

The Craft of Silence

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In “A Search for Silent Signals,” White (2021), a senior curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum, describes Madeline Hollander’s Hawaiian journey searching for the silent movement of the chirping crickets, revealing how their silent movement entangles a duality for the species. On the one hand, the silent movement serves as a protective mantle against predators. On the other, it impedes reproduction and is a threat to species survival. This duality is also present when studying silence in the memory of migrant families residing in the United States of America (USA). As researchers at The New School’s Trauma and Global Mental Health Lab, we measured silence in the stories of migrant families, understanding it as a potential protective factor of their community from possible external threats. But we also realized silence is a potential danger to the transmission of their story and to the heritage of their culture at large.

Yet, the measurement of this phenomenon was insufficient to comprehend its meaning. As proposed by Liou et al. (2016), silences are a cognitive creative space for making connections and fitting together pieces of the puzzle, a space with “boundless creative possibilities.” I found in that void an opportunity to create together with these families, a practice of craft, otherwise referred to as object making, to express and connect these silences beyond their quantification.

To consider silence and its meanings through crafts, I start by describing the Memory and Migration study, completed between 2020 and 2021. Silence was one of the most overarching themes transmitted

across generations of families with Ecuadorian heritage. Next, I show how traditional research methods were useful but insufficient to understand the pervasiveness of silence in migrant stories mostly evident in subsequent generations. Finally, this train of thought allowed me to describe how collective craft may be a better means to interpret and express the silences within the migrant story.

The Memory and Migration Study

The Memory and Migration study was part of The New School’s Trauma and Global Mental Health Lab. Together with local nonprofits in Queens, New York, and the New York Navy Cadet Corps, we interviewed families of Ecuadorian heritage to understand from a psychological standpoint how migration narratives get passed down through generations (Hirst et al., 2018). Families consisted of two living generations (adult parent and an adolescent) or three living generations (grandparent, adult parent, and adolescent or young adult grandchild). Interviewing the grandparents and adult parents who migrated enabled an exploration of their migration stories while interviewing the younger generation, who for the most part were born in the US, helped elucidate how these stories were shared across generations.

The research was approached through traditional methods of investigation that I found were insufficient to answer the following question: how and why were certain memories shared while others were silenced? Traditionally, words, text, and speech are the preferred means to access and represent (collective) memories (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010;

Zolberg, 1998; Scott, 1996; Young, 1993; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). In this research, both participants and researchers heavily relied on words and speech using standardized and self-report questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews to access memories of their migration story and what younger generations remembered hearing about their family's migration story. But what about the silences, omissions, and exclusions that are still apart of the migrant story and are rarely addressed, analyzed, or talked about? Based on a study by Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger (2010) that suggested memory is constructed at the margins of silence, I decided to explore these elements as covert and overt manifestations in order to address the hidden aspects of the migrant story. Overall, it turned out younger generations did not know what older generations had not shared. Still, their silences were also acts of communicating and transmitting memories around migration.

Not Telling - Not Knowing Dynamic

The covert silences were framed as a not telling - not knowing dynamic between family members and were represented through extracts taken from semi-structured interviews. To illustrate: when asked what memories of the migration journey were shared with family members, this is what 37 year-old Adriana¹ (who migrated at age 22) said:

“My children? No. I have not commented on any of this. He knows that I came here...but how it was and all, no, I haven't told him. It is also difficult to say this: ‘Mommy came here and had to go through jail and... Because that's the truth.’”

When the children were asked what they knew about their family's migration story, this is what 11 year-old

Tomas² (born in the US) said:

“She doesn't usually talk about the past. She really doesn't share any memory. No one asks. I never thought about it.”

Likewise, when asked if family's immigration stories helped them overcome current challenges and stress in their life, this is what 12 year-old Mario³ (born in the US) said:

“I don't know anything about their stories, but if they told me, I believe it would help me be less stressed because I think they had to fight to be here. So I, I think that, like stress and, like, problems that are happening in my life is, like, less worse than that.”

These quotes explicitly showed the unawareness of younger generations of their family's migration story. As I discovered this pattern, I felt the urge to measure the overt manifestation of silence in order to understand the structure that underpins the stories and the memories that are not being told.

