforcements. However, in doing so, due to the autopoietic component of the overrepresentation of Man, they also replicated the very same structures which mistreated them in abusive and violent manners. They worked within a violent and exclusionary nationalistic-citizenship framework and did not question the role of the border nor the treatment of undocumented border crossers by Border Patrol, making the system work for themselves.

Working within the system of liberal-democratic institutions in which notions of freedom of speech and the right to remain silent have become institutionalized in order to reach freedom, freedom is regarded as a goal, an achievement. As addressed in the first chapter, this idea of *reaching* freedom has come to stand for the political enablement of

the speech act. However, as the second part of this thesis will show (chapter IV in particular), when considering freedom as a *practice*, silence can take the form of a powerful political enablement.

# INTERLUDE: From Freedom as a Goal to Freedom as a Practice –

and what it can mean to silence

Paramount for Part I is the belief that freedom and liberation in the liberal-democratic tradition are an institution that should be reached, a realm one should have as goal, a domain that one can achieve. Freedom is reached when ‘truth,’ hidden inside an individual demanding to be set free, is unveiled through the speech act. Thus, the spoken word becomes the universal route towards this freedom and liberation, and becomes the route towards political enablement, community-making, and a tool for power. This automatically renders silence as something that should be resisted, due to its non-verbal character, as its opposite: censure, powerlessness, absence, invisibility.

However, in the U.S.’ political and legal system, silence is also constitutionalized as a potential to reach freedom, as chapter II has demonstrated. The right to remain silent, installed in a country that arguably holds the most explicit ideals of liberalism and democracy, offers *protection*. Silence, then, becomes something that is resisting and confronting the coercive law enforcement interrogations. Nonetheless, claiming this right from the liminal category embodied by the Bowie case, this institutionalization of silence has shown how it can be met with the opposite of what it is meant to do in a system which is ruled by confessional discourse and the primacy of speech, and can thus instead be met with coercion, abuse, violence, and humiliation. Their attempt to *reach* freedom through silence, an attempt to *work the trap they were inevitably in*, eventually resulted in stricter law enforcements for the Border Patrol practices, having made the system work for themselves.

Part II departs from this idea of regarding freedom as a goal and an achievement, and, instead, works towards an understanding of freedom as a practice. Chapter III first explores how the discourse of freedom as reached through speech has been adapted in two emancipatory movements that have created the very strong imperative of breaking the silence, constructing a seemingly mutual exclusivity between

silence and speech *that could not be further apart*. They are *Silenced Bodies*: silenced individuals seeking freedom in a discourse of the overrepresentation of Man through breaking the silence. Departing from political theorist Wendy Brown, this part illuminates the risk of what she refers to as “a fetish of breaking the silence” (Brown 1996, 186). She argues how, when emancipatory movements are built upon the noise of the silences in regulatory discourses, silences beg to continuously be filled with explosive counter-tales. Going even further than this, Brown argues: “Even more than a fetish, it is possible that this ostensible tool of emancipation carries its own techniques of subjugation – that it converges with non-emancipatory tendencies in contemporary culture” (Brown 1996, 186). Breaking the silence, then, “feeds the power we meant to starve” (Brown 1996, 186). As will be addressed, the focus on breaking the silence risks the overlooking of the importance of *listening*, turning breaking the silence into an end, rather than a means, necessarily and inherently reaching what it claims to do, namely creating a sense of collectivity, understanding, and, in the best case, a route to freedom.

As a critique on this *universal* premise of freedom activated through the speech act, so prevalent in the liberal-democratic tradition, by working towards the idea of freedom as practice, part II considers the possibilities of silence as a *practice of freedom*. When speech is not needed anymore to *reach* freedom, what does this do for silence and its connotations? Individuals can become *Embodied Silences*, who willfully remain silent in the discourse of the overrepresentation of Man as an act of (not limited to) survival, self-care, a refusal and/or boycott. In this light, the succeeding part highlights the subjectivities of silence, critiquing the universal presumption built for and by the overrepresentation of Man<sup>2</sup> of how freedom is reached, what freedom is, by acknowledging the violence that is done inside these liberal-democratic discourses towards liminal categories.

These subjectivities of silence, and their different motives, is what the Colombian performance artist Maria José Arjona explores throughout her work. Silence as resistance, self-censorship, self-restraint, or as a survival skill. In her video work *Right at the Center, There is Silence* (2011), her throat is stuck between four sharp knives, and with every small movement, just a breath or a heartbeat, her throat comes a little closer to the knives.<sup>9</sup>

Maria José Arjona  
*Right at the Center, There is Silence*  
2011.

Maria José Arjona's work is accompanied with the quiet, mute sound of the heart-beat. The sound of the heartbeat, reminding one of their own mortality. But, also, something so intimate, so delicate, so pure. So inherent to one's existence.

Stuck in between four sharp knives. What does it mean to completely stand still? Are we ever still? We are always moving. Our bodies require to move in order to keep the heart beating. Unless, we hold our breath. Unless our heart stops beating.

A sharp knife on the throat –  
Threatening you to speak –  
Daring you to speak.

Silence is subtle.  
Silence is fragile.  
Silence can be evocative.

Silence can be (self-)betrayal,  
It can mean death.  
It can be protection,  
Survival.  
Silence can be communication.  
It can be freedom.

Silence can be a boycott, preventing language from conceptualizing and finding a solution to that silence.

Silence can be uncomfortable.

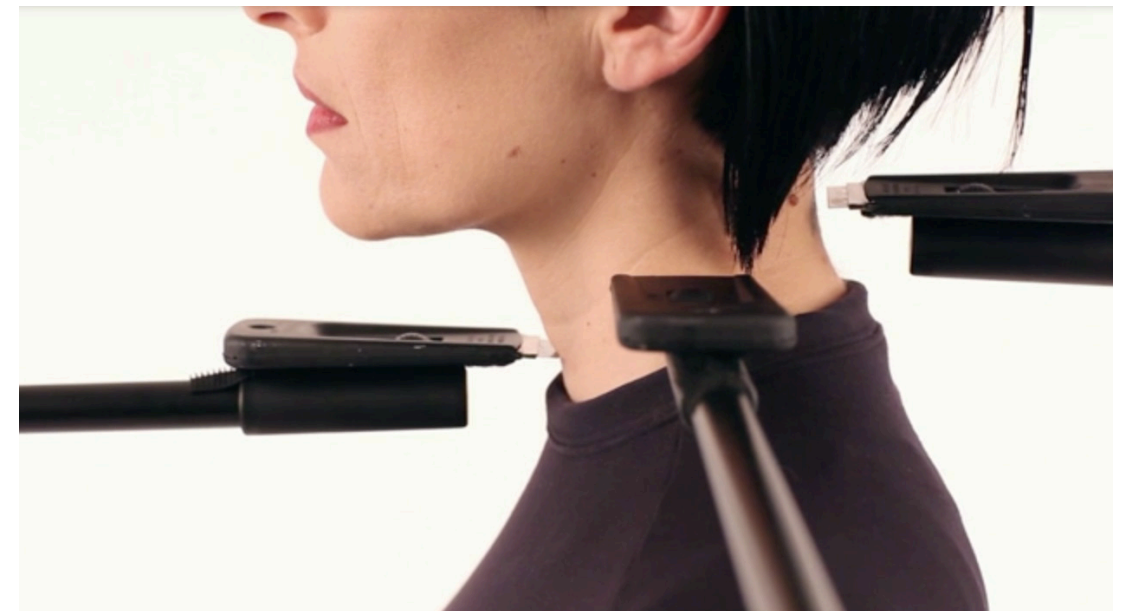
It can be begged to turned into the spoken word.

Silence can speak.

Speech can be silent.



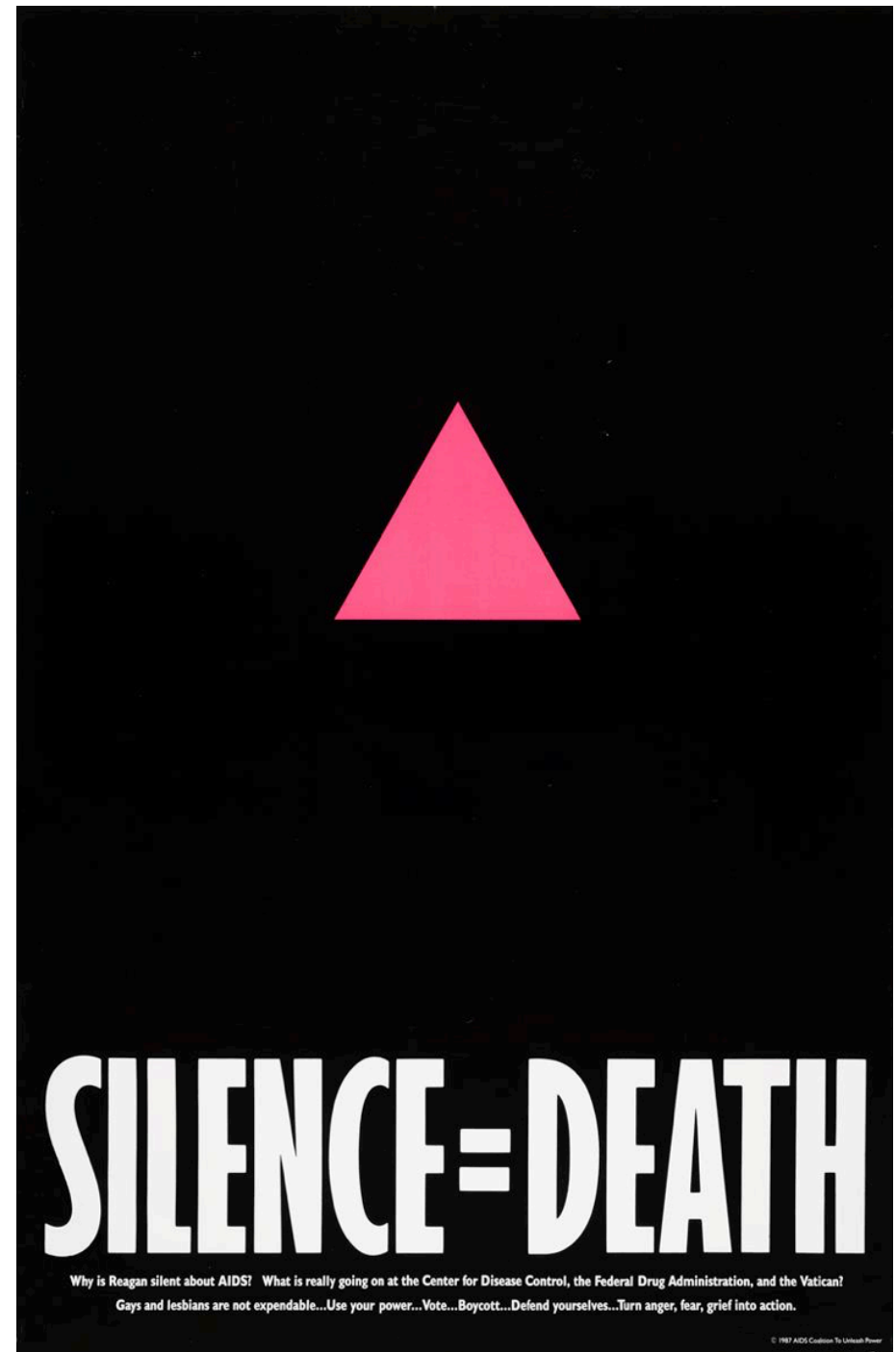
Still from the video at 1:22.



