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**Rhetorical Silence: An Emerging Genre**

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**Rhetorical Silence: An Emerging Genre**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

To my mom and dad, who prayed for me

To my husband, who encouraged me

To my children, who inspired me

To my professors, who counseled me

To my friends, who cheered me

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## **Abstract**

### **Rhetorical Silence: An Emerging Genre**

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My dissertation asks if a genre of rhetorical silence is emerging in response to message saturation in contemporary societies. I define rhetorical silence as an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence. I analyze three instances of rhetorical silence. Ghazala Khan's silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was an uncodeable and indigestible excess that stalled the production-consumption cycle and caused physiological discomfort in the audience. The discomfort led to a clamor for a spectacle that cured public indigestion but robbed Ghazala of her agency. The students participating in the Day of Silence bookend their silence with speech to contain the meaning of their silence. Since silence does not add to information chaos, it is gaining recognition as a new way to protest in digitalized societies. Meher Baba's 44-year silence transformed him into a mythical figure. By relying on interpretation rather than documentation, Baba acquired a status outside of time and place. My study found that instances of rhetorical silence share six generic characteristics: (a) Rhetorical silence is employed to oppose norms such as stereotypes of oppressed and empowered women, gender binaries, heterosexuality, and the image of a talking God; (b) Although rhetorical silence challenges norms, it is not adversarial. Instead, it invites reflection; (c) Rhetorical silence subverts the production-

consumption cycle by creating a human artifact that cannot be packaged and consumed digitally; (d) By engaging the body, rhetorical silence subverts the aesthetics of speed and efficiency on which the digital machine relies; (e) Although silence can be polysemic, the rhetor can contain the meaning by bookending silence with speech; and (f) The form can captivate audiences by evoking a desire to decode the mystery of the silence. My study concludes that a shift is occurring in the available means of persuasion because of the dominance of the digital machine. Rhetorical silence functions at the level of the body, which the machine cannot comprehend. People can be moved by rhetorical silence because it takes a human to listen to silence and because it appeals to the body rather than to its digital twin.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*The formation of a pearl is a strange process. An irritant enters the oyster, and the oyster keeps its lips sealed. Over time, the irritant is transformed into a pearl, much valued for its perfection and beauty.*

I was writing my master's thesis on Heidegger and rhetoric when I first came across the notion of silence as discourse. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger advances the idea that silence is an essential component of discourse and can promote an in-depth understanding.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion that silence is discourse altered my view of rhetorical communication. I realized that words are not the only instruments of persuasion: silence can also persuade. As a rhetorician, I had always endeavored to find the right words to communicate with greater success; however, silence as discourse checked my search for words and switched my focus to silence.

As I shifted my attention from spoken and written communication to silence, I discovered that silence shows up in many areas of public discourse. In the spiritual realm, silence is often presented as a tool for greater communion with God. For example, the Trappist monks of the Cistercian Order dedicate their lives to a silent contemplation of Christ's sacrifice. Quakers (now known as Friends) maintain silence during their group

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

worship meetings. Muslims, when praying alone, recite sacred lines in silence five times a day. Additionally, the embodied state of silence is much revered in Eastern mysticism as a way to connect with a life force that is greater than the individual and to find peace in a chaotic world. For example, Zen masters train their students in awareness through meditation, and Meher Baba, an Indian mystic, stayed silent for forty-four years to raise awareness of God.

In addition to spiritual discourse, many art forms extoll the ability of silence to say what cannot be expressed in words. The poet Edgar Lee Master writes, “Of what use is language? ... We are voiceless in the presence of realities—We cannot speak.”<sup>2</sup> Another poet, Kyle J. Carruthers, notes, “Silence is a conversation being had without sound.”<sup>3</sup> Even popular artists warn us that words can do damage to beautiful moments:

Words like violence  
Break the silence  
Come crashing in  
Into my little world  
Painful to me  
Pierce right through me  
Oh my little girl  
All I ever wanted  
All I ever needed  
Is here in my arms  
Words are very unnecessary  
They can only do harm.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar Lee Masters, *American Modern Poetry: An Introduction*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Kyle J. Carruthers, “Silence is .... - Poem by Kyle J. Carruthers,” *Poem Hunter*, November 1, 2016, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poems/silence/page-1/329753/>.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Gore, *Violator*, recorded by Depeche Mode, Puk Studios, 1990, compact disc.

In poetry and songs, words are used to describe silence; however, in other art forms such as music, composers sometimes deliver silence instead of musical notes. One of the earliest examples of a silent composition is Alphonse Allais' *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*, which is a blank piece of sheet music.<sup>5</sup> A contemporary example is John Cage's *4'33"*, in which musicians are instructed not to play their score for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.<sup>6</sup> Cage's composition draws attention to the fact that there is no such thing as complete silence. Another example: John Lennon's album *Mind Games* includes a silent track titled "Nutopian International Anthem," which suggests that in a utopic world, there would be no conflict and therefore no need for words.<sup>7</sup>

Even in the practical realm of politics, silence is used as a strategy to mediate exigencies. Some activists employ silence rather than slogans and chants to raise public awareness of social issues. For example, pro-life proponents wear red duct tape over their mouths to protest abortion.<sup>8</sup> The tape often has the word "LIFE" written on it with black marker. Similarly, Day of Silence participants take a vow of silence to highlight the bullying of LGBTQ youth in schools and colleges.<sup>9</sup> They carry speaking cards that explain the reason for the silence.

Silence has always been a resource for people, but, increasingly, it has become the instrument for registering protest, bringing awareness, and making a point. Recently, Ghazala Khan's silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention led to a tense public

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<sup>5</sup> Alphonse Allais, *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*, 1897.

<sup>6</sup> John Cage, *4'33"*, 1952.

<sup>7</sup> John Lennon, *Mind Games*, Apple Records, 1973, vinyl.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.bound4life.com](http://www.bound4life.com).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.dayofsilence.org](http://www.dayofsilence.org).

debate over the meaning of her silence. Ghazala Khan stood silently next to her husband, Khizr Khan, as he gave a speech on why a ban on Muslim immigrants is unconstitutional and unpatriotic. The Khans are a Gold Star military family who lost their son in the Iraq war. Although Ghazala Khan said nothing at the podium, the audience witnessed her tears and the patriotic chants that she mouthed noiselessly. Almost instantly, Ghazala's silence at the podium became a hot topic. Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, tweeted that she probably was not allowed to say anything. Several news outlets interviewed the Khans: Khizr Khan expressed that Trump took a cheap shot at a grieving mother, and Ghazala Khan explained that she was silent because she is still grieving for her son. Such a public uproar over a few minutes of silence at the podium has perhaps opened a new chapter in rhetorical theory. In my dissertation, I speculate that silence is now more audible or noticeable than speech is, because people are bombarded with messages from social media, YouTube, television, and other communication media. Silence, I believe, is now a powerful resource in the process of persuasion.

Given the prevalence of silence in public discourse, my dissertation asks a fundamental question: *Is there a category or genre of rhetorical silence, and, if so, what is the significance of identifying and studying the genre of rhetorical silence?* Many scholars have analyzed silence as a metaphysical concept, a gesture, a political strategy, a feminine expression, and a threatening act, to name a few. Although these studies enhance our understanding of silence, there is no systematic approach that takes into account the elements that influence the choice of using silence and the manner in which silence is received by the audience. The elements that play an important role in genre theory are

context, content, style, audience expectations, motivations of the rhetor, and conventions of discourse. An analysis of these elements will determine whether rhetorical silence is in fact a genre category. Therefore, in my dissertation, I ask: (a) Which elements recur in instances of rhetorical silence? (b) Can the recurring elements be gathered into a genre of rhetorical silence? (c) Is there a controlling element in the genre of rhetorical silence? (d) Does the genre of rhetorical silence give us some insight into the contemporary communicative situation? In short, this study aims to identify silence as a rhetorical genre, study the interaction of the generic elements, and conclude with the significance of the classification.

## **Literature Review**

Even though scholars have not studied rhetorical silence as a *genre*, much has been written about silence. In the section that follows, I discuss several themes that emerge from my review of the literature on silence (it is important to note that I am focusing on the linguistic or discursive perspectives on silence):

- Silence as creative or destructive
- Silence as a threat
- Silence as a right
- The possible meanings of silence
- The functions of silence
- Silence as a political strategy
- Silence as epistemic

- Silence as a rhetorical art

This literature review will show that a generic perspective will add something valuable to the study of rhetorical silence; namely, it will allow me to study various factors that influence the choice of keeping silent in a communicative situation, such as the context or the situation in which the discourse occurs, the conventions of the discourse, the motives or intentions of the rhetor, the expectations of the audience, and the stylized choices made in the delivery of silence.

#### **SILENCE AS CREATIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE**

Max Picard, in his seminal work on silence, takes a metaphysical view of silence:

Silence is an autonomous phenomenon. It is therefore not identical with the suspension of language. It is not merely the negative condition that sets in when the positive is removed; it is rather an independent whole, subsisting in and through itself. It is creative, as language is creative; and it is formative of human beings as language is formative, but not in the same degree.<sup>10</sup>

Picard distinguishes silence from language and posits that silence is not passive or the mere absence of language but an independent phenomenon that becomes *apparent* in the absence of language. For Picard, silence is not a part of language but a distinct phenomenon that shares similarities with language. He advances the idea that silence can bring something into existence just as language does. In other words, silence can be performative because it can create something. Picard also draws attention to the neglect of silence in our everyday lives, as well as the impact of that neglect on us and on our language use. He states that

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<sup>10</sup> Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. S. Godman (London: The Harvill Press, 1948), 15.

It is language and not silence that makes man truly human. The word has supremacy over silence. But language becomes emaciated if it loses its connection with silence. Our task, therefore, is to uncover the world of silence so obscured today—not for the sake of silence but the for sake of language.<sup>11</sup>

In short, Picard notes that although language makes us human, it can lose its potency if divorced from silence. When language loses its power, silence can purify or give new breath to language.

George Steiner takes a radically different approach and views silence as a gap that can annihilate civilizations. He argues that until the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “the sphere of language encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality; today it comprises a narrower domain.”<sup>12</sup> Steiner goes on to explain that we have developed sub-languages for different domains of knowledge and action, such as mathematics, symbolic logic, and formulas for expressing chemical and electronic relations. We can no longer just talk about things like people did in previous eras. Steiner asserts that words lost their “vitality and precision” because “Western consciousness became less dependent on the resources of language to order experience and conduct the business of the mind.”<sup>13</sup> The sub-languages or jargon, Steiner claims, have led to “gaps of silence” or a communication breakdown between disciplines. He states that “literacy must reaffirm its authority against jargon” or we will “perish by silence.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Steiner notes, mass media has also cheapened the word:

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<sup>11</sup> Picard, *World of Silence*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 54.