Physical Silence

The quantification of silence in the interviews allowed me to understand silence as a fundamental element of the migrant story. The overt manifestations were called physical silences, corresponding to the conspicuous spaces longer than one second where there was an absence of words or sounds. They were measured as a percentage of the interview's total duration. Results in younger generations, especially those born in the US, showed that interview duration tended to decrease while silence increased. Thus, the physical silences allowed me to reinforce silence as a structural component of the interview. I then realized how migrants' words and migration stories are often invalidated. Therefore,

1 Name has been changed for confidentiality purposes. Translation by the present author.

2 Name has been changed for confidentiality purposes.

3 Name has been changed for confidentiality purposes.

they may opt not to speak about their experience, or feel pressured to stay quiet. But their lack of words does not mean an absence of experience (Levin, 2013; Benish-Weisman, 2009). On the contrary, experiences and memories in the context of migration are all too often colored by threats and consequences of structural vulnerabilities. These include exposure to complex forms of violence, poverty, dangerous border crossings, increased anti-immigration, punitive legislation, multiple attachment ruptures, and acculturative stressors leading to a higher risk of developing mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Charlson et al., 2019). Hence, silence might be an indicator of a never-ending cycle of trauma inherited by every new generation of migrants.

Frontline Arts Organization

These intriguing results motivated me to think about other alternatives beyond quantification and analysis that could be used to craft silences in migrant stories and perhaps address emotional wounds. I recognized the alternative methods that I was looking for were not easily found in psychological interventions, which tend to be prescriptive in nature and rely on words, text, and speech. I decided instead to approach the silence of migrant's stories through creative and alternative practices by joining the Frontline Arts organization. In an interview, David Keefe, a graduate of Columbia University's narrative medicine program and president of Frontline Arts asserts that creative encounters are spaces for people to transform, find a personal voice, and more importantly, tell their own stories (Schiff, 2020). Keefe suggests participatory craft, or the act of doing, is a solution that accounts for the silences within people's stories. As he posits, craft is a mediator for social interaction, transformation and connectivity that helps combat a pervasive culture of

silence in communities with pronounced trauma, enabling new narratives of cohesion that will naturally strengthen well-being.

Crafting Silence

In 2018 Frontline Arts, in partnership with the Bronx Museum, developed four workshops with migrant communities to make paper and prints from cultural objects, plants native to the Bronx and Mexico, and clothes from Mexican street vendors. Participants shared their experience of migration, reporting that they felt safe telling their stories and expressing their feelings of what it meant to be an immigrant for the first time. Based on the project's success, I have decided to replicate these techniques in my work with migrant families to bring with them personal objects. Collectively, participants will macerate these objects into fibers to create paper. While doing so, they will be encouraged to share their thoughts, memories and emotions and engage in a common language of silence hardly shared but always present. This exchange is a potential space to explore common story themes and more importantly, make connections. Once the paper is ready, participants can modify it with drawings, writings, and prints, related to the topics discussed during the production. As a result, a palimpsest of migrant stories will be shared in an exhibition where participants will have the opportunity to show and explain their work, thoughts, and memories to their families and to the migrant community. This space will serve as the container for those memories and stories rooted in the past. Getting back to Keefe's solution, craft will be an opportunity to tap into the silence, the unspoken within a population whose stories are often colored by trauma.

The Duality of the Chirping Cricket

Overall, traditional methods used in the Memory and Migration study helped me represent silence in

the context of migration. I observed how silences containing the energy of trauma transmit across generations. Results indicated that silence might be a protective factor, yet its pervasive presence may represent a widespread perpetual cycle of trauma. The recognition of silence motivates me to materialize the unspoken in collective craft, the paper-making project.

I expect this encounter and the work produced to be a medium for social and psychological connection, a reservoir for collective awareness of migrant stories. My goal is to overcome the duality of the chirping cricket present in the silence of the migrant stories. Silence is not necessarily a threat to cultural heritage shared between generations; instead, silence can create a new collective space where migrant stories can be shared.

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