Still from the video at 4:17.

Maria José Arjona - *Right at the Center, There is Silence* (2011). Video work 5:42 min. Anita Beckers Gallery, Frankfurt.

PART II:  
SILENCED BODIES  
&  
EMBODIED SILENCES



*Silence = Death*, The Silence = Death Project, 1987, Poster, off set lithography, 85,1 x 55,9 cm.

# CHAPTER III: The Presumed Evil of Silence in a Discourse of Breaking the Silence – lethal, deadly silences

Silence as metaphor for oppression has long been deployed by feminists, activists, and emancipatory movements. The imperative of ‘breaking the silence’ has become prominent in feminist discourses prevalent in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, influencing the feminist (academic) discourses that have evolved from their work. As the first chapter of this thesis has demonstrated, the rise of the liberal democracy in Europe heavily reinforced the dichotomy between silence and speech, in which speech became the ultimate route to freedom and silence was constructed as its opposite, namely standing for repression and censorship. As a continuation of this deconstruction of the seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech, this chapter serves as an inquiry of how these insights are embedded in and have been adapted by canonical emancipatory movements that became embedded in these liberal-democratic discourses and their ideology of speech as being politically enabling. The common dominant narrative in these movements frame the notion of silence as needing to be ‘cured’ by the imperative of breaking the silence. Unpacking this presumed evil of silence, this chapter explores why the imperative of breaking the silence has become so prominent in emancipatory movements. To do so, it will build on two cases that are both regarded as, despite their entirely different contexts and situatedness, revolutionary and historical and have shaped and inspired many preceding activist movements: The Silence = Death project, initiated in the heights of the AIDS epidemic and crisis in the U.S.A. in the 1980s, and poet, writer and activist Audre Lorde’s seminal speech-turned-essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1977). Both cases deploy a strong and provocative rhetoric, framing silence and speech as two opposites that could not be any further apart.

The Silence = Death project was initiated by a collective existing out of Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Soccarás in 1985 in New York City. The project, and its political post-

er in particular (see page ...), has reached an iconic status. The strength of the provocative slogan lies in how the sentence is simultaneously utterly simple as extremely complex, allowing it to be the subject of both popular culture and a doctoral thesis.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the many references made in the poster inspired a multitude of activists to put forward different takes on the poster: the appropriation of the pink triangle refers to the prosecution and oppression of homosexuality in the Nazi era, and the poster's rhetoric challenges notions of silence, framing it as complicity, oppression and shame, encouraging one to speak out. The creation of the poster is often brought up in relation to the campaigns of ACT UP and Gran Fury since both initiatives adapted the poster and engaged with it in their own ways. However, in this chapter I will focus on how the initial creators of the poster, the Silence = Death collective, and what they intended and hoped to achieve.

Secondly, Audre Lorde's paper *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, which she originally delivered at the Lesbian and Literature panel of the Modern Language Association conference in Chicago in 1977, is considered ground-breaking and has been much-cited, most notably influencing black feminist theory and intersectional feminism. Examining factors that may cause people to remain silent and others to speak and act, Lorde's essay is a plea for speaking up, even when one is afraid to do so.

10 The slogan and poster has been subject to a variety of references, ranging from being analyzed in academic theory, being used as inspiration in AIDS resistance coalitions (ACT UP) and broader emancipatory movements, inspiring artists (for example Keith Haring and Jordan Arsenault), being part of art exhibitions (for example being part of art shows in the Brooklyn Museum, New Museum, Hirshorn Museum, and Galerie Buchholz), and being turned into merchandise ranging from tote bags, t-shirts, pins, and notebooks. In the introduction of *After Silences: A History of AIDS Through Its Images* (2017) by co-founder of the collective Avram Finkelstein, he has expressed his concerns on how the slogan and poster have often been appropriated as an archival material or work of cultural productivity stripped of its original meanings in museums, has been reduced to a visual code for AIDS activism, or has become coopted by capitalism in the form of merchandise (5-7). He brings in the examples of the slogan being an almost 30-meter video wall backdrop in U2's 2015 tour, the image used in the movie *The Pelican Brief*, directed by Alan J. Pakula (1993) and *How to Survive a Plague*, directed by David France (2012). It offers a compelling read on how the poster and text have been appropriated in many different discourses that neglect its actual history.

Reflecting on her own mortality, she questions her own fears of speaking up. The essay has been incorporated in many of Lorde's later works and collections, including *The Cancer Journals* (1980), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (1984), and *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (2017). British author Reni Eddo-Lodge has argued how feminists with a social media account in the 21<sup>st</sup> century inevitably come across Lorde's work and her micro-poetry (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 1). Additionally, Lorde's work holds a canonical position in intersectional feminist academic theory, being part of many syllabi, cited by many prominent academic scholars, her work considered to hold the power of never failing to teach and constantly leaving her audience with a feeling of empowerment: "We find comfort in her words because we see that the struggles we thought we were alone in she struggled with too" (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 1).

What both cases in this chapter have in common, is the provoking (yet different) rhetoric in which they speak of silence. They both clearly articulate, and reinstall, the primacy of the spoken word over silence and thereby create a dichotomy between silence and speech in which their mutual exclusivity could not be further apart. Silence, in both works, is considered as to be the absolute enemy. Neither support the individual motives of someone willfully choosing to stay silent, let alone acknowledge the ability of silence as a practice of freedom, political activism and resistance. Both deploy radical language to express their demand of breaking silences by regarding silence as lethal, required to be conquered by speech and action. Speech, in their framework, is regarded as the route to freedom, just as explored in the first chapter. The negativity and passivity that silence is associated with in these cases, reinstalls the discourse in which the relationship between silence and speech is reduced to a simplistic opposition of speech being the positive and the politically enabling, the route to freedom, and silence as the negative, the passive, the absence. Once again, the idea of 'finding your voice,' and having a voice, assumes the



primacy of the spoken word in feminist activism, regarding it as the path towards self-transformation, societal transformation, and, ultimately, liberation.

By exploring the metaphoric analyses in the two vignettes of how silence and speech are approached by the Silence = Death collective and Audre Lorde, the aim of this chapter is to answer the following question: how is the presumed evil of silences in emancipatory movements, that demands to be broken by speech, situated in the liberal-democratic tradition and their accompanying constructed ideologies on speech and silence?

However, by providing an analysis of the origins of the metaphor of silence as being oppression, this chapter will conclude with challenging the imperative of breaking the silence by arguing how it is not *necessarily* and *inherently* an act of liberation.<sup>11</sup> While granting one freedom in a discourse built for and by the overrepresentation of Man, it also holds the possibility of speech becoming exploited or devalued by the same discursive mechanisms of the Overrepresentation of Man. As a result, depending on the type of speech, speech can conceal a significant silence. Professor, author, and activist bell hooks argues how communication not only requires the act of *speaking*, but also the act of *listening*, which complicates the way one engages with the Silence = Death poster and Audre Lorde's essay, and paves the way to chapter IV.

### **The lethal silence in Silence = Death**

As introduced above, the Silence = Death project was an initiative by a group of six gay men living in New York City, who first came together in 1985. Finkelstein, Howard, Johnston, Kreloff, Leone and Soccarás felt the need to give voice to their anger and show their commitment towards ending the AIDS crisis, foregrounding the deathly crisis in the minds

<sup>11</sup> I wish to explicitly make clear that by no means this chapter should be understood as an argument for a simple reversal of this dualism between silence and speech or a critique on the Silence = Death collective and Audre Lorde; on the contrary, I admire their work and recognize that often silences should be broken and that this action holds the possibility of leading to empowerment, bridging differences, creating collectivity, and social transformation.

of Americana that was until then ignored and neglected. As Avram Finkelstein explains, “in 1981 there was a tempest on the horizon, and anyone with eyes could see it coming. In no time at all it was shaking the doors” (Finkelstein 2017, 1). In *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Its Images* (2017), in which Avram Finkelstein reflects on the storytelling and cultural memory of AIDS since the 1980s, he explains how and why the collective came together as a result of feelings of isolation, rage, fear, loss, and being alone in a fight that no one understood. However, eventually, due to him breaking the secrecy around AIDS with a couple of friends, Finkelstein realized that he was not alone, that his feeling of isolation, rage, fear and loss were shared by so many others. The problem was that no one articulated their experiences. It was an isolation that demanded to be transformed into speech, to be turned into solidarity and recognition. A recognition of their existence, sexuality, and life-threatening illnesses, and to create a sense of collectivity amongst gays and to build towards the realization of not waking up alone on the other side of a divide. Finkelstein profoundly describes his experiences of losing his partner Don to AIDS and the way Don's family coldheartedly turned Finkelstein from being the embodiment of Don's soulmate into the embodiment of Don's illness:

The line I'm referring to is not the line that divides the sick from the well, or families from each other when they're confronting mortality ... It's the line tracing along centuries of unspoken pacts that cater to the portions of the world with unchallenged veins of hatred, the line drawn around queer existence and any articulation of it, the line marriage rights don't actually remove, the line that can separate you from everything, even your own humanity. I'm talking about homophobia, and if AIDS had any cultural meaning at that point in time, a large portion of it was situated there, even for people who

would never have characterized themselves that way (Finkelstein 2017, 31).