In our time, the language of politics has become infected with obscurity and madness. No lie is too gross for strenuous expression, no cruelty too abject to find apologia in the verbiage of historicism. Unless we can restore to the words in our newspapers, laws, and political acts some measure of clarity and stringency of meaning, our lives will draw yet nearer to chaos.<sup>15</sup>

Steiner has a rather dark view of both silence and the state of public discourse. He claims that our civilization will perish by silence unless we restore vitality and precision in discourse. In other words, people should be able to talk to each other about things that matter without jargon getting in the way, and public discourse should not be so ambiguous that society falls into chaos.

#### **SILENCE AS A THREAT**

R. L. Scott draws our attention to the dialectical tensions inherent in the choice between staying silent and speaking. He posits that if the utterance is a choice, then “In speaking we remain silent. And in remaining silent, we speak.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Scott notes that even though speaking is a mark of civilization, “inadequacy of language is a motive for silence.”<sup>17</sup> However, any instance of silence needs some interpretation to minimize its threat. He states, “there is something threatening, then, in the silence of another; and silence may be used to threaten.”<sup>18</sup> “The word preserves contact,” Scott argues, whereas silence isolates.<sup>19</sup> Scott further claims that the threat of silence can be mitigated with a proper

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<sup>15</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> R. L. Scott, “Rhetoric and Silence,” *Western Speech* 36, no. 3 (1972): 146.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, “Rhetoric and Silence,” 147.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, “Rhetoric and Silence,” 147.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, “Rhetoric and Silence,” 149.

interpretation of the silence, “leaving the situation not quite wordless,”<sup>20</sup> even if the tension is only resolved momentarily. Scott states:

Rhetoric is not the counterpart of dialectic. Rather it is the antithesis of silence making a dialectic with which to resolve, momentarily, some perplexity we face, preparing for civilized activity if validated by mutual respect.<sup>21</sup>

Scott sees rhetoric and silence as a dialectical pair—not speech and silence. Such a view implies that all speech is rhetorical in nature and function, which may very well be the case; however, I find that it is more productive to think of speech as falling on a continuum of rhetoric so that speech can be categorized as increasingly or decreasingly persuasive. Scott ends with the suggestion that an intense inward silence can lead to an insulation from the reality of others and from taking action. Once again, the threat of silence—as in neglecting the other and neglecting to act—is prominent.

Sidney Baker argues that there are two forms of interpersonal silences: when speech breaks down (negative silence) or when words become irrelevant (positive silence).<sup>22</sup> In the first case, “fear, hatred, anger, or acute anxiety strike[s] us dumb ... In strong contrast, there is also a placid, contented type of interpersonal silence, such as that sometimes (although not frequently) encountered between lovers or old friends. They know each other so well that words are unnecessary.”<sup>23</sup> Baker maps on the concept of “reciprocal identification” onto negative and positive silences, defining reciprocal identification as

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<sup>20</sup> Scott, “Rhetoric and Silence,” 147.

<sup>21</sup> Scott, “Rhetoric and Silence,” 158.

<sup>22</sup> Sidney Baker, “The Theory of Silences,” *Journal of General Psychology* 53 (1955): 157.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, “Theory of Silences,” 157–58.

commonalities between people, and notes that psychic tensions impede identification. He states, “When tensions are more or less absent, identification is close and communication is highly effective.”<sup>24</sup> Like Scott, Baker identifies a threat that is felt in the silence of another, but he does not use the term “threat.” Instead, he uses the terms “psychic tensions” and “lack of identification.” Also, Baker does not state that positive silences need verbal reassurances that mitigate the threat. Instead, Baker concludes that the aim of speech is silence—a state of equilibrium in which all psychic tensions are resolved and arguments are replaced by acceptance and contentment.

#### **SILENCE AS A RIGHT**

George Rice argues that the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution is not as clear as the right to free speech. The Fifth Amendment protects a person from testifying against him- or herself in a criminal case, but it is not clear when and how this right can be invoked.

Rice states:

The present status of free legal speech contrasts sharply with that of the right to silence. Much litigation has come before the courts on issue of speech and assembly. The result is that rights and duties of speakers have been clarified in a wide variety of circumstances. On the other hand, legal aspects of the right to silence are largely unexplored.<sup>25</sup>

Rice discusses three types of situations in which the right to remain silent has been invoked or restricted: “(a) the right not to say what one does not believe; (b) the right not to say what one believes, that is, the right to keep one’s counsel; and (c) the right not to say what

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<sup>24</sup> Baker, “Theory of Silences,” 158.

<sup>25</sup> G. P. Rice, “The Right to Be Silent,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* XLVII, no. 4 (1961): 354.

one knows.”<sup>26</sup> An example of the first type of situation is the right of children as members of Jehovah’s Witnesses not to say the pledge of allegiance in school. This right, according to Rice, is well documented. The second situation (the right not to say what one believes) is not as clear as the first one. The court could require a statement of belief or non-belief, and the person could make a statement that satisfies the requirement, but the belief may not match the statement. An example of the second situation is the Taft-Hartley Act, which requires a statement of non-belief in communism as a necessary condition for labor union leadership. Rice states that the third situation—the right not to say what one knows—has the most restrictions (for example, the requirement that one must reveal known financial information to the Internal Revenue Service or give personal information to the Department of Motor Vehicles). Rice explains that the Immunity Act of 1954 was written to give Congress the ability to overcome the evasive strategies of people whose testimony was important for matters of national security. The Immunity Act of 1954 was an attempt to check the invoking of the Fifth Amendment when issues of national security weighed more than individual freedom. Rice concludes that we need to develop a clear theoretical approach to the right to remain silent so that citizens can know when to legally invoke this right. Understanding silence as a genre of public discourse will help clarify when individuals have the right to remain silent.

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<sup>26</sup> Rice, “Right to Be Silent,” 352.

## POSSIBLE MEANINGS OF SILENCE

Richard L. Johannesen argues that silence communicates because some meaning is attributed to the silence. According to Johannesen, there are many potential meanings of silence:

- (1) The person lacks sufficient information to talk on the topic.
- (2) The person feels no sense of urgency about talking.
- (3) The person is carefully pondering exactly what to say next.
- (4) The silence may simply reflect the person's normal rate of thinking.
- (5) The person is avoiding discussion of a controversial or sensitive issue out of fear.
- (6) The silence expresses agreement.
- (7) The silence expresses disagreement.
- (8) The person is doubtful or indecisive.
- (9) The person is bored.
- (10) The person is uncertain of someone else's meaning.
- (11) The person is in awe, or raptly attentive, or emotionally overcome.
- (12) The person is snooty or impolite.
- (13) The person's silence is a means of punishing others, of annihilating others symbolically by excluding them from verbal communication.
- (14) The person's silence marks a characteristic personality disturbance.
- (15) The person feels inarticulate despite a desire to communicate; perhaps lends itself more to intuitive sensing than to verbal discussion.
- (16) The person's silence reflects concern for not saying anything to hurt another person.
- (17) The person is daydreaming or preoccupied with other matters.
- (18) The person uses silence to enhance his own isolation, independence, and sense of self-uniqueness.
- (19) The silence marks sulking anger.
- (20) The person's silence reflects empathic exchange, the companionship of shared mood or insight.<sup>27</sup>

Johannesen acknowledges that in order to attribute meaning to silence, one needs contextual information.

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<sup>27</sup> Richard L. Johannesen, "The Functions of Silence: Plea for Communication Research," *Western Speech* 38, no. 1 (1974): 29–30.

## FUNCTIONS OF SILENCE

Vernon Jensen contends that silence can perform five functions: linkage, affecting, revelational, judgmental, and activating, and each function has a positive and negative aspect.<sup>28</sup> Regarding the linkage function, Jensen notes that silence can either sever relationships by building a wall between people or link people together: people often form deeper bonds with God or each other when maintaining a companionable silence. The second function of silence—affecting—also has positive and negative aspects, as silence can both heal and wound. One can prevent injury to another by holding back hurtful speech and allowing tempers to subside. But, silence can also wound when it communicates indifference. Jensen states that

Silence can communicate scorn, hostility, coldness, defiance, sternness, and hate; but it can also communicate respect, kindness, and acceptance. Potentially both balm and irritant, silence definitely affects us.<sup>29</sup>

Jensen notes that the third function of silence—revelational—means that silence can both reveal and conceal things. Silence conceals when someone refuses to report on internal states or external happenings, but silence can also reveal as it invites self-reflection and stillness as a way to know. Jensen explains that the fourth function—judgmental—can be “employed to register assent or dissent.”<sup>30</sup> Silence implies assent with the status quo because one speaks only when one objects to something; however, silence can also register dissent through a noble kind of silence, such as a refusal to speak under torture or the silent

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<sup>28</sup> Vernon J. Jensen, “Communicative Functions of Silence,” *ETC; A Review of General Semantics* 30, no. 3 (1973).

<sup>29</sup> Jensen, “Functions of Silence,” 252.

<sup>30</sup> Jensen, “Functions of Silence,” 254.

sit-ins that were a mark of the Civil Rights era. Finally, the activating function of silence either “communicates an attitude of thoughtfulness” or idleness when no physical activity accompanies the silence.<sup>31</sup> Jensen describes a public speaker who pauses to choose her words as an example of thoughtfulness, whereas a parent quietly sitting on the sofa may be seen as idle. Jensen concludes:

Our talkative culture needs to realize more fully the value and communicative function of silence. We need to view it not as periods in which there is an absence of communication but rather as an active agent, an important vehicle for significant communication.<sup>32</sup>

Jensen views silence as a tool with which something significant could be communicated and exhorts us to realize the value of such silence.

Thomas J. Bruneau declares that silence is the ground of speech. He states, “Speech signs, created by necessity or will, appear to be mentally imposed figures on mentally imposed grounds of silence.”<sup>33</sup> Bruneau notes that we need to define silence in language (because it is not possible to know an unknown entity by itself) before we can compare it to something clearly defined like rhetoric. Bruneau identifies three forms of silence and their corresponding (and overlapping) communicative functions: psycholinguistic, interactive, and sociocultural. He explains that psycholinguistic silences are “necessary and variable impositions of slow-time on the temporal sequence of speech. These impositions appear to be created by both encoders and decoders of speech.”<sup>34</sup> Slow-time silences can

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<sup>31</sup> Jensen, “Functions of Silence,” 255.

<sup>32</sup> Jensen, “Functions of Silence,” 256.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas J. Bruneau, “Communicative Silences: Forms and Functions,” *Journal of Communication* 23 (1973): 18.

<sup>34</sup> Bruneau, “Communicative Silences,” 23.

be hesitations in the temporal sequencing of speech, such as pauses or filler words that allow the encoder to think through what they want to say and allow the decoder to predict what the encoder will say. Interactive silences are “pausal interruption in dialogue, conversation, discussion, debate, etc.”<sup>35</sup> These interactive silences, according to Bruneau, perform several functions, such as determining who takes on the burden of speech, making inferences about the meaning of a message, exerting control over who to form relationships with, reacting to diversity when one could be charged with prejudice, handling intense emotions, and managing physical distance in interpersonal relationships. The third form of communicative silence is sociocultural silences, about which Bruneau states that they “may define cultural patterns of communication much better than what is said.”<sup>36</sup> These silences, Bruneau notes, determine who has authority to silence and censure, what the society believes about God and life after death, who deserves silent respect (such as the dead), who has the authority to remain silent, who can require silence, where silence is demanded (such as in a church or a library), and in which situations people must not break silence to preserve hegemonic ideology (such as the requirement to remain silent during the recitation of the national anthem). Bruneau concludes that silence needs to be defined before it can be compared to other forms of speech such as rhetoric.