Based on feminist consciousness-raising principles, the “Silence = Death collective” was initiated as a collective that would dedicate themselves to exploring what it meant to be gay in the age of AIDS (Finkelstein 2017, 36). A collective of which its members, even though they were not friends before, were bound by “an accelerated chemistry that was extremely unguarded” (Finkelstein 2017, 37). Their shared experiences of isolation, fear, loss, and rage, leading to secrecy and silence, were complemented with another dimension of silence, namely the complicit ignorance of the broader societal, political and economic structures when it came to acknowledgment of the existence of AIDS. Installing its own violent mechanism, responsibility to provide resources for curing the disease was lacking. In the documentary *Silence = Death* (1990), AIDS-diagnosed artist David Wojnarowicz furiously contends:

If I die, what I want is my friends to pick up my body from the hospital, drive to Washington DC, break through the gates in front of the White House, and drop my fucking body right on the front steps of the White House. These are the people responsible for my death ... It is not my sucking dick that's responsible for my death or me getting fucked in the ass ... These people at this point are responsible for my death because of their inactivity and total gesture of silence throughout eight years of this (Wojnarowicz qtd. in *Silence = Death*).

The origins of these feelings of isolation, rage, fear, exclusion, and loss demanded to be broken in order to claim recognition, freedom, and protection in a system that violently reconceptualized discursive mechanisms of the overrepresentation of Man.

It is 1987.

New York City.

The silence on AIDS was deafening.

It demanded to be broken.

Recalling the night Finkelstein, Socarrás and Johnston first discussed their experiences with AIDS, Finkelstein describes:

“No one knew what to say about AIDS, and when they did say something, it was rarely in the company of strangers. But it was all we talked about that night” (Finkelstein 2017, 35).

The prime feelings the collective experiences that resulted in Finkelstein's silence were loss, rage, fear, isolation, leading to an environment of secrecy. Finkelstein explains the foundations of his feelings as following:

Loss of his partner Don and the thousands of others in that year (Finkelstein 2017, 34).

Rage, because nobody seemed to care about all these deaths and uncertainties; rage against the public neglect and ignorance surrounding the disease; rage against the disproportionate media's attention for actor Rock Hudson being outed by the disease in 1985, the media suddenly becoming revolting, agonizing whether he put Linda Evans at risk with his on-screen kiss (Finkelstein 2017, 34).

Fear for saying goodbye to the world as he knew; fear for the uncertainty that would follow (Finkelstein 2017, 25); fear for the unspoken presumption of being the next to fall ill (Finkelstein 2017, 33); fear for being at risk; fear for sex; fear not knowing how to navigate sex anymore; fear for not being able to retrieve the connectedness that sexual intimacy could bring; fear for facing death alone (Finkelstein 2017, 37-38).

Isolation by being excluded from Don's family who refused him in being part of their grief (Finkelstein 2017, 30-33); isolation from inside the gay community by talking around the subject; isolation because of the refusal to directly articulate one's rage and fear (Finkelstein 2017, 30-35); isolation because of how straight friends articulated how freaked out they were by the disease (Finkelstein 2017, 35).

All these feelings and experiences, resulted in secrecy (Finkelstein 2017, 35).

Finkelstein experienced a feeling of exhilaration of being able to speak about AIDS after so many years of silence. Speaking about it became a form of liberation, created safety, a way to process his experiences: “There’s a point when your story stops being yours” (Finkelstein 2017, 15). For Finkelstein, articulation of his silences led to:

Safety that was found in the anger of others; safety that was found in the connection made with others; a safety that allowed anger to exist; a safety that even embraced the fury (Finkelstein 2017, 35-36).

Processing what has happening by turning the struggle from a personal one to a communal one (Finkelstein 2017, 36).

Liberation by not having to hide the pervasive rage (Finkelstein 2017, 35).

The enemy was not simply the disease: it was much more, it was the silence that was present in the broader defining structures of power in mainstream culture, politics, economics. It was the silence of the media and the way they foregrounded or ignored race and gender in depictions of AIDS, the way government opposed the existence of the disease and the infected individuals, the way public policy did not come up with resources to cure the disease, and the way the media only started to pay attention when a popular public figure was outed by the disease, the way no money was being made available for research, and the way the public tiptoed around discussions of AIDS.

Their silences were *complicit, oppressive, structural*.

Forming the collective enabled them to become political.

Speaking enabled them to become political.

Forming the collective enabled them to reach liberation.

Speaking enabled them to reach liberation.

The transformation from silence into speech.

The goal of the poster needed to address two distinctly different audiences, with a bifurcated goal, that seemed to be oppositions from each other (Finkelstein 2017, 40):

- 1) It needed to stimulate political organizing in the lesbian and gay community
- 2) It needed to imply to anyone outside the community that the community was already fully mobilized

Meant as a conversation starter, the tagline had to raise questions and encourage political responses. It had to be provocative, alarming, stimulating.

SILENCE = DEATH

Every connotation of silence, every motive to stay to silent, every form of silence, reduced to the simple equation of death. The many meanings of silence, with its variety of motives, all being circled around the inevitability of the time, a forceful reminder that – no matter what sort of silence – it will eventually get you, destroy and kill you. The many, many silences that, when paying attention, violently reveal the biases, prejudices and power mechanisms at play in the autopoietic system of the overrepresentation of Man, the liminal category being stuck in a loophole.

A loophole that demanded to be broken by political action.

THE SILENCE WAS ABOUT TO END (Finkelstein 2017, 53) // WAR. BECAUSE OUR GOVERNMENT OPPOSED OUR EXISTENCE (Finkelstein 2017, 60).

Tracing the underlying motives of silence that led the Silence = Death collective to create such a strong rhetoric on silence and speech, reveals how silence in this discourse is conflated with being silenced, leading to the overarching metaphor of silence as oppression. As discussed in chapter I, Beatrice Hanssen and Nikita Dhawan have argued how the articulation of inner truth through the speech act supposedly leads to *universal* freedom in liberal-democratic discourse (Dhawan 2007, 229-232; Hanssen 2000, 160). It is exactly this presumption of the existence of a universal freedom that can be reached through the speech act, that proves to be more complicated once performed by categories of liminality. This motive for breaking the silence through speech also appears in the Silence = Death collective, who regard speech as allowing and creating space for safety, process, and liberation. Speaking out is a revolutionary act that frees the truth that is stuck inside.

According to the logocentric discourse of the liberal-democratic tradition, the revelation of this truth by the

spoken word symbolizes this same truth, speech offering a direct and unmediated relation to this supposed truth. Since speech allows for no spatial or temporal distance between speaker, speech, and listener, and the speaker and listener perceive the speech act simultaneously, Dhawan argues how this immediacy seems to guarantee that the spoken word resembles exactly that what was meant to be said (Dhawan 2007, 230-231). She argues how this idea of perfectly self-present meaning occurring in the speech act is one of the foundational underlying ideals of Western culture and defines its logocentric bias (Dhawan 2007, 231). The Silence = Death collective declaring war on silence is strongly rooted in this same logocentric bias and framework that regards speech as the ability to reveal truth and silence as the oppression of this truth. However, the edges of this truth-seeking ideal that presumes that the listener perceives the same truth as the one who is speaking, and thus actually *listens*, are revealed when the speech act is conducted by a liminal category, demanding to be listened to by the overrepresentation of Man.

Thirty years after the creation of the first poster, In *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through its Images*, Finkelstein expresses his doubts and struggles with how the poster and slogan increasingly became an object, an artefact to be displayed as in art institutions, when this was never the intention of the collective. "Once these posters are isolated from the environment they were created for, they become oddly mute ... No amount of didactic material adequately compensates for this effect" (Finkelstein 2017, 5). Besides, the Silence = Death poster has in many situations been reduced to a visual code for AIDS activism and institutional storytelling, turning the poster into a narrative in which the role of grassroots movements – which the poster embodied – were not recognized, and instead became part of a problematic popular discourse and collective memory of AIDS. This dominant narrative, the saga that is in regulatory discourses accepted as the "History of AIDS" (Finkelstein 2017, 3), rep-

resents the narrative more being supportive of political and economic power structures than of grassroots organizing, and, most of all:

It's the heroic tale of an embattled community demanding the accelerated drug research that paved the way for pharmaceutical advances offering viral suppression to patients with access, a parable that "proves" the system works in a way so predicated on the presumptive neutrality of whiteness, male physiology, pharmaceutical intellectual property rights, and a deregulation-mad political landscape that it turns back to the parts of the pandemic that continues to rage offering a sense of resolution in its place (Finkelstein 2017, 3).

Finkelstein continues by offering a powerful critique of this sense of resolution he speaks of, and the understanding that AIDS is somehow manageable, asking the following questions:

How do you convince people to care about the millions of lives beyond the reach of treatment access, or about decades of HIV criminalization case law? How do you reignite the will to fund research into a cure for HIV/AIDS, the only kind of pharmaceutical intervention that might finally eradicate stigma? And if AIDS only mattered where white people were threatened by it, and if the only story that matters is how white people respond to it, what becomes of the majority of people still trapped in its furious spin? (Finkelstein 2017, 3-4).

These questions raised by Finkelstein himself undermine the strong rhetoric deployed earlier on silence and speech. When silence is framed as censure, not allowing for truth to appear, in a context of being refused to speak and being

denied participation in dialogue, does breaking the silence evidently and necessarily mean that one is allowed to speak, allowed to participate in dialogue, and, most importantly, *allowed to be listened to*? The poster has clearly demonstrated how breaking the silence is an important first step, as the Silence = Death collective and the many other grassroots initiatives have proven in the 1980s, the question of *listening* should follow directly in order to make sure that the breaking the silence will lead to structural, actual, lived change. While Silence = Death is now annexed by regulatory discourses on the History of AIDS that offer a sense of resolution and, in turn, silence the fact that the crisis far from over – with regards to stigma, medication access, the lack of resources and attention to geographic areas and non-white individuals where of for whom AIDS still poses a significant threat – it becomes clear how breaking the silence is not synonymous with joining the conversation. Finkelstein acknowledges this as well: “The thinking behind it is as grounded in listening as it is in speech, and listening is essential to the intersectionality required to finally eradicate HIV/AIDS” (Finkelstein 2017, 6). As I will argue in the next section, the act of listening is just as, or probably even more, important for an even dialogue to exist as the act of speaking.