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<sup>35</sup> Bruneau, “Communicative Silences,” 27.

<sup>36</sup> Bruneau, “Communicative Silences,” 36.

## SILENCE AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Robert G. Gunderson argues that President-elect Abraham's Lincoln's silence when he was on his way to Washington D.C was eloquent.<sup>37</sup> Gunderson explains that many people urged Lincoln to speak out in an increasingly tense situation where Republicans feared a split within their party, businesspeople feared an economic crisis if reconciliatory moves were not made with the border slave states, and Southern Unionists wanted Lincoln's support. As the train journey proceeded from Springfield to D.C, every railway stop "provided a threat to Lincoln's policy of silence."<sup>38</sup> Gunderson concludes that Lincoln made an eloquent choice in keeping his remarks brief, humorous, and riddle-like.

Barry Brummett also discusses the influence of strategic silence in political discourse. Brummett defines strategic silence as "a refusal of a public figure to communicate verbally when that refusal (1) violates expectations, (2) draws public attributions of fairly predictable meanings, and (3) seems intentional and directed at an audience."<sup>39</sup> Brummett further clarifies that strategic silence occurs when talk is expected but not given, the politician does not explain her silence, and the public attributes four meanings to the politician's silence: mystery, uncertainty, passivity, and relinquishment. Brummett notes that in politics, unlike intimate relationships, talk maintains relationships and creates a persona of an active politician. Therefore, when a politician employs strategic silence, she denies her constituents a relationship, which is threatening and mysterious

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<sup>37</sup> Robert G. Gunderson, "Lincoln and the Policy of Eloquent Silence: November, 1860, to March, 1861," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* XLVII (1961).

<sup>38</sup> Gunderson, "Lincoln," 4.

<sup>39</sup> Barry Brummett, "Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 289.

because the public does not know where the politician stands. Further, the politician appears passive even though she may be doing a lot, and she relinquishes all control to the media regarding the interpretations of her silence. One example of strategic silence that Brummett offers is Lincoln's silence or brevity in the time just before his inaugural address. Gunderson sees Lincoln's silence as eloquent, whereas Brummett sees it as passive, mysterious, uncertain, and relinquishing. Brummett also applies the theory of strategic silence to President Carter's ten-day silence from July 5, 1979, to July 15, 1979. Brummett concludes that, although Carter's "silence was not wise ... the silence was exactly the wrong thing to do," not all uses of strategic silence are similarly doomed.<sup>40</sup>

#### SILENCE AS EPISTEMIC

George Kalamaras argues that silence is "an authentic mode of knowing" and a rhetoric because it is "a way of making meaning."<sup>41</sup> Kalamaras observes that Western tradition has biased us against silence because silence is a non-conceptual, non-categorizing mode of knowing. He states:

The concept of silence as a mode of knowing conflicts with the current Western perception of silence as a condition of annihilation. Particularly in the wake of poststructuralist theory, the concept of silence has become synonymous with psychic death. In such theories, silence is most often represented as a condition the speaking subject must overcome, an abyss or lack that inhibits one's power to make meaning. Poststructuralist interpretation often positions language against silence as a means of avoiding such a nihilistic state.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Brummett, "Silence as a Political Strategy," 297.

<sup>41</sup> George Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension*, 1.

Kalamaras states that he wishes to expand the nature of rationality. He goes on to explain that conceptual knowledge relies on categorizations and thought processes. Non-conceptual knowledge, on the other hand, is not based on categorization, but the lack of categorization does not make non-conceptual knowledge irrational. By including non-conceptual understandings such as paradoxa in the realm of knowledge, Kalamaras concludes that we can gain a more complex understanding of rationality. Kalamaras looks to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism for non-conceptual knowledge and discusses how non-conceptual understanding is helpful in teaching composition. For example, Kalamaras sees the practice of yoga as a non-conceptual mode of knowing and as a place where the practice of silence becomes concrete for a practitioner. For Kalamaras, such practices are pedagogical tools because they raise awareness.

#### **SILENCE AS A RHETORICAL ART**

Cheryl Glenn has done an extensive study of the many ways silence manifests in society. She explains that silence is not always potent, but too often silence is read as

simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power. Employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority, silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use.<sup>43</sup>

Glenn contends that speech and silence are both instruments of communication, but silence remains an under-appreciated rhetorical art because, in the West, speech is seen as masculine and silence as feminine. Thus, Glenn draws attention to the gendering of silence

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<sup>43</sup> Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), xi.

in Western culture. Glenn defines silence as “a rhetoric, as a constellation of symbolic strategies that (like spoken language) serves many functions.”<sup>44</sup> Glenn analyzes the rhetorical dimensions of silence and silencing in four case studies: Anita Hill’s testimony during Clarence Thomas’ hearings for his appointment as a Supreme Court justice; the case of Lani Guinier who was nominated by Clinton’s administration to head the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division; the many women associated with President Bill Clinton; and the case of the Native American Leonard Peltier, who was imprisoned for a crime he never committed. Glenn concludes: “Like the zero of mathematics, silence is an absence with a function.”<sup>45</sup>

In an edited volume, Cheryl Glenn and Krista Radcliffe highlight the value of listening and silence as preparatory rhetorical arts in the practice of eloquence.<sup>46</sup> For example, one of the chapters discusses how St. Catherine of Siena gained legitimacy to speak in the name of the church at a time when women were not allowed to speak in public meetings.<sup>47</sup> The author, Kristie Fleckenstein, argues that Catherine acquired the legitimacy to speak because she had cloistered herself “in a small bare room at her home, pursuing complete silence (except for confession) and a strict regimen of self-mortification for more than three years.”<sup>48</sup> The author calls such a silence generative, as knowledge of God is

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<sup>44</sup> Glenn, *Unspoken*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Glenn, *Unspoken*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, introduction to *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, ed. C. Glenn and K. Ratcliffe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Kristie Fleckenstein, “Out of ‘Wonderful Silence’ Came ‘Sweet Words’: The Rhetorical Authority of St. Catherine of Siena,” In *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, ed. C. Glenn & K. Ratcliffe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Fleckenstein, “Wonderful Silence,” 40.

received in silence, which gave Catherine legitimacy to speak. The author explains that Catherine also performed her silence when she imitated the limitation of language in expressing the infinitude of God. Thus, silence not only prepared Catherine to speak in the name of the church but also helped her execute her performance of God's silence. Taken collectively, this volume articulates three arguments: listening and silence are as important as the traditional arts of reading, writing, and speaking; "the arts of silence and listening are particularly effective for historicizing, theorizing, analyzing, and practicing the cultural stances and power of both dominant and nondominant (subaltern) groups"; and these arts "offer people multiple ways to negotiate and deliberate."<sup>49</sup>

Krista Ratcliffe identifies a dysfunctional silence that arises when interlocutors "occupy competing cultural logics about how gender and race intersect."<sup>50</sup> Ratcliffe identifies four structures of dysfunctional silence that haunt public discourse on race and gender: (a) it describes silence in negative terms such as "wasted energy," "reluctance," and "emotional cost;" (b) it operates on either/or logic by foregrounding either commonalities or differences among white women and women of color and positing silence and speaking as dichotomies; (c) it offers dysfunctional stances of denial that race influences attitudes and actions, defensiveness to protect the ego, and guilt or blame that shuts down opportunities for dialogue; and (d) it operates on the logic of metaphors rather than metonyms so that assumptions are made about how all members of a group share

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<sup>49</sup> Glenn and Ratcliffe, *Silence and Listening*, 2–3.

<sup>50</sup> Krista Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 79.

substance with one another.<sup>51</sup> Ratcliffe clarifies these structures by analyzing the dysfunctional silence between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly, who disagreed about feminist research methods in late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>52</sup>

### **Why Genre Theory?**

Silence performs an important role in communication and persuasion: it can maintain or negotiate social power, be epistemic, take or give power to language, convey multiple meanings, and perform various functions. Although these are interesting approaches in the study of silence, *they presuppose a category that has not yet been defined*. I propose that we ask: What is silence, and what are its constitutive elements? Studying what a thing is made of is the first step in understanding the thing. The generic perspective will allow me to study the composition of rhetorical silence. Specifically, I will (a) identify the elements that inform the practice of employing silence in public discourse, (b) determine if these elements recur together to make up a genre, and (c) discern if there is a controlling element in the genre of rhetorical silence. I will apply the generic lens to three case studies chosen from three different areas of public discourse. The questions I ask will allow me to examine the contexts in which silence is employed, the conventions of discourse that silence upholds or challenges, the social motives of the rhetor, the expectations of the audience, and the stylistic choices made in the delivery of silence. Once the generic category of silence has been explicated, I can begin to answer the question of

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<sup>51</sup> Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening*.

<sup>52</sup> Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening*.

why the genre of rhetorical silence matters. Carolyn Miller notes that studying genre reveals the character of a culture or a time period,<sup>53</sup> and I hope that my study can tell us something about the nature of persuasive discourse in an age dominated by mediated messages.

Before the age of mass communication, persuasive messages were blips on a radar. Now, silence is the blip that gets noticed. In the digital age, we are bombarded with an unprecedented amount of information. We no longer seek out political rhetoric from television or newspapers. Instead, rhetoric comes to us as memes, sound bites, and video clips. One Google search on the computer leads to weeks of advertisements of similar products on every webpage we visit. Even on social media, which is ostensibly a way to keep in touch with friends and family, we are presented with trending stories of the moment. We use multiple electronic devices that are synced so that tailored persuasive messages are delivered round the clock. *I submit that amidst so much digital chatter, rhetorical silence has become a significant resource in persuasion.* One of the duties of rhetoric is to address the needs of the moment and use rhetoric toward a social good. Once we understand how the Internet has changed the nature of discourse, we can then use that knowledge to mediate exigencies. Kathleen Jamieson explains that a genre is useful because it provides a window for understanding how people respond in similar ways to similar problems.<sup>54</sup> Spoken and written messages are frequently tuned out by audiences, so

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<sup>53</sup> Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984).

<sup>54</sup> Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, eds. K. Campbell and K. Jamieson (Falls Church, VA: The Speech Communication Association, 1978).

rhetorical silence is perhaps the instrument with which persuasion can take place. It is not only with words that we persuade one another but also with silence.

In summary, I am going to determine if there are more similarities than differences in three instances of rhetorical silence. The generic perspective is useful because it permits a systematic analysis of artifacts. The elements typically examined in generic analyses are the intent or social motives of the rhetor, the situation or contextual factors that inform the discourse, conventions that govern the production and reception of the discourse, the expectations of the audience, and the stylistic similarities of works. These elements will help me determine if a category of rhetorical silence exists.

### **WHAT IS A GENRE?**

Walter Fisher explains that a genre is a category or a generalization that is created “by humans out of the mind’s penchant for observing similarities and differences in things, to provide order to understanding.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, genres are not formed just for the purpose of classification but for organizing our experiences. Indeed, Fisher notes, “the test of a genre, any generalization, is the degree of understanding it provides of phenomena.”<sup>56</sup> However, Fisher is careful to point out that genre is an Aristotelian construct, not Platonic,<sup>57</sup> which means that genre is not an idealized form but an inductive generalization. One must look at actual instances of discourse to see if a genre can be articulated. Kathleen Jamieson explains that “genre” is a word borrowed from the French language that means

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<sup>55</sup> Walter Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 291.

<sup>56</sup> Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications,” 291.

<sup>57</sup> Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications,” 291.

“a distinct species, form, type, or kind.”<sup>58</sup> Jamieson and Campbell define genre as an “economical way of acknowledging the interdependence of purpose, lines of argument, stylistic choices, and requirements arising from the situation and the audience.”<sup>59</sup> Campbell and Jamieson remind us that the idea is not to have a neat classification but a classification that provides illumination—and that genre criticism should be “taken as a means toward systematic, close textual analysis.”<sup>60</sup> This idea is echoed by Fisher, who states that genre criticism is “an aspect of critical method, not a critical method in and of itself.”<sup>61</sup> This stance prompts the question, What constitutes a genre?

What is clear from extant literature is that a genre is made of recurring forms. But the concept of form is not clear, as different scholars have used the term “form” to signify different things. To bring clarity to the concept of form, I need to first discuss that genres can manifest at different levels of abstraction. Fisher notes that there are four levels on which genres occur:<sup>62</sup> The first level is the broadest, and it includes categories of discourse such as poetic, rhetoric, or dialectic. The second level points to the divisions within the broad categories of discourse, such as the genres of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic rhetoric. The third level includes specific types of discourse, such as eulogies, apologies, etc. The fourth level is that of style, such as sentimental style, paranoid style, jeremiad style, and so on. Since my dissertation looks at rhetorical discourse, the first level of

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<sup>58</sup> Kathleen H. Jamieson, “Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 162.

<sup>59</sup> Kathleen H. Jamieson and Karlyn K. Campbell, “Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusion of Generic Elements,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 146.

<sup>60</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, “Form and Genre,” 18.

<sup>61</sup> Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications,” 299

<sup>62</sup> Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications.”

abstraction (the level of broad categories of discourse) is not especially relevant. The second level of abstraction that further divides rhetorical discourse into categories will be important when I discuss the motives or the intent of the rhetor and the expectations of the audience. The third level of abstraction will be relevant when I discuss the recurring situations (material or perceived) that call the rhetoric into being and the conventions that shape the responses to such situations. Finally, the fourth level of abstraction, of style, will be relevant when I delineate the stylized choices that express the beliefs of the rhetor. In this study, I hope to show that the elements that constitute a genre can come from all levels of abstraction. Would it make sense for a critic to say that the rhetor used enactment without also saying something about the purpose of the discourse, the intent of the rhetor, the expectations of the audience, the situation that gives rise to the discourse, and the conventions that were upheld or violated? Generic criticism, in my view, must draw from all levels of abstraction to show how the discourse is working to influence others.

The concept of “form” needs a clear definition. For Fisher, form is a specific type of discourse, such as a sonnet or a nomination speech.<sup>63</sup> Campbell and Jamieson give the label of “form” to all the elements that are found in a genre, such as lines of argument, stylized choices, and perceived situational demands.<sup>64</sup> Northrop Frye calls forms recurring images, associative clusters, complex variables, communicable units, and topoi.<sup>65</sup> Roderick Hart notes that “forms emerge in audiences’ minds” as a result of the structure imposed on

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<sup>63</sup> Fisher, “Genre: Concepts and Applications.”

<sup>64</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, “Form and Genre.”

<sup>65</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 95–115.

the discourse by the rhetor.<sup>66</sup> There appears to be no consistent use of the term “form,” which is confusing, as the reference is not clear. A distinct vocabulary would minimize confusion. In rhetorical theory, there already exists a more precise vocabulary that can be utilized to name the elements that make up a genre. Elements such as repetition are commonly known as strategies or style, and elements such as refutation are referred to as substance. For the sake of clarity, I will use the term “form” to refer to a specific type of discourse, such as an apology or a eulogy. I will use the term “strategies” to refer to stylistic choices made by the rhetor, such as the use of certain objects to express certain beliefs. I will use the term “substance” to denote elements that refer to content such as refutation. To refer to all the things that make up a genre, I will use the term elements.

### **Elements of a Genre**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Form	A specific type of discourse, such as a eulogy or a nomination speech
Substance	The content of the discourse, such as arguments, metaphors, narratives
Strategies	Stylistic choices, such as repetition, images, objects
Situation	Occasion that influences the discourse, such as death or inauguration
Conventions	Previous responses to similar situations
Intent	The social motives of the rhetor
Expectations	What the audience anticipates

Table 1: Elements of a Genre

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<sup>66</sup> Roderick Hart, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 109.

Genres are made up of certain recurring elements, and those elements cluster together.

Jamieson and Campbell use the metaphor of stars in a constellation.<sup>67</sup> They state:

Because a genre is a constellation of elements, the appearance of the same forms in different genres poses no critical problem; a genre is given its character by a fusion of forms not by its individual elements.<sup>68</sup>

Genres are unique because some elements repeatedly come together to constitute a genre; however, the coming together of some elements does not automatically signal the formation of a genre. The elements that cluster together to constitute a genre are bound by an internal logic:

a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic. When a generic claim is made, the critical situation alters significantly because the critic is now arguing that a group of discourses has a synthetic core in which certain significant rhetorical elements, e.g., a system of belief, lines of argument, stylistic choices, and the perception of the situation, are fused into an indivisible whole.<sup>69</sup>

In a genre, all the elements are fused together so that if an element were missing it would alter the nature of that discourse. This characteristic is important because generic criticism reveals something about the manner in which humans respond to life's situations. For example, in a eulogy, one expects the speaker will capture the life story of the deceased, make the audience cry or laugh, and attempt to bind together a community that has been torn apart by the death. But if a eulogy ridicules the deceased or shames the bereaved, one would wonder about the motives of the speaker in deviating from the conventions of a eulogy.

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<sup>67</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, "Form and Genre."

<sup>68</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, "Form and Genre," 21.

<sup>69</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, "Form and Genre," 21.

The elements that are typically studied in generic analyses are the intentions or motivations of the rhetor, the conventions of discourse, the expectations of the audience, the stylized choices made by the rhetor, and the substance or content of discourse. Although there is general agreement on which elements come together to make up a genre, there is some tension in the way the variables are discussed. Below, I discuss the tensions within each element.

### **THE SITUATION**

The situation is often seen as the controlling principle in genre studies because rhetoric is a practical art that comes into being for a purpose. It makes no sense to discuss the aims of discourse, the types of arguments given, and the strategies employed without first asking about the situation in which a response is made: What is a situation, what are the characteristics of a rhetorical situation, and how does a situation influence discourse? William Benoit notes that it was Edwin Black who “laid the foundation for situational approaches to genre criticism.”<sup>70</sup> Black was frustrated with the limitations of a neo-Aristotelian approach and drew our attention to the notion that there are a limited number of situations in which people find themselves and a limited number of ways in which they might respond to recurring situations.<sup>71</sup> Black explains that a review of history (or

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<sup>70</sup> William Benoit, “Beyond Genre Theory: The Genesis of Rhetorical Action,” *Communication Monographs* 67, no. 2 (2000): 178.

<sup>71</sup> Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

conventions) provides “information on the rhetorical responses available in that situation.”<sup>72</sup>

Lloyd Bitzer further emphasizes the role of the situation in rhetorical transactions and gives us a vocabulary for referring to different aspects of the rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, and constraints.<sup>73</sup> Bitzer notes that the situation not only dictates the responses of the rhetor but also prescribes a fitting response. Bitzer rejects other factors such as the intent of the rhetor that might influence rhetoric. He states, “Not the rhetor, and not persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground for rhetorical activity—and I should add, of rhetorical criticism.”<sup>74</sup> Additionally, Bitzer views “the rhetorical situation as a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, Bitzer posits that situations exist objectively or naturally regardless of discourse, though a rhetorical situation is one in which an exigence can be mediated through discourse.

Some have challenged a materialist view of a situation and have noted that situations are perceived. Richard Vatz claims, “No situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it.”<sup>76</sup> For Vatz, the distinction between objective and subjective views of situations is important: if there is some meaning intrinsic to a situation, one needs another discipline, such as philosophy or political science, to figure out the real meaning of a

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<sup>72</sup> Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 133.

<sup>73</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968).

<sup>74</sup> Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation,” 5.

<sup>75</sup> Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation,” 6.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Vatz, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6, no. 3 (1973).

situation. Vatz reverses the nature of a rhetorical situation so that “situations are rhetorical,” rather than objective; it is “utterance [that] strongly invites exigence” and “rhetoric [that] controls the situational response.”<sup>77</sup>

Carolyn Miller explains that the debate over whether a situation is material or interpreted is important because a materialist view of situations “would lead ... to scientific generalizations.”<sup>78</sup> Miller instead proposes that “rhetorical situation is not material and objective, but a social construct.”<sup>79</sup> She defines exigence as a “form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, an exigence is not a defect but a mutual recognition of a social need. This view also does not discount the intent of the rhetor. Miller states:

The exigence provides the rhetor with a socially recognizable way to make his or her intentions known. It provides an occasion, and thus a form, for making public our private versions of things.<sup>81</sup>

Miller bypasses the dichotomy of situations as objective or subjective, accounts for the motives/intentions of the rhetor, and explains how social needs become objectified through mutual recognition. I hypothesize that situation is the controlling element in the genre of rhetorical silence. Language is already ambiguous, and silence is perhaps even more ambiguous; therefore, it appears that we can make useful meanings out of silence only if we know the context or can inquire about it.

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<sup>77</sup> Vatz, “Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” 158.

<sup>78</sup> Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” 156.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” 157.

<sup>80</sup> Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” 157.

<sup>81</sup> Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” 158.

## INTENTIONS (OR MOTIVATIONS)

Intentions, or motivations, are another important element in the study of genres. I am mindful of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment subject, so I will direct this discussion toward social motives. Kenneth Burke notes that “situations are shorthand terms for motives.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, recognition of an exigence entails a motive. Burke also explains that “motives are distinctly linguistic products. We discern situational patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born.”<sup>83</sup> In short, people interpret their motives in the verbalizations of the group or culture to which they belong. Burke gives the example of how Person A may say that he dislikes Person B because Person B behaves poorly toward his wife and is involved in shady deals. But when Person A has a dream that Person B is fired because everyone in the office believes that such a despicable person ought to be fired, the psychoanalyst listening closely will realize that the motive behind Person A’s dislike for Person B is that Person A is worried that Person B will be more successful at work than he is. Burke’s example clarifies how people articulate their motives in the language that is available to them. Burke further notes that motives used to be quite transparent to people in times of great dramas when people knew the motives of the characters. Contemporary culture is more unstable than previous eras were, so we have to raise the question of motives. Miller echoes Burke’s notion of situations being a shorthand for motives and explains the connection between a situation

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<sup>82</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 29.