### **Audre Lorde and silence as self-destruction and self-betrayal**

Audre Lorde’s work is also characterized by the constant affirmation that to speak is the equivalent of self-transformation and to create community, to become the path towards reaching liberation and freedom. As already mentioned, her seminal *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1977) deploys a rhetoric that strongly reinforces an understanding of silence that could almost not be further apart from speech. In this text, she declares “a war against the tyrannies of silence” (Lorde 1992, 32), urging her listener and reader to speak up, to break the silence, quoting her daughter when she claims that “you’re never really

a whole person if you remain silent” (Lorde 1992, 33). The MLA-conference, where she first delivered her speech, took place a couple of months after Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer. As an identifying black lesbian feminist poet, she felt isolated, wanting to reach out to other black lesbian feminists with cancer, wondering how they managed their disease and recovery (Lorde 1992, 50). Instead, she realized she had to do it by herself, find her own ways of coping with her diagnosis, finding her own way of survival.

Her speech, while addressing the silence surrounding breast cancer, became interwoven with insights on the relationship between silence and power as being a member of several marginalized communities. Dealing with her feeling of isolation in her diagnosis, writing poetry and essays on what had not been written down before allowed her to realize she had to exist, enabling her to pick up her life again (Lorde & Rich 1981, 736). *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* reveals the limits, the possibilities and boundaries of rhetoric, addressing silence in relation to power and the way it is often abused by power through examining the factors that causes some people to remain silent and others to speak up. However, throughout the text, her central focus lies on the role of language and articulation in communicating differences that hold the possibility of constructing relationships and community, and how language holds the potential to transform oneself and society. Her understanding of the possibilities of speech, as its ability to be a form of human liberation rhetoric, are, similar to the Silence = Death collective, vastly rooted in the ideal reinforced by the liberal-democratic tradition as addressed in the first part, namely as speech being the route to freedom.

Lorde’s rage and feeling of isolation that needed to be turned into speech, mostly departed from the realization of one of the greatest difficulties after surgery. She asked: “Where are the models for what I’m supposed to be in this situation?” (Lorde 1992, 50). She highlighted the great lack of role models, the great lack of advice on how to proceed,

the great lack of tradition that would guide her. Aiming to speak up about this issue and hoping to create and find a community of women she could share thoughts, beliefs, and visions with, Lorde hoped to lose the feeling of standing alone. The sense of isolation played, just as for the Silence = Death collective, an important role for her demand to break the silence. In an interview with poet Adrienne Rich that took place in 1979, Rich brings up Lorde's hesitations prior to attending the conference: "And you said there was no way you were going to the MLA - remember? That you couldn't do it, you didn't need to do it, that doing it could not mean anything important to you" (Lorde & Rich 1981, 735). To which Lorde replied:

You said, why don't you tell them about what you've just been through? ... And I started saying, now that doesn't have anything to do with the panel. And as I said that I felt the words "silence." "transformation." I hadn't spoken about this experience ... This is silence ... Can I transform this? Is there any connection? Most of all, how do I share it? And that's how a setting down became clear on paper, as if the connections became clear in the setting down (Lorde & Rich 1981, 735).

It is 1977.

The Modern Language Association Conference, Chicago.

The Lesbian and Literature Panel.

Audre Lorde delivers "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" for the first time.

"... I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" (Lorde 1992, 32).

Lorde dedicated her essay to shatter the myth of silence as being a form of protection and instead emphasizes silence as being self-destructive, self-betrayal, a type of cancer, and death. As a cancer that grows inside your body, day by day, undetected, making you sick, and eventually kills you:

Death ... is the final silence.

And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words (Lorde 1992, 31).

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid? (Lorde 1992, 30).

Speech, on the other hand, stands for Lorde for integrity, courage, self-respect, responsibility, and holds the possibility of revealing taboo: in her context race, sexuality, and life-threatening illnesses (breast cancer).

I was going to die, if not sooner than later,  
whether or not I had ever spoken myself.

My silences had not protected me.

Your silence will not protect you.

But for every real word spoken,  
for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths  
for which I am still seeking,

I had made contact with other women

while we examined the words

to fit a world in which we all believed,

bridging our differences.

And it was the concern and caring of all those women

which gave me strength and enabled me

to scrutinize the essentials of my living

(Lorde 1992, 31).

Lorde makes here a very direct (whether unconscious or not) reference to the meaning of speech in the liberal-democratic tradition. For Lorde, speech reveals her subjective truth, which is not granted a status of truth/existence. It is a demand for visibility, the route to freedom.

It is self-revelation, that in turn allows for a search for self-examination, transformation, and community building –

“I have come to believe over and over that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.

That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect” (Lorde 1992, 29).

Even though Lorde does acknowledge the risks that speech brings, being bruised or misunderstood, she regards the possibilities of speech as more valuable: identification, transformation, bridging difference, communal support, by overcoming internalized shame, anxiety and fear.

For Lorde, thus, breaking the silence is a necessary act in order to overcome isolation and difference, and create community. Speaking one’s truth would lead to freeing one’s mind, to self-revelation, self-transformation, and the transformation of society. Lorde’s plea is strongly rooted in the logocentric liberal-democratic understanding of speech, referring explicitly to the ideal of speech as being truth-revealing and that speaking out profits her, “beyond any other effect” (Lorde 1992, 29). Most likely to encourage people to start speaking their truths without too many burdens, creating bridges between the differences in her audience, Lorde seems to not make any difference in the type of speech that is articulated and regards breaking the silence, and dialogue, as necessary first steps to cure one from the evil of silences. In the text, Lorde does emphasize the importance of listening, stating:

Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives” (Lorde 1992, 37).

Lorde also recognizes how speaking out can be dangerous, risking one’s truth to be bruised or misunderstood (Lorde

1992, 29). However, despite these fears, she still believes that speaking out paves the route towards transformation and freedom.

### **The other side of dialogue: the importance of listening**

Speech as the route towards freedom is the continuously ideal that comes to surface. In pointing out the importance of listening in the framework of breaking the silence, communication scholar Lester Olson has pointed out: “Breaking silence is a necessary condition for overcoming internalized shame or for acknowledging and bridging differences in the interest of combatting wrongful deeds, but it is not a sufficient condition. We have evidence in the historical record of how well we listen to such voices” (Olson 1997, 64).

bell hooks has argued along similar lines: “Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (hooks 1989, 6). Thus, while hooks throughout her work also encourages her audience to turn their silence into speech, she emphasizes also how communication requires listening, the ability to speak in a way that compels listeners, and one that is heard. She argues how, from her own positionality as being a black woman raised in the southern black community of the U.S.A. (hooks 1989, 5), the “right speech of womanhood” was focused around “the talking into thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear you – the talk that is simply not listened to” (hooks 1989, 6). She argues how voices can be tuned out, can become background music; audible but not acknowledged as significant speech (hooks 1989, 6). Thus, dialogue, and especially the mythical ideal of Socratic dialogue that lays on the basis of the liberal-democratic understanding of speech as argued in the first chapter, is not necessarily the result once a silence is broken. Lorde as well recognizes the importance of listening:

Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we, each of us, must recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our living (Lorde 1992, 37).

However, Lorde refers to the importance of listening rather as an invalidation of the excuse of hiding behind separations that have been imposed and internalized, letting each other's differences rob ourselves from ourselves and each other (Lorde 1980, 38). Listening in Lorde's context is meant as building bridges and to create solidarity across difference. hooks, on the other hand, addresses this point too, but takes it a step further. hooks identifies the feminist emphasis put on finding a voice, its primacy of the spoken word in talk, discourse, writing, and action and how, as a result, "speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject" (hooks 1989, 12). In acknowledging the importance of speech, she argues how it is more important to pay attention to *what one speaks of*, and the possible problematic aspects of speaking that can surface:

-in the United States, ... here the idea of finding a voice risks being trivialized or romanticized in the rhetoric of those who advocate a shallow feminist politic which privileges acts of speaking over the content of speech. Such rhetoric often turns the voices and beings of non-white women into commodity, spectacle. In a white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal state where the mechanisms of co-optation are so advanced, much that is potentially radical is undermined, turned into commodity ... Often the question of who is listening and what is being heard are not answered. When reggae music became popular in the United states, I often pondered whether the privileged white people who

listened were learning from this music to resist, to rebel against white supremacy and white imperialism. What did they hear when Bob Marley said, "we refuse to be what you wanted us to be" - did they think about colonization, about internalized racism? (hooks 1989, 14).

hooks proposes here an incredibly compelling and important argument. Even though she speaks specifically about the geographical context of the U.S.A., I regard it as safe to extend this argument to at least the discursive imperial geopolitical context of the U.S.A. and Europe as it is known today. The rise of the internet, the accelerated content consumption, and the heavily publicization of private life are only a few examples of what has reinforced this trivialization and romanticization of turning silence into speech. Thirty years later, hooks' argument for listening and recognizing as being just as important as speaking in creating dialogue, has arguably only become even more relevant and important to remember. As her quote suggests, speaking in such a way that confirms regulatory discourse, speaking what it wants to hear, defining experience in a language compatible with dominant narratives and frameworks in this discourse, will only reinforce domination (hooks 1989, 14-15). Thus, she argues for the establishment of a "liberatory voice", a way of speaking characterized by opposition and resistance, a way of speaking that is not determined by one's status as oppressed being and object. hooks proposes that how this type of voice would demand a paradigm shift in talking, listening, and hearing (hooks 1989, 15).