<sup>83</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 35.

and a motive: “To comprehend a motive is to have an exigence. Except in a primitive sense, our motives are not private or idiosyncratic, they are products of our socialization.”<sup>84</sup>

Fisher explains that rhetorical discourse seeks to create a certain value-laden image of the world, which instructs people on how to behave in certain situations.<sup>85</sup> He identifies four motives that are useful in characterizing rhetorical situations: affirmation, reaffirmation, purification, and subversion.<sup>86</sup> Fisher clarifies that affirmation is concerned with giving birth to an ideology; reaffirmation is concerned with revitalizing an existing ideology; purification is concerned with correcting or refining an ideology; and subversion is concerned with weakening or destroying an ideology. Fisher also notes that a relationship can exist between motives. For example, to affirm something is to automatically subvert something else. Nevertheless, one motive will “dominate in any given rhetorical situation.”<sup>87</sup> In my dissertation, I will discuss intent or motives in terms of social motives that can be discerned from a person’s linguistic and non-linguistic styles.

James Kinneavy argues, “The aim of a discourse determines everything else in the process of discourse.”<sup>88</sup> However, Kinneavy is quick to point out the fallacies that are associated with such a view: intentional fallacy and affective fallacy. Intentional fallacy occurs when one judges the intent of the work on the basis of author’s intent, and affective fallacy occurs when one judges the intent of the work on the basis of the effect on the auditor. Kinneavy notes that the intent of the work is “embodied in the work itself—given

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<sup>84</sup> Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” 158.

<sup>85</sup> Walter Fisher, “A Motive View of Communication,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970).

<sup>86</sup> Fisher, “Motive View of Communication.”

<sup>87</sup> Fisher, “Motive View of Communication,” 139.

<sup>88</sup> James Kinneavey, *A Theory of Discourse* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971), 48.

the qualifications of situation and culture ....”<sup>89</sup> To state it differently, Kinneavy proposes that intent is not to be read as the psychology of the author or the auditor but is found in the material discourse. Additionally, a work should be read while keeping in mind both the situation and the culture (or conventions) that influence the discourse. I now turn to a discussion of such conventions.

### CONVENTIONS

The responses a rhetor makes in a situation are shaped by the conventions of discourse that have come before. Burke uses the metaphor of a conversation to explain how social idioms influence what can be said:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.<sup>90</sup>

Burke poetically explains why conventions shape what can be said and how it can be said. One must keep in mind the conventions (and conventional knowledge) that influence discourse. Otherwise, one would seem ill-mannered at a parlor, muttering to herself in a corner. Edwin Black notes that there are only so many situations in which a speaker finds

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<sup>89</sup> Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 110-11.

herself and only so many responses that could be made in such situations.<sup>91</sup> As such, Black notes, conventions develop over time.

Rod Hart notes that generic patterns or conventions stabilize a culture since “genres are conservative.”<sup>92</sup> Hart explains with an example in which he contrasts the behaviors of a toddler throwing a tantrum, a sulking teen, and a savvy politician:

To speak in established ways by following the rules is to tip one’s hat to the forces that be. Thus, the two-year old expresses displeasure by wailing, and the adolescent by sulking, but the teenager slowly learns to disagree without being disagreeable...Should that teenager become a US representative, he or she would learn how to express contempt even more elegantly: “The honorable gentleman from Missouri must surely be mistaken.” ... So even though generic formulas sometimes seem silly, careful inspection finds them perpetuating important, agreed-on truths.<sup>93</sup>

In short, conventions matter because they are good manners (Burke), they necessarily evolve as there is a sameness to human situations and responses (Black), and they preserve the values of a culture (Hart).

However, Bitzer notes that “the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form [of discourse].”<sup>94</sup> Jamieson builds on Bitzer’s notion of convention as a constraint.<sup>95</sup> She argues that situation is not always the controlling element in genre formation. Some discourses “bear the chromosomal imprint of ancestral genres,” and, therefore, “it is sometimes rhetorical genres and not rhetorical situations that are

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<sup>91</sup> Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 133.

<sup>92</sup> Hart, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 123.

<sup>93</sup> Hart, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 123.

<sup>94</sup> Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” 13.

<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Jamieson, “Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975).

decisively formative.”<sup>96</sup> Jamieson gives the examples of how contemporary papal encyclicals have the same elements as Roman imperial documents and apostolic epistles; the early state of the union addresses bear the “chromosomal imprint” of the King’s speech; and the Congressional replies to the early state of the union speeches resemble Parliament’s response to the King’s speech. Jamieson concludes that a rhetor is not free to choose from the available means of persuasion because antecedent genres exert considerable force on the responses that a rhetor can make. She notes that it is difficult to hold a rhetor accountable for the choices made in their discourse without looking at the conventions that constrained those choices in the first place. For example, one cannot say that the founding fathers deliberately choose monarchical elements, because the preceding form of the King’s speech considerably narrowed the means of persuasion available to the founding fathers. Frye too notes that a work partly derives meaning from the tradition to which it belongs.<sup>97</sup> Thus, generic criticism is not so much about classifying but about noticing affinities that discourses share with and derive from older works.

## EXPECTATIONS

In many ways, the expectations of the audience are part of the situation that the rhetor encounters. Additionally, the expectations of the audience are shaped by traditions and conventions. I have already discussed situation and convention; however, there are some nuances about audience expectations that still need to be explicated. Genre implies that works share characteristics regardless of the author and the time period in which the

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<sup>96</sup> Jamieson, “Genre as Constraint,” 406.

<sup>97</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*.

discourse was produced. For example, Mark Anthony's eulogy for Julius Caesar will have more in common with Brooke Shields' eulogy for Michael Jackson than will any other speeches given by either speaker, even though the two speeches are removed in time. Jamieson explains that this phenomenon occurs because the speaker is constrained not only by the situation but also by the expectations of the audience.<sup>98</sup> An unspoken contract exists between the speaker and the audience that hinges on fulfillment of a certain expectation. When discussing form, Burke brings up the psychology of the audience. He states, "Form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite."<sup>99</sup> Thus genre not only accounts for what was done in a certain work but also what was done in the past and what is expected in the future, which raises two questions: What happens when generic expectations are frustrated, and why would a rhetor frustrate the expectations of the audience?

Jamieson states that genre implies a contract between the rhetor and the audience, and the rhetor is expected to fulfill the expectations of the audience.<sup>100</sup> The breaching of a generic contract is a risky endeavor, as it can produce a backlash. The audience may see a breach as a bold, new move or rebuke it as inappropriate. However, once generic expectations have been shattered, they lose their shock value, and the audience will have new expectations regarding that type of discourse. Jamieson gives the example of the film *Bonnie and Clyde*. The audience was not expecting a blood bath after so much solicited

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<sup>98</sup> Lloyd Bitzer notes that it is the situation that determines the rhetoric produced.

<sup>99</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 31.

<sup>100</sup> Kathleen Jamieson, "Generic Constraints."

laughter; thus, the breach of contract resulted in shock. But when later films such as *Little Big Man* blended comedy with horror, the shock was muted since the audience already had been exposed to that particular type of generic violation. The point Jamieson is making is that even though genres can calcify, violations of generic expectations become a source for practicing agency for the savvy rhetor. Edwin Black adds a postulate: “at the foundation of any system of rhetorical criticism ... there will be a correspondence among the intentions of a communicator, the characteristics of his discourse, and the reactions of his auditors to that discourse.”<sup>101</sup> Black explains that without such a correspondence, expression would be impossible.

## STRATEGIES

Traditionally, the generic element of strategies includes such things as diction, repetition, alliteration, and other literary devices. Since my dissertation focuses on silence, it makes no sense to speak of literary devices. Literary devices apply to words, phrases, and the overall structure of discourse. Fortunately, Barry Brummett offers a view of stylized rhetoric that goes beyond literary devices.<sup>102</sup> Brummett suggests that signs, such as clothing, movement, speech, and vocabulary cluster together. Therefore, these signs communicate relatively homogenous meanings.<sup>103</sup> Brummett defines style as a language:

Style is a complex system of actions, objects, and behaviors that is used to form messages that announce who we are, who we want to be, and who we want to be considered akin to. It is therefore also a system of communication with rhetorical influence on others. And as such, style is a means by which

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<sup>101</sup> Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 16.

<sup>102</sup> Barry Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>103</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*.

power and advantage are negotiated, distributed, and struggled over in society.<sup>104</sup>

Style is a complex system of communication. A system means that all the signs must work together to form stable messages. Violations of piety in the system of communication will affect the meaning of the message. The signs, as Brummett observes, must hang together for a successful signification:

When we think about style as a system, it is also important to think about how style works as a system to bind together its component elements... This unity is not trivial; it has powerful consequences for social and political experience.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, people are hesitant to mix up signs from different style systems because it makes a powerful statement. Styles can be changed to form new identities and affiliations but not on a whim. Changing style frequently compromises successful signification of identity and group affiliations. The signs must not only hang together but also remain relatively stable over time for people to be persuaded by the signification. Since my dissertation focuses on rhetorical silence, it makes sense for me to take a broader view of style. As such, I will examine objects, images, clothing, and other stylized choices from which the beliefs of the rhetor can be construed. Additionally, I will comment on the struggle over the meaning of objects, actions, and behaviors.

## SUBSTANCE

The strange thing about instances of silence in public discourse is that they have no manifest content. Sonja Foss, in her discussion of generic criticism, observes that the

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<sup>104</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*, xi.

<sup>105</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*, 35.

substantive features are the content of the discourse, what discourse is made of.<sup>106</sup> But silent discourses are made of nothing. In the moment(s) of silence, the rhetor gives no arguments, tells no stories, and uses no metaphors. It would not be incorrect to say that the substantive feature of silent discourse is dead air or a pregnant kind of absence. But just because it has no substance does not mean that the silence is not significant. In the absence of substance, meanings are inferred. Here, I must let the case studies speak to me. My analysis will reveal the attributions of meaning in the absence of what traditionally has been called substance.

### **Rhetorical Silence**

So far, I have discussed how silence shows up in many areas of public discourse such as music, poetry, social movements, politics, and spiritual discourse; I have reviewed the various ways in which many scholars study silence as communication and persuasion; I have explained why the generic perspective would be useful in studying silence; and I have discussed the meanings and tensions associated with generic concepts. I now explain what kind of silence I seek to study. I am interested in rhetorical silence, which I tentatively define as an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence people. By “intentional” I mean that the person consciously chooses to remain silent. By “strategic” I mean that the person has decided that silence will be the means to their end. By “influence” I mean moving people in their imaginations and/or actions. I do not posit the criteria of

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<sup>106</sup> Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2009), 137.

intentionality and strategy as absolute but rather as continua. One may not be fully conscious of their intention, but as long as the silence is not accidental or forced, I place it somewhere on the continuum of intentionality. Similarly, a strategy may be as loose as “let me try this” or as clearly articulated as a statement on a group website. As long as it is a deliberate use of silence to achieve a specific goal, I call it strategic.