### **Concluding remarks**

Thus, as both the cases of Silence = Death and Audre Lorde have shown, a reinforcement of the liberal-democratic discursive understanding of silence and speech, has led to the demanding that silences need to be cured by the imperative of breaking the silence. Silence, here, stands for iso-



lation, fear, loss, rage: hidden truths that are waiting to be unveiled by speech, which is considered as liberatory, community-making, safety, self-examination, and transformation. However, as Finkelstein's reflections on how becoming part of the 'History of AIDS' discourse that fails to acknowledge the importance of grassroots organizing in the mobilization of political action against the disease, he addresses how it has influenced the way dominant narratives currently regard the disease in relation to stigmatization, intersectional approaches, treatment access, and research. By being annexed by regulatory discourse, it became complicit in violently excluding and silencing others. Chapter IV will address this annexation of underrepresented discourses by regulatory discourses in further detail.

Similarly, for Lorde, who regards breaking the silence as a necessary step in order to overcome isolation and difference, she also frames breaking the silence as the ultimate way to reach freedom and liberation. When breaking the silence in these contexts are indeed very necessary first steps, it does not mean they are *inherently* acts of liberation, as was promised by the liberal-democratic discourse. This presumption of the existence of a universal freedom reached through the speech act, proves to be more complicated once performed by categories of liminality. Listening, in turn, as bell hooks point out, is just as important. Wendy Brown argues how silences are not broken forever once they are broken once, and argues that, even though choosing to stay invisible (from unitary discourses) can be injurious in its own ways, it can be a mild suffering compared to "that of radical denunciation, hystericization, exclusion, or criminalization" (Brown 2005, 75). Chapter IV will engage with this complexity in further detail, by offering an understanding of silence that is a practice of freedom, a practice of political resistance that refuses to be coopted, "annexed" as Michel Foucault argues, by regulatory discourse. Simultaneously, the decision to stay silent can also be an act of radical self-care.

## CHAPTER IV: SILENCE AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM –

*silence as alternative imaginary*

This chapter serves as an exploration of silence as a means of preserving and keeping certain practices and dimensions of existence from regulatory power and normative violence. Public exposure can be threatening, demanding. At what possible cost comes breaking the silence? What is at risk by speaking up? This chapter addresses the possibility of subjugation that can be found in the discourse of breaking the silence. Does one want to be part of a system that is inherently violent and built on exclusionary mechanisms? These suggestive questions address whether the “fetish” of breaking the silence, as Wendy Brown argues (1996; 2005), while intended as paving the way towards freedom through speech, also holds the possibility to chain one to their histories and to further regulate those lives while, as a possible (not guaranteed) result of breaking the silence, they are part of the violent public discourse of the overrepresentation of Man.

As a challenge against ‘speak out culture’ and ‘call out culture,’ this chapter argues how the demand of breaking the silence can be indifferent towards the suffering it can cause. By opening up space for staying silent out of free will, as a practice of self-care, refusal and freedom, this chapter explores the possibilities of creating spaces of freedom in silence in regulatory discourse. In order to think of silence in such a way, silence need to be reconceptualized as an act of freedom making and community making. In order to do so, I will examine how silence as a practice of radical self-care can lead to community making, and how regarding silence as a way of communication becomes a practice of freedom. Michel Foucault’s theorization of freedom will serve as a foundation to this argument.

Foucault considers freedom not as an achievement or a goal, but instead regards it as a practice: “the liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them” (Foucault qtd. in Rabinow 1984, 245). This offers a radical shift in the perception of silence/speech and challenges the liberal-democratic assump-

tion of freedom as a universal goal, as addressed in chapter I. When speech in the liberal-democratic tradition and their institutions is regarded as the revealing of truth which paves the way *towards* freedom, speech is framed as the politically enabling. However, when freedom is understood as *a practice*, then it does not have to be ‘saved’ or ‘cured’ by speech in order to *reach* freedom. While intended as a route towards freedom and as a production of truth (and thus rendered as *being* the truth), the speech act also holds the possibility of chaining individuals to injurious and violent histories. This can even lead to a perpetuation of the power mechanisms inside the system that controls and regulates liminal categories.

This chapter is therefore structured as following: firstly, I will elaborate on what Wendy Brown calls “compulsory discursivity” (Brown 1996; 2005). I will use her concept to interrogate how the compulsion and force with which subjects are coerced into participating with discourse, can create a system that can be exclusionary and subjugating in its own way. Keeping this tension of compulsory discursivity in mind, I will then argue how silence can function as a practice of self-care that protects certain human beings from participation in these violent discourses. Simultaneously, by not participating in these discourses, the decision to remain silent provides a counter-discourse in which silence can become a practice of freedom in itself.

Crucial to this argument is the difference in the relationship between silence and power. Michel Foucault has argued how silence has two possibilities in relation to power and discourse: silence in discourse can function as a shield *for* power, and as a shield *from* power (Foucault 1978, 100-101). Whereas turning to the silence of the Fifth Amendment in chapter II functioned as a shield *for* power, mobilizing silence as a dimension of institutional power, this chapter engages with the possibilities that are opened up once silences are instead a shield *from* power, practicing freedom in themselves. I will explore this possibility of free-

dom in the deployment of silence in the case of Marlon T. Riggs' documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989) and the way the Mexican political group the Zapatistas understand silence as a method of communication.

*Tongues Untied* is a documentary capturing the many meanings and legacies of silence in the black homosexual community in 1980s U.S.A. Its strength lies in the way it recognizes and displays silence in its multiplicity, amongst which silence are being a practice of self-protection and coping mechanism.

Furthermore, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (in short: ELZN, after this referred to as 'Zapatistas'), is a political group fighting for anti-globalization, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and radical democracy in Chiapas, Mexico. The group actively mobilizes silence as a way that directly rejects dominant structures of power, as a refusal to participate in dominant narratives of neoliberalism and capitalism and their frameworks that reinforce the violent institutions created by the overrepresentation of Man2. Instead, they approach silence as community-making, a way of communication, creating a counter-discourse in which they practice freedom through silence, refusing to be annexed by the regulatory discourse of the Mexican capitalist and political discourse.

Both examples form demonstrations in which silence is considered as a practice of freedom and a refusal to participate in the violent overrepresentation of Man. This chapter thus answers the following question: How can silence be a practice of freedom that refuses to be part of the violent system of the overrepresentation of Man?

### **The compulsory discursivity of breaking the silence**

In her article "In the 'folds of our own discourse'—The Pleasures and Freedoms of Silence," (1996) Wendy Brown expresses her concern with 'compulsory feminist discursivity,' decrying the demand of emptying private life into the public realm, resulting in a trivialization of public sphere. As she

states, "these productions of truth not only bear the capacity to chain us to our injurious histories as well as the stations of our small lives but also to instigate the further regulation of those lives, all the while depoliticizing their conditions" (Brown 1996, 185). This compulsory feminist discursivity goes hand-in-hand with the demand to break the silence as addressed in the previous chapter. Brown detects a potential of freedom and resistance in silence that I want to elaborate on here, in order to come to an understanding of silence that is a *practice* of freedom. For Brown, silence demands a different relationship with unitary discourse: "it signifies a relation to regulatory discourses, as well as a possible niche for the practice of freedom *within* these discourses" (Brown 1996, 188).

Brown detects two types of formulations engaging with the (North American) feminist concern with censorship and silencing<sup>12</sup>, either subscribing to an *expressive* or a *repressive* notion of speech. On the one side, expression is regarded as the route to freedom, the ability to tell the truth and put these truths into circulation and recognition (as addressed in chapter I and III). On the other side, expression is understood as oppressive, because it can put 'their' truth into circulation, for example in the form of pornography, harassment, and hate speech. Thus, these two engagements argue for either more expression on 'our' part, or for less expression on 'their' part. Making this analysis, as also comes forward in the cases in addressed in chapter III, Brown then argues what is hidden underneath these two strands in American academic feminist theory: both equate freedom with visibility and voice, assuming that recognition is the material for power and pleasure. She argues how both these strands fail to confront the regulatory potential when

12 Brown is concerned with "American academic feminism," and the two strands she identifies within it, and focuses on the work of Gayle Rubin and especially Catherine MacKinnon (Brown 1996, 187). However, even though I agree that this tension and understanding of silence and speech is still echoes today in many forms of academic feminist theory, I think Brown makes a somewhat generalizing assumption about American academic feminism and that this simple equation between these two strands oversimplifies and generalizes the whole of what Brown refers to as "American academic feminism". Therefore, I build upon her work, but addressing and challenging a more specific type of feminism (albeit highly influential), rather than following Brown here.

one speaks for themselves, presuming an evil of silences that needs to be conquered by expression and the speech act (Brown 1996, 187). So far, Brown theorizes the narrative of breaking the silence that I have addressed in the previous chapter. In order to initiate a rethinking of the relationship between silence, freedom and speech, which enables silence as a practice of freedom in regulatory discourse, Brown turns to Michel Foucault and the way the French philosopher understood silence and its relation to discourse. I will elaborate and trace this argument in order to come to an understanding of silence inside that discourse that holds the potential of resistance and as a practice of freedom. Brown notably turns to two of Foucault's works: his seminal work *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978), in which he theorizes silence as being both a shelter of power and a shelter from power, and his theorization of subjugated knowledges in the lecture he gave at the Collège de France on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault demonstrates how a continually increasing economy of confession was developed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This confessional discourse resulted in a repeatedly intensifying relationship between silence and power:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. *In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance* (Foucault 1978, own emphasis, 100-101).

Foucault emphasizes in this quote the ambiguity of the notion of silence, as holding the possibility of functioning as both a shield *for* power and a shield *from* power. Foucault illustrates this with the presumed freedom of same-sex practice (and in particular: homosexual practice) in a historical age, when a formal discourse for or about these practices was non-existent, which evolved in becoming "the great sin against nature" while the 19<sup>th</sup> century unfolded (Foucault 1978, 100-101). This development led to a nearly universal reticence in talking about sodomy, enabling a twofold operation: "on the one hand, there was an extreme severity (punishment by fire was meted out well into the eighteenth century, without there being any substantial protest expressed before the middle of the century), and on the other hand, a tolerance that must have been widespread" (Foucault 1978, 101). Social control on 'homosexuality' – a term that also only came into existence late 19<sup>th</sup> century – emerged as a result from discourses around sodomy that made its appearance in psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature, creating an environment of perversity, secrecy, and heterosexual normativity. However, this discourse also created a "reverse discourse" (Foucault 1978, 101): a discourse in which homosexuality started to speak for itself, often in the same discursive vocabulary as established in the unitary discourses that disqualified its existence, demanding its legitimacy or naturality (Foucault 1978, 101).

Silence, here, is not the equivalence to either secrecy or not speaking; rather, as Brown argues, silence forms a signification of a relation with regulatory discourse and a possible niche for the practice of freedom *within* those discourses (Brown 1996, 188). This would entail an understanding of freedom as a practice, rather than an end or an achievement that demands to be installed in institutions. Practicing freedom in discourse holds the possibility to take place in these 'silences' that are not yet broken, and are thus not part of the production of a new public or institu-

tional discourse. Once these silences are ‘broken,’ Brown argues, they “may bring otherness *violently* into being as it brings a designated subject respectively into abjection, censure, or regulation” (Brown 2005, 74).<sup>13</sup> Keeping certain practices from regulatory and unitary discourses, keeping it silent, “may then be read as a radical deconstructive proposition against any pretense to political absolutism” (Brown 2005, 74). It is this circle/loop of constant discursivity, built on the equation between speech and freedom and truth, that results in the compulsory discursivity Wendy Brown speaks of.

As she argues, it is important to mark that Foucault does not imply a prediscursive existence of certain practices. In the case of the emerging discursive social and biopolitical control of same-sex practices, Foucault does not mean that before becoming annexed by regulatory discourse they existed outside of discourse: “the point is rather that they had not yet been brought into the pervasive disciplinary or biopolitical discourses of the age – science, psychiatry, medicine, law, pedagogy” (Brown 2005, 75). This presupposes the idea that silences are discursively produced. It is not absence, neither secrecy, neither not speaking; rather, it is a *practice* of freedom, of community making, even. Silence as a shelter from power, can be the space which *unitary* discourse has not penetrated (yet): an environment of practices that escape the regulatory functions of discourse, rendering silence into a source of protection, and potentially even power (Brown 2005, 75). This also contests the liberal-democratic premise of a universal freedom reached through

13 For further readings that include examples and analyses of violent effects of “broken” silences that have become part of regulatory discourse, I highly recommend the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, who has traced the production of “lesbian” as a category in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas, specifically in her article “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas” (1994). Joseph Massad’s work, and his book *Desiring Arabs* (2007) in particular, reveals the production of the binary category between heterosexual/homosexual by the “Gay International” in cultures where these constructed subjectivities did not exist prior in a highly compelling (yet polemic) manner.

speech: regarding freedom as a practice allows for freedom that comes in multiplicities and a variety of subjectivities.

What these freedom-practicing silences risk then, is what Foucault has identified as the risk of “re-codification and recolonization” (Foucault 1976, 86) of these oppositional discourses by unitary discourses:

In fact, those unitary discourses, which first disqualified and then ignored them when they made their appearance, are, it seems, quite ready now to annex them, to take them back within the fold of their own discourse and to invest them with everything this implies in terms of their effects of knowledge and power (Foucault 1976, 86).

Foucault argues how certain ‘oppositional’ discourses, “when ‘annexed’ by those ‘unitary’ discourses which they ostensibly oppose, become a particularly potent source of regulation, carrying as they do intimate and detailed knowledge of their subjects” (Brown 1996, 190). Thus, when the demand to break the silences by liminal categories is meant as a tool for empowerment, ironically enough, by being co-opted in the dominant and unitary discourse, the speech act runs the risk of becoming a new technique of subjugation and domination.

This process of becoming part of the system of the overrepresentation of Man that prioritizes speech over silence, is strongly entangled with the processes of identity formation and categorization. This process is two-folded: on one side of the coin, confessing injury and speaking about trauma, for example, can result in stigmatization, attachment to the injury or traumatic experience, and, most importantly, often prevents one from being able to move on, to disengage with the experience and to not want to have one’s identity attached to it. In other words, the subject is *produced* by the system it claims to protect or emancipate because of the demand to turn the experience into lan-

guage, and preferably the speech act.

The other side of the coin engages with how breaking the silence can lead to subjugation: when a silence is broken, that specific speech act risks becoming to constitute a universal truth about a whole identity group. These confessions are assembled and deployed as “knowledge” about a specific group (Brown 1996, 192). Certain experiences become the monopolies of certain truths:

Even as feminism aims to affirm diversity among women and women’s experiences, confession as the site of production of truth, converging with feminist suspicion and de-authorization of truth from other sources, tends to reinstate a unified discourse in which the story of greatest suffering becomes the true story of woman” (Brown 2005, 78).

The effects of this monopolization can be tremendous, exclusionary and violent: Brown argues how persons who, for example, not manifestly suffer from their childhood sexual experience, do not feel shame about being gay, someone who does not necessarily identify as a person of color, are excluded as members of identity categories that also claim them (Brown 2005, 79). Thus, while meant to empower them, these practices can silence those who do not share the experiences of those who have spoken up, of those whose suffering is most (discursively) marked.

Bringing in subjugated discourses and lived experiences into the law, thus risks their recodification and recolonization of “disinterred knowledges”, forming their own techniques of domination. Truths, then, “can become our rulers rather than our emancipators” (Brown 2005, 77). Consequently, the liberal-democratic premise of “universal freedom” that is reached by speaking one’s inner truths, is not necessarily accomplished when these truths are annexed and taken over by regulatory discourses, turned into violent, exclusionary, and stigmatizing logocentric discourses.

It is in this light that I wish to highlight the understanding of silence as a way of preserving oneself from being annexed by regulatory discourse in the case of *Tongues Untied* and the Zapatistas.

### **Silence as protection of and survival in unitary discourses in *Tongues Untied***

*Tongues Untied* is a revolutionary, ground-breaking and experimental documentary directed by Marlon T. Riggs in 1989. Riggs was an Emmy-award winning American filmmaker, poet, activist and professor. Throughout his work, he examined, often in an innovative and provocative manner, past and present representations of race and sexuality in the U.S.A., confronting racism and homophobia. *Tongues Untied*, set in New York City and San Francisco, is often regarded as one of the first movies in European and North American cinema that gave voice and visibility to the black gay male experience (Petty 2014; Mercer 1994). As a result, the documentary has often been theorized as a work that penetrated the walls of oppressive silence by which the black gay community was living. However, one of the strengths of the documentary, is that Riggs does not construct and display a monolithic representation of black gay identity. Rather, the documentary enables and advocates a proliferation of voices (Petty 2014, 418). As the title of the documentary suggests, Riggs engages with the relationship between silence and speech, and in particular the meaning and possibilities of this relationship in a context where one feels out of place, uncomfortable, foregrounding personal journeys of navigating existence and identity formation in these environments.

Even though the documentary successfully endeavors to undo the legacy of (oppressive) silence in black gay life, I want to emphasize the ambiguity and ambivalence of silence in this film that Riggs captures so well, approaching silence as a concept that allows for multiple experiences, stories, subjectivities. The strength of *Tongues Untied* lies in the way how the documentary politicizes the relation be-

tween silence and the speech act, specifically in how it suggests silence as being an open-ended path that leads to a proliferation of subjectivities, creating a harmony of different ways of engaging with the struggle of identity formation. The documentary is experimental in the sense that it blurs any aspects of poetry, rap, performance and personal testimony into a compelling, non-chronological entanglement in which race, sexuality and culture – and its oppressive, exclusionary mechanisms – cannot be discussed separately from each other. As a consequence, Riggs' politicization of silence and the speech act builds upon a variety of experiences and contexts of, amongst others, self-protection, personality, insecurity, fear, oppression, privilege, and ignorance.

It is 1989.  
Marlon T. Riggs.

#### TONGUES UNTIED

One of the opening poems of the documentary:

*Silence is my shield / it crushes  
Silence is my cloak / it smothers  
Silence is my sword / it cuts both ways  
Silence is the deadliest weapon*

Silence is subjective and ambiguous and multiple and speaking and enigmatic and indefinite and is throughout the documentary addressed as:  
Silence is anger | silence is the hurt | silence is protection | silence is destruction |  
silence is acceptance

Silence can mean a multitude of things. The documentary allows for and enables a recognition of these multiplicities of silence. It enables individuals to choose their own form of self-representation and their own form of engaging with silence. It allows them agency. It acknowledges the pains and struggles that come with breaking the silence and shows how silence can be a form of self-care when one does not have the social privilege of falling back.

But there again, the heartbeat, similarly to Maria José Arjona's *Right at the Center, There is Silence*. Something so inherent to existence, not being able to live without it. Yet, also the discomfort that it brings, the realization of mortality:

I know the anger that lies inside me. Like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It's easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning (qtd. from 27:20).

Silence is a way to grin and bear it. A way not to acknowledge how much my life is discounted each day (qtd. from 1:30).

*When these are identities one does not want to claim – one has not chosen to claim:*

The blacks hated me. Because they ... assumed my silence as a superiority. I was shy ... Cornered. By identities I never wanted to claim. I ran. Fast. Hard. Deep. Inside myself. Word was still. Silent. Safe. Deception (qtd. from 13:10).

## SPEAKING UP DEMANDS // AKA A RESPONSE TO RIGGS

Speaking up demands braveness.  
Speaking up demands to be open for reactions from others.  
Speaking up demands an openness of your vulnerability.  
Speaking up demands to be willing to do emotional labor.  
Speaking up demands not being shy of the spotlight.  
Speaking up demands being able to give up being shy.  
Speaking up demands being willing to give up being shy.  
Speaking up demands being willing to fight the battle inside a violent system.  
Speaking up demands making yourself vulnerable.  
Speaking up demands allowing yourself to be vulnerable.  
Speaking up demands making yourself visible.  
Speaking up demands assimilation into regulatory discourse.  
Speaking up demands assimilation into identification categories.  
Speaking up demands a willingness to identify.  
Speaking up demands becoming part of regulatory discourse.  
Speaking up demands assimilation into a vocabulary that does not suffice.  
Speaking up demands a realization that your silence is illegitimate and invisible.  
Speaking up demands standing your ground in a fight for legitimacy.  
Speaking up demands coming to terms with the labeled identities.  
Speaking up demands coming to terms with injurious histories and experiences.  
Speaking up demands accepting injurious histories and experiences.  
Speaking up demands acknowledging how much life is discounted every day.  
Speaking up demands claiming identity.  
Speaking up demands seeking identity.  
Speaking up demands seeking acceptance in identity.  
Speaking up demands being willing to start the conversation.  
Speaking up demands being willing to participate in the conversation.  
Speaking up demands being able to participate in the conversation.  
Speaking up demands being able to start the conversation.  
Speaking up demands being willing to be defeated.  
Speaking up demands being willing to be critiqued.  
Speaking up demands being willing to be humiliated.  
Speaking up demands being willing to confront the public.