Some exclusions are necessary to give focus to my study of rhetorical silence. The first exclusion is a rule-based silence that is equally enforced in some settings, such as libraries, movie theaters, and classrooms. In such settings, individuals willingly maintain silence because it is expected and because violations of this rule might result in undesirable consequences such as being asked to leave the library. This kind of silence is an instance of intentional and strategic silence, but it is not rhetorical, as it is not meant to influence anyone’s imagination or action. A second exclusion is a self-enforced silence that results from certain psychological conditions such as shyness or fear. Some individuals maintain silence not because silence is a way for them to say something but because of some personal inhibitions. Such dispositional silence is not strategic or intentional in the sense that hardly anyone intends or plans to be tongue-tied at a social gathering. A third exclusion is stonewalling or a refusal to speak. For example, one may have an argument with one’s teenaged child, and the teen might retreat to their room and refuse to speak. The teen has indeed used their agency and responded with silence, but this is a refusal to speak, not speaking with silence. Such a refusal to engage in discourse is excluded from my study precisely because it is a refusal to discourse. My study focuses on silence as a way to engage in persuasive discourse.

## Case Studies

I analyze three instances of rhetorical silence to determine if there is a genre of rhetorical silence. The three case studies meet my tentative definition of rhetorical silence as an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence. The three instances of silence are selected from three different areas of public discourse to answer the question of genre. My first case study is Ghazala Khan's silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, which sparked a national debate on the meaning of her silence. Ghazala Khan's silence is a rare example of a complete absence of spoken words in a public address situation. My second case study is a social movement campaign called Day of Silence, a national, annual event in which students from middle school to college take a vow of silence for one day to protest the bullying of LGBTQ youth. My third case study is Meher Baba, an Indian spiritual guru who stayed silent for forty-four years, from 1925 until his death in 1969. Baba claimed that he was an avatar—God in human form—and he explained that he stays silent because he has come to raise awareness, not to teach. In all three instances, the silence is intentional, strategic, and purposeful. The three cases—Ghazala Khan, Day of Silence, and Meher Baba—are drawn from three different areas of public discourse to answer the question of genre. Ghazala Khan's silence is in the realm of politics and public address; the Day of Silence campaign belongs in the area of social movements; and Meher Baba's silence falls in the realm of spiritual discourse. The three case studies are not alike except that they meet my tentative definition of rhetorical silence.

## Research Questions

My dissertation posits rhetorical silence as an emerging genre. It investigates the elements that recur in the intentional and strategic use of silence to influence people. Drawing on generic concepts, I have designed a series of probes that will address the dissertation question.

*Probe 1: How is silence maintained and broken by the rhetors?*

Although Ghazala Khan did not give a speech, she was mouthing the words “USA, USA, USA,” with the crowd. Afterward, she discussed her silence in interviews and wrote an op-ed piece. The Day of Silence protesters prepare for their silence for days before the event. They register the event with the organization; obtain permission from school officials; make posters, flyers, and speaking cards; and even plan their “break the silence” moment. Meher Baba was verbally silent for forty-four years, but he communicated with his chosen disciples with hand gestures and an alphabet board. He also “dictated” books and gave interviews in which he explained his silence, among other things. A few times, Meher Baba even announced that he would break his silence and speak, but at the last moment, he would withdraw from the speaking arrangement. In none of the three cases is the silence absolute, so the first probe inquires into the manner in which silence is delivered and broken.

*Probe 2: What is the significance of the length of the silence?*

The length of silence varies in the three instances: Ghazala Khan was silent for a few minutes, Day of Silence protesters are silent for a day, and Meher Baba was silent for half his life. Ghazala Khan may have been silent for a few minutes, but those moments

derailed the campaign of the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, for several days and threatened the unity of the Republican Party leadership. The Day of Silence event lasts only for a day, but it disturbs school order, which is why some schools are not in favor of it. Although schools seek compliant and disciplined students who do not interrupt, school order is threatened by the sheer act of students not saying anything for a day. When the demand for speech is thwarted, the engine of education is stalled momentarily. In Baba's case, the silence is striking, because it was held for a period of forty-four years. Such an extended period allows me to investigate the legacy of his silence. There are several Meher Centers across the United States where people come to read about Baba or gather to remember him. There are even websites that archive information pertaining to Baba. Thus, the second probe investigates the temporal dimension of silence. I ask if the length of silence has any influence on how silence is received.

*Probe 3: In the absence of substance, what are the meanings attributed to the silence?*

Attribution of meaning varies from each first-person account. In the case of Ghazala Khan, there were those who contradicted her account, such as conservative media generally and the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, specifically. However, there were also those who complimented her account, such as people who unequivocally support Gold Star families. In the case of Day of Silence campaign, schools and teachers interpret the event differently from the protesters. This difference in interpretation is evident in the manner in which schools handle such protests. Some schools allow full silence even when students are in class, while some schools allow silence only during lunch. Also, there is variation among students in how they stay silent. Some are silent only on social media, while some

are silent all day. The goals articulated by the organization are echoed by the American Civil Liberties Union in an open letter to schools stating that a blanket policy against the Day of Silence event is a violation of the First Amendment.<sup>107</sup> This statement is interesting because silence is being viewed as speech and is therefore protected under the right to free speech. In Meher Baba's case, multiple meanings were given to his silence besides his own. Therefore, the third probe looks into meaning attributions in the absence of substance.

*Probe 4: What is the connection between the intent of the rhetor and the effect of the discourse?*

In Ghazala Khan's case, perhaps her private intent was simply to maintain her dignity in front of a national audience. However, her social intention or motivation could be the subversion of an image.<sup>108</sup> The identity of Muslim Americans has come under scrutiny lately. Muslim women, especially those marked by hijabs and burqas, are seen as oppressed, and the trope of an oppressed woman calls forth the trope of a savior. As Americans, we see ourselves as heroes who will rescue the oppressed. Even though Ghazala Khan was unable to look upon her son's picture without dissolving into tears, she mustered up the courage to appear in front of a national audience. Perhaps she made a public appearance because she did not want to reify the image of a Muslim woman who is absent from the public sphere and in need of rescuing. Ghazala Khan's attempt to maintain her dignity shows that she did not want her grief to be a public spectacle. She assumed that her silence would be understood by the audience as an expression of grief too profound for

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<sup>107</sup> See [www.dayofsilence.org](http://www.dayofsilence.org).

<sup>108</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication."

words. Some people did indeed understand her motivation for silence, but others immediately invoked the trope of an oppressed woman. In the Day of Silence campaign, the social motivation also appears to be subversion. Many LGBTQ youth have a difficult time in school. Heteronormativity and binary construction of gender leave many people on the margins of society where their needs are not addressed. They seek to subvert hegemonic beliefs to crack open a space for themselves. Finally, Meher Baba's stated motivation was to raise awareness of God, but perhaps he also wanted to subvert the image of a teaching God and create a new image of a silent God. With the fourth probe, I want to investigate the link between the social intent of the rhetor and the effect of the discourse.

*Probe 5: What are the reactions of the audience when they are delivered silence instead of speech?*

Some people see silence as threatening and are therefore anxious for the silence to be broken.<sup>109</sup> The public was not satisfied with Ghazala's silence at the convention. Even those who sympathized with her wanted to hear from her. The public was not content until Ghazala Khan publicly shed the tears that she had tried so hard to hold back at the convention. The public wanted a teary spectacle and did not rest until it was delivered. When the Day of Silence protesters stay silent in school, varied reactions are evoked from family members, school officials, teachers, and peers. Peers often tease the protesters and try to trick them into speaking. Some schools do not want classroom instruction to be interrupted by the silence. Parents worry about the consequences of such a protest. When

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<sup>109</sup> Scott, "Rhetoric and Silence."

the protesters gather to make noise, everyone is relieved that speech is reinstated and the threat of silence is lifted. Meher Baba did not satisfy his devotees' desire for his speech. He would announce his intention to speak at a certain time, but when that time drew near, he would rescind on his promise. In essence, he never delivered the word that people craved. Why did the devotees want him to speak? Was it because Baba had promised that the consciousness of the Universe would be altered permanently when he finally spoke as God? Or perhaps the audience wanted confirmation that nothing would change even when Baba did speak? Therefore, my fifth probe inquires into audience expectations and violations of those expectations.

*Probe 6: Are there situational similarities that bring silence into existence?*

The notion of bringing silence into existence may seem counterintuitive. Silence is something that exists already, with or without human intervention. But *rhetorical* silence is defined as an intentional and deliberate use of silence to influence. Silence is foregrounded or embodied by the rhetors because it appears to be a fitting response in a particular type of situation. With Ghazala Khan, the situation is that her son, Captain Humayun Khan, died in combat while saving the lives of fellow soldiers. Ghazala Khan perhaps did not want her son's sacrifice to be forgotten amid the ongoing polemic against Muslim citizens of the US, brought to the fore in an executive order commonly known as the Muslim ban. Was her silence a fitting response in the situation? With the Day of Silence campaign, the exigence is the bullying of LGBTQ youth. Why is silence considered by protesters to be a better response than speech? What is it about the natures of the exigence and the audience that make silence a fitting response? Baba explains that he embodies

God's silence because no one adheres to God's Word. Instead of embracing the message of love and compassion that God has sent multiple times, people have waged wars in God's name. Since people have ignored the Word, God stays silent in his current form of Meher Baba. My sixth probe investigates the situation in which the silent response is made. It asks why silence was considered to be a fitting response to the exigence.

*Probe 7: Over which aspect of the rhetor's style does the struggle of meaning take place?*

Dick Hebdige notes that cultures and subcultures often struggle over the meanings of objects.<sup>110</sup> For example, something as simple as a jar of petroleum jelly can become a site of resistance against heteronormativity. Ghazala Khan was wearing a *dupatta* at the convention. A *dupatta* is not a hijab or a burqa: it is a light scarf of chiffon material that accompanies the *shalwar/kameez* outfits of women from South Asia. The *dupatta* can be worn around the neck in different ways or over the head. After the Democratic National Convention, many people attributed an oppressive meaning to the *dupatta* that Ghazala Khan wore over her head. Some people assumed that Ghazala Khan's silence plus the *dupatta* over her head equaled an oppressed Muslim woman. On the other hand, many conservative Muslims would not consider a *dupatta* to be sufficiently modest. The *dupatta* is part of Ghazala Khan's style and identity. She wore it over her head at the DNC and every public appearance since the DNC. But there appears to be a struggle over what the *dupatta* signifies. The Day of Silence protesters carry speaking cards that explain the purpose of their silence, put up posters around the school in preparation for the Day of

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<sup>110</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1982).

Silence, and distribute flyers to students. Perhaps these strategies help them achieve their goal of educating people. Meher Baba stylized his silence with an alphabet board and hand gestures, which allowed him to speak without words. The final probe investigates the stylistic features of rhetorical silence to see how style influences the message.

These seven probes will help me answer my overall research question of whether a genre of rhetorical silence exists. I seek to (a) identify the elements that cluster to form a genre of rhetorical silence and (b) locate the organizing principle around which the elements cluster. Ultimately, I hope that my work will shed some light on how rhetoric can mediate exigencies in a world already saturated with messages. To answer these questions, I examine three instances of rhetorical silence that originate in three different areas of public discourse.

### **Outline of the Chapters**

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are case studies that fit my tentative definition of rhetorical silence as an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence. The case studies have been selected from different areas of public discourse to probe for generic similarities. In chapter 2, I discuss Ghazala Khan's silent rhetoric at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Ghazala's appearance at the DNC is a rare example of silence at the podium. Her intentions and strategies were perhaps loosely formed and tentative, but her silence caused waves in public discourse. In chapter 3, I analyze the Day of Silence campaign, in which students take a vow of silence for one day to protest the bullying of LGBTQ youth. On the continua of intentionality and strategy, the student-participants are much more

advanced than Ghazala Khan was. In chapter 4, I inquire into the curious case of Meher Baba who stayed silent for forty-four years. Baba claimed that he was an Avatar—God in human form—and had come to raise awareness of God. He promised to deliver the word that would change the consciousness of the universe, but he died without speaking. In the concluding chapter, I return to the question of genre. Drawing upon my findings from the case studies, I discuss the common elements that form a genre of rhetorical silence, the logic that binds the individual elements together, and the significance and limitations of the genre of rhetorical silence.

## Chapter 2

### **Ghazala Khan's Silence: From Oppression to Subversion**

In the age of mass communication, people are exposed to an unprecedented number of messages. The public no longer seeks out political rhetoric; instead, messages come to us as memes, video clips, sound bites, and trending stories. Amid so much digital chatter, I argue that rhetorical silence is emerging as a genre that attempts to shape public opinion by operating outside the logic of digital communication. Silence has always been an avenue for people, but silence is increasingly becoming a significant persuasive resource in cultures saturated with digital chatter. The case studies I analyze in my dissertation meet my tentative definition of rhetorical silence—an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence—and are drawn from three different areas of public discourse to answer the question of genre. Specifically, I analyze Ghazala Khan's silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, the silence of the students participating in the Day of Silence campaign, and the forty-four-year silence of the spiritual guru Meher Baba. My goal is to determine if a genre of rhetorical silence exists and, if so, what its constitutive elements, significance, and limitations are.

In this chapter, I conduct a close analysis of Ghazala's silent appearance at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Although I do not proceed mechanically from the probes delineated in chapter one, my analysis is guided by (a) issues of meaning attribution in the absence of substance, (b) stylized features of Ghazala's silent rhetoric, (c) Ghazala's social intent in appearing but not speaking, (d) the circumstances that influenced her choice to

remain silent and the situation that led to verbal explanations of her silence, and (e) the violation of audience expectation that resulted in a demand for a spectacle. The following themes emerged as I applied the probes to Ghazala's silent appearance at the convention and her comments post-convention.

Several meanings were attributed to Ghazala's silence, and they can be grouped into first-person, the missing second-person, and the multiple third-person perspectives. The first-person perspective is more complex than the simple "grieving mother" explanation that we get from Ghazala Khan herself. Just as one's speech reveals much more than one what one intends, one's silence can signify more than what one intends. For a more nuanced explanation of her silence, I turn to Ghazala's attire and background to understand the social motives behind her silence at the convention. Ghazala's outfit subverts both Western and Middle Eastern standards of appropriate clothing for female bodies. Ghazala's stylized appearance complicates her own account of why she was silent at the convention. The third-person perspective falls into two categories: those who align their publicly expressed sentiments with Ghazala's own projected image of a grieving Gold Star mother and those who assume that Ghazala was silent because she is an oppressed Muslim woman. The second-person voice is missing. The Republican nominee—Donald Trump—labeled Ghazala Khan as an oppressed Muslim woman but did not address her directly to demand her speech. Instead, he demanded Ghazala's speech via her husband—Khizr Khan—with the assumption that she would be unable to produce the speech. However, this gamble failed when Ghazala not only wrote an op-ed piece but also gave voice to her silence in interviews conducted by the news media. Since Ghazala was not

addressed directly, many Muslim women took on Trump's challenge with the Twitter campaign #CanYouHearUsNow to share how Muslim women are not oppressed but participating in most aspects of life.

The final theme examines why Ghazala's few minutes of public silence did not sit well with the American people. I argue that there was a mass frenzy for her speech because she did not produce a spectacle that could be coded and packaged for easy consumption. There was nothing in Ghazala's silence that could be exchanged and consumed as a commodity. Since her silence was not available for easy consumption, it caused mass American indigestion. Ghazala was forced to speak even though her original and most authentic choice was to remain silent. Once Ghazala had cried several times on national television, public hunger for a spectacle was satisfied and she was allowed to withdraw from public scrutiny. To summarize, my analysis reveals four themes: (a) meaning attributions made in the absence of substance (words), (b) Ghazala's subversive motive that is evident from her outfit, (c) Donald Trump's subversive motive in labeling Muslim women as oppressed, and (d) silence as a resistance strategy in a culture where the dominant value is consumption.

The texts I analyze in this case study are a video record of Khizr and Ghazala Khan on the DNC stage and the news stories that emerged post-convention. The news stories, which include interviews and an op-ed piece, provide context for understanding the rather unexpected impact of the Khans' presence at the convention.

## **The Stars of the 2016 Democratic National Convention**

It was the last night of the 2016 Democratic National Convention, and the audience was eagerly awaiting Hillary Clinton's nomination acceptance speech. One by one, the assigned speakers for the day took the stage to express their agreement with the party's agenda. Then a curious thing happened: a Muslim American couple walked on to the stage. In that moment, I knew something transformative was about to happen. Khizr Khan, father of the fallen army captain Humayun Khan, began his speech with these words: "First, our thoughts and prayers are with our veterans and those who serve today. Tonight we are honored to stand here as parents of Captain Humayun Khan and as patriotic Muslim Americans with undivided loyalty to our country."<sup>111</sup> He accused Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, of not being familiar with the US Constitution when calling for a ban on all Muslims entering the United States. Khizr lamented that under a Muslim ban, his son, who sacrificed himself in Iraq to protect his unit from a suicide bomber, would not have been allowed in Trump's America. Khizr offered Trump his well-worn, pocket copy of the US Constitution that he pulled out of his jacket pocket. The image of Khizr Khan brandishing the US Constitution became the most memorable image of the 2016 Democratic Convention. Khizr accused Trump of having sacrificed "nothing and no one." Amid thunderous applause, Ghazala Khan stood with her hand resting on the podium, her face grief stricken. She wiped tears from under her eyeglasses and mouthed "USA, USA,

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<sup>111</sup> "Full Text: Khizr Khan's Speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention," ABC News, last modified August 1, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-text-khizr-khans-speech-2016-democratic-national/story?id=41043609>.

USA” with the crowd. The question that emerged almost immediately after the Khans’ appearance at the 2016 DNC was, why was Ghazala Khan silent?

### **Layers of Meanings**

In the absence of speech, people assign some meaning to silence. Richard Johannesen explains that “one human attaches meaning to the silence of another human being because it is assumed that thought processes are occurring. Human silence is pregnant with meaning because of this assumption.”<sup>112</sup> Like speech, silence generates a field of meaning in which several interpretations come into play. The playing field of silence is perhaps even larger than the field of assigned meanings of speech. Public discourse over the Khan couple exploded the day after the Democratic convention ended. Ghazala Khan’s brief silence at the podium was extensively covered in news stories. Public debate over the meaning of Ghazala Khan’s silence was first started by the Republican nominee, Donald Trump.

Donald Trump attributed an oppressive meaning to Ghazala Khan’s silence. In an interview with George Stephanopoulos with NBC News, Trump stated, “If you look at his wife, she was standing there. She had nothing to say. She probably, maybe she wasn’t allowed to have anything to say. You tell me, but plenty of people have written that she was extremely quiet, and it looked like she had nothing to say.”<sup>113</sup> In an interview with Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times*, Trump said, “I’d like to hear his [Khizr Khan’s]

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<sup>112</sup> Johannesen, “The Functions of Silence,” 25.

<sup>113</sup> Anna Merod, “Donald Trump Questions Army Father’s DNC Speech, Wife’s Silence,” NBC News, last modified July 30, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-questions-army-father-s-dnc-speech-wife-s-n620241>.

wife say something.”<sup>114</sup> Trump assumed that because Ghazala was a Muslim woman who was silent in a public address context, she must be forbidden to speak. Trump was of course jumping to conclusions based on stereotypical notions of Muslim women as veiled, voiceless, submissive, passive, oppressed victims of a faith that gives all the power to men. He was subsequently proven wrong when Ghazala Khan took on Trump’s challenge and spoke about her silence at the convention.

It was not just Donald Trump who wanted to hear Ghazala Khan “say something.” The news media, sensing public interest in the Khans, pursued a dialogue with the couple. Ghazala Khan explained her silence in an op-ed piece published in the *Washington Post*:

Donald Trump has asked why I did not speak at the Democratic National Convention. He said he would like to hear from me. Here is my answer to Donald Trump: Because without saying a thing, all the world, all America, felt my pain. I am a Gold Star mother. Whoever saw me felt me in their heart...Donald Trump said that maybe I was not allowed to say anything. That is not true. My husband asked me if I wanted to speak, but I told him I could not. My religion teaches me that all human beings are equal in God’s eyes. Husband and wife are part of each other; you should love and respect each other so you can take care of the family.<sup>115</sup>

Ghazala ended her op-ed with these words: “Donald Trump said he has made a lot of sacrifices. He doesn’t know what the word sacrifice means.”<sup>116</sup> In addition to the op-ed, Ghazala Khan spoke at several interviews alongside her husband Khizr Khan, where she

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<sup>114</sup> Maureen Dowd, “Trump’s Thunderbolts,” *New York Times*, last modified July 29, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/30/opinion/trumps-thunderbolts.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/30/opinion/trumps-thunderbolts.html?_r=1).

<sup>115</sup> Ghazala Khan, “Ghazala Khan: Trump Criticized My Silence. He Knows Nothing About True Sacrifice,” *Washington Post*, last modified July 31, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ghazala-khan-donald-trump-criticized-my-silence-he-knows-nothing-about-true-sacrifice/2016/07/31/c46e52ec-571c-11e6-831d-0324760ca856\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f989cef8010c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ghazala-khan-donald-trump-criticized-my-silence-he-knows-nothing-about-true-sacrifice/2016/07/31/c46e52ec-571c-11e6-831d-0324760ca856_story.html?utm_term=.f989cef8010c).