One of the subjectivities of silence that Riggs addresses and acknowledges, is a context in which silence offers protection, acceptance and as a way to “grin and bear it,” as quoted in the vignette. Even though Riggs does not explicitly mention it, these practices of silence can be regarded as a form of self-care. In order to argue for silence as an understanding of self-care, it is necessary to regard self-care as a mode of protest, a way of survival, essential for surviving in a system that is inherently violent. Arguing for this understanding of self-care, I build upon Sara Ahmed and Audre Lorde who have convincingly argued against neoliberal co-optations of self-care and feminism and thereby claim self-care as a necessity for “finding ways to exist in a world that is diminishing” (Ahmed 2014). Self-care has often been criticized for being self-indulgence, holding an individualistic neoliberal agenda, nowadays quite often regarded as a feminist buzzword that glosses over and neglects its underlying dynamics of power in the dimensions of race, gender, class, sexuality, ableism, etc. I argue for an understanding and practice of self-care that is a mode of protest, essential for surviving in a system that is inherently violent and not built for the survival of some positions of liminality. Resultingly, the decision to stay silent – to practice silence as a way of freedom – can function as a method of self-protection and coping with injurious histories, not willing or not being ready to participate in regulatory discourse, when speaking up demands too much.

In a much-cited sentence of Audre Lorde in *A Burst of Light*, she claims how self-care is an act of political resistance: “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde 2017a, 256).<sup>14</sup> Lorde wrote this when she was diagnosed with liver cancer, referring to the political struggle that was caring for

14 Much-cited; however, this sentence is often referred to and quoted without taking Audre Lorde’s context in consideration, leading to exactly this individualistic take on self-care.



her own body. *A Burst of Light* is a collection of profound writings and notes by Lorde while she learns that she has liver cancer and becomes more and more confronted with her own mortality. Throughout, she addresses how the struggle for survival is simultaneously a struggle for life and a political struggle, not only evolving into a chronicle against her fight and resistance against the disease, but also towards social injustice. In the context of her work, self-care becomes self-preservation, rather than self-indulgence. In her poem *A Litany of Survival*, Lorde addresses those who “were never meant to survive” (Lorde 2017b, 200), in which the very act of survival demands creativity, work, and willfulness, and how this mode of survival is already inherently political, revolutionary, a way of protest. Building on Audre Lorde, feminist writer and independent scholar Sara Ahmed has dedicated one of her *feministkilljoys* blogposts to self-care, claiming and defending self-care as an act of political warfare when the costs of protesting are made so high and one does not have the needed support system and privilege to fall back to that protesting often demands. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed writes:

When you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action; a refusal not to exist until the very end; a refusal not to exist until you do not exist. We have to work out how to survive in a system that decides life for some requires the death or removal of others (Ahmed 2017, 237).

Self-care then becomes a possible action of survival. How to live for, and be for, one’s body when it is under attack. Ahmed argues how self-care is looking after oneself because they don’t have the privilege of being looked after: not being cared for, supported, protected, not being part of a support system (Ahmed 2014). For Ahmed, self-care can be about the creation of community, “assembled out of the experi-

ences of being shattered” (Ahmed 2014). reassembling oneself by the everyday, the ordinary and often painstaking work of looking after oneself and after one another.

When self-care is understood as finding a way in a world that makes it difficult to exist, then allowing for silence to exist in a context in which the social norm is to speak out, call out, and break the silence. Even though Ahmed does not recognize or acknowledge silence specifically as self-care, and only addresses silence in relation to complicity,<sup>15</sup> I want to broaden Ahmed’s argument by enriching it with Brown’s endeavor to approach silence as a practice of freedom and how *Tongues Untied* allows for a silence that is protection and survival. When these silences are meant as a way to preserve certain stories and truths from being annexed by regulatory discourse – when they deliberately stay silent as an act of resistance and a practice of freedom – they become a way of taking care of oneself and others in the overrepresentation of Man that is extremely violent and demanding. In a quiet, humming way, these silences are everything but invisible, non-existing, absent. Challenging the regulatory discourse in which calling out and speaking out – and how they are framed as being easy to do – is the “new social norm” (Ahmed 2014), can take shape in the allowance and recognition for deciding to stay silent.

Having come to understand, know and feel what is at stake in the feminist obligation of speaking up, Ahmed recognizes why so many choose not to speak up. She therefore argues towards a new communication system that goes beyond the speech act but suggests that feminist disturbance can take many forms of action, not solely limited to speech:

Speaking out and speaking with, sheltering those who speak; these acts of spreading the word, are world making. Killing joy is a world-making project.

15 One of Ahmed’s much-cited sentences is: “Silence about violence is violence” (Ahmed 2017, 260-261), in which silence stands as a metaphor for (not limited to) an easy-way-out, complicity, fear, shame ignorance, and/or privilege.

We make a world out of the shattered pieces even we shatter the pieces or even when we are the shattered pieces (Ahmed 2017, 261).

When self-care, as a revolutionary act, can include silence as both a revolutionary act and a practice of freedom, then, in Ahmed's consideration of speaking out *that does not necessarily entail the speech act* and includes a variety of feminist disturbances that are world-making, silence can be a method of communication and resistance. This idea, of silence being a practice of freedom, communication and resistance in the discourse of the overrepresentation of Man, is embodied by the following case of the Zapatista's.

### Communicative and resistant silences

Striving to foster expanded identities among its members, the spokesman of The Zapatista movement, Subcomandante Marcos, has created a myth of universality around himself. Marcos solely takes on the status of an outsider, which helps to make the movement appealing to a wide variety of supporters, even ones that are not affiliated with the direct struggle of indigenous communities in Mexico (Russell 2005, 566-567). Marcos proclaims universality and not only justifies his own commitment to the movement, but also authorizes the involvement of others (Russell 2005, 564). With the claim of being an outsider, Marcos bridges global north and south, the indigenous and non-indigenous and encourages others to join the network and to go beyond traditional identity affiliation in order to reach as many people as possible. In a similar light, Subcomandante Marcos has stated how the Zapatistas form a group that proposes a "decentralized intercontinental network of alternative communication" (Ruggiero 2002, 9), and, in 1996, when the Zapatistas organized their first "Encuentro" that brought thousands of people together from all over the world, the invitation read as following:

It is the word which is the bridge to cross to the other. Silence is what the powerful offer our pain in order to make us small. When we are silenced we remain very much alone. Speaking heals the pain. Speaking we accompany one another. The powerful uses the word to impose his empire of silence. *We use the word to renew ourselves.* The powerful uses his silence to hide his crimes. *We use silence to listen to one another, to touch one another, to know one another* (Ruggiero 2002, own emphasis, 8).

Their poetic play between the hegemonic concept of silence and a reversal of its meaning, a *reclamation* of their silence almost, allows the Zapatistas to deploy the concept as a method of communication. A clear example of this is their December 2012 demonstration, when 40.000 Zapatistas and allies mobilized silence into a mode of subversive defense and political protest by silently marching through the southern Mexican state of Chiapas with the following slogan: "With our silence, we have made ourselves present." In this protest, silence has been politicized in order to reflect, analyze and regenerate community:

It is December 21, 2012.

Chiapas, Mexico.

In particular, five cities in Chiapas: Ocosingo, Palenque, Altamirano, Las Margaritas and San Cristóbal de las Casas.

December 21, 2012: the last day of the Mayan cycle. Note the symbolism of the date: for many 'the end of the world,' for others, the beginning of a new era.

It has been more than a year and half without a public statement, but suddenly the Zapatistas showed their faces again. 40.000 members of the Zapatista 'social bases,' who support the military structure but are not directly involved in it, walked in the rain, with discipline and dignity, their faces covered with masks. They marched along the streets of five cities in the state of Chiapas.

But, most striking, *they marched in total silence*. The sound of falling raindrops was the only noise accompanying the march.

It was the largest mobilization of Zapatistas since the emergence of the ELZN in 1994. When the demonstration ended, a brief statement was read by the Zapatista general command, signed by Zapatistas spokesman Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, stating:

*“Did you hear? It is the sound of your world collapsing/it is our world coming back”* (Navarro 2012).

Following the massive demonstration, the ELZN published a communiqué on December 30, 2012, explaining its next steps and reflecting on the strategy of silence:

*In the cities of Palenque, Altamirano, Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, and San Cristóbal de las Casas, we looked at you and at ourselves in silence.*

...

*Ours is not a message of resignation.*

...

*It is not one of war, death, or destruction.*

...

*Our message is one of struggle and resistance* (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2012-2013).

This is not a silence of defeat. It is not a silence of dismissal, neither is it a silence of resignation. On the contrary, in their silence, the Zapatista's have been in a strong and active dialogue with people from all over the world, demonstrating their solidarity with communities across Mexico and building bridges between social movements in order to learn from them.

*With our silence, we have made ourselves present* (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2012-2013).

It is a silence responding to the silences of the state. A state's silence that is complicit, used as a tool of power, meant to silence voices from liminal spaces and voices that critique the politics of the state.

*They slandered us first and wanted to silence us later* (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2012-2013).

Contrary to this silence coming from the top, that keeps everything in place and doesn't allow transformation to happen, the silence coming from below stands for a shift in focus. It stands for solidarity and connection among grassroots movements and spaces of liminality, working towards a radical change in the political landscape.

*They don't need us in order to fail.*

...

*We don't need them in order to survive* (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2012-2013).

Did you hear?

Despite from the symbolical meaning of the date of the protest, the demonstration was strategic in another way as well: it was organized less than a month after the inauguration of former president Enrique Peña Nieto. His election caused several massive demonstrations organized by various social movements, who regarded the elected president as controversial, and being part of a corrupt media-government oligarchy (Molina 2013). The demonstration, which was their biggest non-violent mobilization up to that point, can thus be read as a clear message stating they are doing their work. The world they aim to achieve can only be reached by discipline, daily coordinated efforts, and organization. For the rest of the world, the demonstration was a lesson in exactly these things: speaking with their marching legs, militant clothing and their non-verbal communication, the demonstrators showed their dignity and everlasting presence. The many protestors marched a route that was unchangeable due to the amount of preceding and following demonstrators, appearing to be infinite. The message was: “we are here, we are fighting.”

*Those who wagered that we only existed in the communications media and that, with the siege of lies and silence they created we would disappear, were mistaken.*

...

When there were no cameras, microphones, pens, ears, or gazes, we continued to exist.

...

When they slandered us, we continued to exist.

...

When they silenced us, we continued to exist.

...

And here we are, *existing* (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2012-2013).

Through the protest and their accompanying statement, the Zapatistas mobilized silence into a practice of freedom and communication that disrupts the autopoietic system of the overrepresentation of Man. It is exactly through their deployment of silence as being a method of communication that they practice freedom. Silence, here, is not absence, invisibility, censure; rather, it is humming, whispering, present when you pay attention. It is a component of discourse that refuses to be annexed by regulatory discourse, boycotting the overrepresentation of Man and the systems it creates. It refuses to become part of the neoliberal capitalist system by staying silent in this discourse, not demanding to be listened to and accepted by hegemonic discourse. Rather, through this demand of not breaking the silence, they reach out to other liminal categories from all over the world to join their struggle and to build communities, building bridges between them. Contrary to what chapter III has demonstrated, in which *speech* was supposed to lead to building bridges and community, in the framework of the Zapatistas, the decision to remain silent allows them to build their own communities and ways of life, fighting to remain untouched by the overrepresentation of Man. Speech is not their emancipator, but indeed, their ruler, as Wendy Brown has argued.

In an age where silent political protests are not necessarily unique and not historically unprecedented and happen on a regularly basis all over the world, this case of the Zapatistas has been unique. Most silent protests deploy silence because of its striking power of showing urgency in an era in

which the “carnavalesque” has ruled social and political activism, reinforcing a discourse in which as much noise possible is regarded as the best and most engaged form of activism (Fitz-Henry 2016). However, in many of these protests, the demand is still to *break the silence*, and *demand recognition and participation* inside the system of the overrepresentation of Man, echoing what has been argued in chapter III.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Zapatistas, instead of demanding the right to participate, their protest is meant as a way to demonstrate that they were existing, precisely without participation in regulatory discourse. By manifesting to the world that they were, in their silence in the overrepresentation of Man, creating a world-otherside, and deploying silence is their practice of freedom.

### Concluding remarks

Concluding, by arguing a switch in both regarding silence as a shield *from* power instead of *for* power, and from regarding as a practice instead of a goal reached by speech, silence offers a safe space to for protection, resistance, and power. In both the cases of *Tongues Untied* and the Zapatistas, silence is deployed as a refusal of participation in regulatory discourse, a refusal to be annexed by this discourse, a refusal to become produced by the system. In the first case, allowing for space for self-care and resisting identity, and in the latter, silence as a method for communication and community building. Both practice freedom in discourse exactly because their silences are not broken by colonization of unitary discourses, and are thus not part of the production of new public or institutional discourse, rendering otherness

<sup>16</sup> Two recent examples of these type of silent protests are the annual organized ‘The Silent Protest’, recurring at different university campuses throughout South Africa, aiming to generate awareness around rape and uniting women who have been subjected to sexual assault by taping the mouths of the protestors. Secondly, the many pro-choice protests happening in different cities around the world, ranging from the U.S.A. to Ireland to Argentina, in which the protestors march silently throughout the cities dressed in the robes of the popular novel-turned-TV-series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, demanding change regarding reproduction rights and abortion rights.

violently into being. Keeping these practices from regulatory discourses, then, offer space for silence as a practice freedom, resistance, and community building. The question that remains then, is, can silence be a method of transformation?

## CODA –

**The possibilities of  
silence as sociopolitical transformation**

In its aim to open up the reductive understanding of silence as absence, invisibility and powerlessness and as the opposition of the politically enabling speech act, this thesis has illuminated possibilities of how silence can function as a powerful act of strategical political enablement, community-making, a practice of freedom, and as a refusal to participate in regulatory discourses. This thesis opened with following question: How can the inherently violent and exclusionary seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech, as constructed for and by Sylvia Wynter's 'overrepresentation of Man2' rooted in the liberal-democratic tradition, be opened up by Wynter's 'liminal categories' towards an understanding of silence as politically enabling, creating a world-others? With each chapter intended as an exercise of deconstructive theory, feminist politics and methods, together they explored different facets and potentials of silence by mapping out its relation to speech as understood in the liberal-democratic tradition created by the overrepresentation of Man. Part I explored the possibilities of silence as politically enabling in a realm in which freedom is regarded as an achievement and a goal. As a response, Part II worked towards an allowing for a multiplicity of silence, in which freedom is understood as a practice. This difference in approach has proven to be crucial for the exposure of the violent and exclusionary mechanisms of the overrepresentation of Man that installed an understanding of a *universal* freedom that could be reached by the speech act, created for and by the construct of Man2.

Chapter I provided a considerate deconstruction of the seemingly mutual exclusivity between silence and speech by tracing it to this liberal-democratic tradition, and how these connotations are strongly reinforced, implemented, and embedded in contemporary liberal-democratic societies and their socio-geopolitical impacts. This premise has become universalized through what Sylvia Wynter has come to scrutinize as the installment of the overrepresentation of Man2,

in which colonial difference violently demarcated which type of being human has come to stand for all human beings. The primacy of the spoken word in European logocentric thought is evident in two bodies of theory that still influences contemporary liberal-democratic thinking: the Socratic dialogue, and John Stuart Mill's work *On Liberty*, both forming significant examples of how silence should be something to be resisted by manifesting the importance of speech towards reaching freedom. However, this inherent ability of speech is only in reaching distance for this construct of Man2, failing to take into account any notion of violence. Silence, in this discourse, is rendered as the opposite of speech since it offers no direct route to freedom.

The succeeding chapters illuminated the violent and exclusionary mechanisms of this discourse, by challenging the presumptions of speech and its seemingly opposition of silence from what Sylvia Wynter proposes as liminal categories. These positions of liminality, as being both inside and outside of the overrepresentation of Man, hold the ability to conjugate alternative imaginaries towards a world-others. Chapter II explored these possibilities of silence as political enablement when silence has been institutionalized as a route to freedom, and thus offering a similar trajectory towards this achievement of freedom as the speech act. However, as the Bowie case has made clear, this institutionalization of silence in the Fifth Amendment did offer them anything but its promises of protection and (ultimately) freedom. Instead, due to the liminal position of the Bowie students and staff, the case revealed the exclusionary mechanisms hidden inside the system of the overrepresentation of Man.

Chapter III engaged with two prominent cases of emancipatory activism, The Silence = Death collective and Audre Lorde's essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, and how they are both strongly situated inside these ramifications of the discursive mechanisms created by the liberal-democratic tradition that have violent-

ly demarcated the dichotomy between silence and speech. Their demand to break the silence revealed how the universal premise of freedom, reached through the speech act, is not inherently and necessarily reached. The act of listening is just as important in order to participate on an equal level with Man<sup>2</sup> in regulatory discourse. Where breaking the silence can be a necessary first step, it is far from synonymous for freedom.

Building on Wendy Brown, Chapter IV has built on this approach by allowing for a multiplicity of existences of silence that challenges the contemporary impulse of compulsory discursivity. It explored how silence, when understood as a practice of freedom, allows for a safe space for self-care, resistance, boycott, communication, and community building. These practices of silences are a practice of freedom because they have not been unified by regulatory discourses, who have produced them in a new public or institutional discourse, thus shaping, once again, silence as a goal and achievement. The powerful cases of the documentary *Tongues Untied* and the deployment of the Zapatistas have both demonstrated how silence can be an act of free will, a subjective practice of freedom, and, most importantly, creating a world-otherwise that is dominated by the overrepresentation of Man.

### **Silence as a method of political enablement**

Strongly built on the existing scholarship of Sylvia Wynter and Wendy Brown, an overarching approach and position of this thesis has been the impossibility of certain practices happening “outside” of discourse. In her engagement with Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown has focused upon Foucault’s relation between silence and power in which silence functions as a shelter from power. As explored in chapter IV and in particular the case of the Zapatistas, when silence functions as a shelter from power, they have not been brought into these socially pervasive discourses, rendering silence into an understanding that is neither identical with secrecy

or non-speaking, and therefore offers a possibility for silence as a practice of freedom within those discourses (Brown 2005, 75). They are, then, silences that are discursively produced and should be considered as part of these discourses. Sylvia Wynter’s theorization of the liminal category and its relation to the overrepresentation of Man addresses in a similar manner how the liminal category is always produced by this system of the overrepresentation of Man, due to its autopoietic component. This inescapability renders the liminal category as potentially radical, as explored in the Bowie case in chapter II.

Together, these overarching principles can question the possibilities of the variety of deployments of silence as being radical challenges to the discourses created by the overrepresentation of Man. Indeed, the liminal category is written by the same system, and therefore is embedded in the same discursive mechanisms and practices. However, the crucial difference is when these silences are deployed as a practice of freedom. Silence, then, holds the ability to convey a world-otherwise.

### **Silence and the world-otherwise**

When understanding liberation and freedom as a practice, instead of the liberal-democratic understanding that freedom is an (institutionalized) accomplishment, an achievement, reached by the speech act as a revelation of one’s inner truth, the connotation of speech being inherently and necessarily politically enabling, fades away. Throughout this thesis I have argued how this opens up space for more subjective engagements with silence and speech and how they are related, that do not necessarily reduce them as simple opposites. As has been evocatively demonstrated with the vignettes of this thesis, silence holds the potential of allowing, and creating, space for approaching silence that can be implemented as a method of survival, radical self-care, refusal, recognition, community-building, boycott, and communication. It creates space for surviving in a world that finds

itself governed by a grammar that relies more and more on confessional discourse and an exponentially grown accelerated content consumption. Silence, in this light, allows for a space of contemplation and freedom.

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The technology of science  
The rituals, the etiquette

the blurring of terms  
silence not absence

of words or music or even  
raw sound

Silence can be a plan  
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence  
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it  
with any kind of absence