<sup>116</sup> Khan, “Trump Criticized My Silence.”

expressed similar sentiments. In a satellite interview with ABC News, Ghazala Khan explained that she remained silent not because she was forbidden to speak but because she was overwhelmed with grief. She explained, “Because when I was standing there, all America felt my pain. Without saying a single word. Everybody felt that pain ... I am very upset when I heard when he said that I didn’t say anything. I was in pain. If you were in pain you fight or you don’t say anything, I’m not a fighter, I can’t fight. So the best thing I do was quiet.”<sup>117</sup> In an interview with Lawrence O’Donnell of MSNBC, Ghazala said, “It was very nervous, because I cannot see my son’s picture and I cannot even come in the room where his pictures are, and that’s why when I saw the picture on my back, I couldn’t take it. And I controlled myself at that time, so it is very hard.”<sup>118</sup> From Ghazala’s own words, the American people received an explanation of her silence. People learned that she was silent because she is still grieving for her son.

Ghazala Khan was not alone in defending herself against Trump’s attacks. Hillary Clinton and Khizr Khan both jumped to her defense. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party’s nominee, provided a more charitable interpretation of Ghazala’s silence. Clinton said in a statement, “I was very moved to see Ghazala Khan stand bravely and with dignity in support of her son on Thursday. And I was very moved to hear her speak last night, bravely and with dignity, about her son’s life and the ultimate sacrifice he made for his country.”<sup>119</sup> Khizr Khan seemed upset that Donald Trump would take a cheap shot at a

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<sup>117</sup> Mary Bruce, “Muslim Family of Fallen Army Captain Responds to Trump: ‘Shame on Him,’” ABC News, last modified July 30, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/muslim-family-fallen-army-captain-responds-trump-shame/story?id=41022064>.

<sup>118</sup> Merod, “Donald Trump Questions.”

<sup>119</sup> Merod, “Donald Trump Questions.”

grieving Gold Star mother. He passionately exclaimed, “For this candidate for presidency to not be aware of the respect of Gold Star mother standing there, and he had to take that shot at her, this is height of ignorance. This is why I showed him Constitution. Had he read that, he would know the status a Gold Star mother holds in this nation.”<sup>120</sup> Both Clinton and Khizr Khan defended Ghazala Khan without invoking the stereotype of an oppressed Muslim woman. Hillary Clinton interpreted Ghazala’s silence as dignified and a symbol of courage. Khizr, similarly, interpreted Ghazala’s silence as an expression of grief and deserving of respect.

### **The “I” and the Others**

Ghazala told the American people that her silence at the convention was indicative of a suffering so great that it goes beyond the realm of speech. She used the word “pain” to explain her silence at the convention. She described that she was unable to speak because she was still mourning for her son who was killed in 2004. Twelve years later, her grief was still fresh. She was reduced to tears simply by glancing at her son’s picture. So, when a larger than life image of Humayun Khan was displayed as a backdrop to Khan’s speech, she could barely hold herself together. Although she did not speak, she mouthed the words “USA, USA, USA” with the crowd.

The first-person account of why Ghazala Khan did not speak at the convention is supported by both literature and common lived experiences. Ghazala described that she

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<sup>120</sup> Eric Brandner, “Khizr Khan: Trump Has a ‘Black Soul,’” CNN, last modified July 31, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/31/politics/khizr-khan-donald-trump-black-soul/>.

was still mourning for her son, which is why she dissolved into tears when she saw her son's photograph. Johaannesen identifies twenty possible meanings of silence, and one of them is that the person could be too emotionally overcome to speak.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, poets often describe how some human experiences cannot be expressed in words. Edgar Lee Masters writes,

Of what use is language?  
A beast of the field moans a few times  
When death takes its young.  
And we are voiceless in the presence of realities –  
We cannot speak.

A curious boy asks an old soldier  
Sitting in front of the grocery store,  
“How did you lose your leg?”  
And the old soldier is struck with silence,  
Or his mind flies away  
Because he cannot concentrate it on Gettysburg.  
It comes back jocosely  
And he says, “A bear bit it off.”  
And the boy wonders, while the old soldier  
Dumbly, feebly lives over  
The flashes of gun, the thunder of cannon,  
The shrieks of the slain,  
And himself lying on the ground,  
And the hospital surgeons, the knives,  
And the long days in bed.  
But if he could describe it all  
He would be an artist.  
But if he were an artist there would be deeper wounds  
Which he could not describe.<sup>122</sup>

Masters beautifully describes the paucity of words when it comes to describing traumatic experiences. Trauma exceeds language. Even artists, Masters writes, cannot fully express

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<sup>121</sup> Johannesen, “Functions of Silence.”

<sup>122</sup> Masters, “Silence.”

deep wounds. Similar accounts have come to us from Holocaust survivors who were unable to describe the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. For example, in the film *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, when an eyewitness is asked to give an account of a Nazi concentration camp, he is unable to say anything except that in Auschwitz they had no names, just numbers. Even in our everyday lives, we have a common-sense understanding of how words cannot do justice to some common experiences. The condolence phone calls that are difficult to make, the expressions of love that seem inadequate on an anniversary card, and the poverty of the word “congratulations” in the face of a near-impossible accomplishment are all evidence of how often words fail us. When Ghazala Khan spoke of her pain during the speech, it made sense to us because we are familiar with the experience of being rendered speechless in some circumstances.

One thing that complicates the first-person account of being in too much pain to speak at the convention is Ghazala Khan’s admission that she never planned to speak. Khizr Khan explained that when the invitation came to speak at the convention, he asked his wife if she would like to speak. He recalls, “I invited her, would you like to say something on the stage when the invitation came, and she said, ‘You know how it is with me, how upset I get.’”<sup>123</sup> In her op-ed piece, Ghazala Khan also revealed that her husband asked her if she would like to say something, and she declined.<sup>124</sup> Instead, she helped Khizr Khan write the speech so that her voice would be present in whatever Khizr Khan stated at the convention. Khizr Khan explained in an interview with Lawrence O’Donnell, “She’s my coach. I would

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<sup>123</sup> Bruce, “Muslim Family of Fallen Army Captain.”

<sup>124</sup> Khan, “Trump Criticized My Silence.”

think of something that they have asked us to say something. I would say this, and she would say no, don't say this."<sup>125</sup> So, the decision to not speak was not made in the moment when she saw her son's image displayed at the convention. It seems as if she anticipated the pain and decided in advance that she would not be able to say anything. Then the question arises: why make an appearance at all?

It was important to Ghazala Khan to make an appearance at the DNC. She chose to do so in spite of the difficulty of maintaining composure in front of a large audience. One reason that has been foregrounded is that Ghazala Khan wanted to support her husband as he publicly rebuked Donald Trump. Khizr Khan told Lawrence O'Donnell in an interview with MSNBC:

She's my coach and she was there. I was strengthened by her presence. 40 years of marriage has brought us in a position where we are strength for one another. So her being there was the strength that I could hold my composure. I am much weaker than she is in such matters. So it was her strength that made me stand there and address a candidate for a major party for the highest office of this country...<sup>126</sup>

Is it possible that, besides being supportive, some other motivations might exist for Ghazala Khan's silent appearance at the 2016 Democratic National Convention? Roderick Hart posits that "because they [individuals] are complex, they will sometimes say more than they realize they are saying."<sup>127</sup> Similarly, one's silence can also reveal more than one intends or realizes.

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<sup>125</sup> "The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell," MSNBC News, last modified July 29, 2016, <http://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/watch/slain-soldier-s-dad-gop-should-call-out-trump-735109699658>.

<sup>126</sup> "The Last Word," MSNBC News.

<sup>127</sup> Roderick Hart, "Analyzing Form," in *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997): 128.

## Stylized Subversion

Ghazala Khan's appearance at the podium served to subvert the image of a Muslim woman who is absent from the public sphere. Walter Fisher identifies four motives of rhetoric: "affirmation, concerned with giving birth to an image; reaffirmation, concerned with revitalizing an image; purification, concerned with correcting an image; and subversion, concerned with undermining an image."<sup>128</sup> To clarify, images are not pictures but "composites of empirical and nonempirical knowledge..."<sup>129</sup> In other words, rhetorical discourse creates a certain view of the world and recommends how people should behave in such situations. Fisher gives the example of the Vietnam War: Discourse about the war can create an image of the Vietnam War as civil war, a response to Communism, or just war. How one defines the conflict then "governs all one's actions in respect to the conflict."<sup>130</sup> Fisher explains that one motive for rhetorical discourse is subversion of an image. He states, "The rhetoric of subversion occurs in situations in which a communicator attempts to weaken or destroy an ideology."<sup>131</sup> I posit that Ghazala's appearance at the convention was an attempt to subvert the image of an oppressed Muslim woman.

The stereotypical depiction of a Muslim woman in popular Western discourse is that of a veiled, submissive, oppressed woman who is confined to the home. And, silence is already a trope for oppression. Cheryl Glenn explains that "silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness,

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<sup>128</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication," 132.

<sup>129</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication," 131.

<sup>130</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication," 131.

<sup>131</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication," 137.

stupidity, or obedience.”<sup>132</sup> When Ghazala’s silence was combined with her Islamic affiliation, the mental leap to the trope of an oppressed Muslim woman was easy to make for some Americans. However, not all Muslim women can be gathered under the oppressed woman trope. Krista Ratcliffe explains the difference between identification and identity:

Identification is inextricably linked with identity but does not directly correspond to it. In other words, although an identification may inform a person’s identity, a person’s identity cannot be reduced to a single identification... This distinction between identification and identity is incredibly important. It demonstrates how people are influenced by their identifications with cultural categories but also how people are not rendered identical by these identifications.<sup>133</sup>

People who identify with a cultural category are influenced by their group affiliation, but the affiliation does not render group members identical to one another. South Asian Muslim women are a diverse group. There are not only pronounced differences within the group but also differences across groups. The women of South Asia, especially those living in urban areas, tend to be educated, hold jobs, or run their own businesses. Even those who are not educated earn money by cleaning homes, sewing clothes, making *topis* (Islamic hats) or *rotis* (flat bread), and so on. Those who only received an Islamic education earn money by teaching children how to read/memorize the Quran in Arabic or the prayers that need to be recited during *wudu* (ablution) and *salaat* (formal prayers). Pakistan has even had a female prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, who became the first female prime minister of any Muslim-majority nation. Urban Pakistani women defy the stereotypes associated with Muslim women.

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<sup>132</sup> Glenn, *Unspoken*, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening*, 51.

Ghazala's background adds nuance to how we view her appearance at the convention. Her role at the convention was much more complex than what the stereotype suggests. Her appearance subverted the image of an oppressed Muslim woman. The West is not quite sure what to make of a woman who is veiled yet highly educated and a political subject. Ghazala and Khizr met at the University of Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan—the largest public university in Pakistan.<sup>134</sup> Khizr was studying law and Ghazala was studying Persian. Their paths crossed at a Persian book reading club Ghazala had hosted. The Khans' story does not conform to the common trope of an oppressed Muslim woman. Ghazala obtained higher education, played an active role in the university, and married someone she fell in love with at the university. The story sounds more Western than Islamic. So, what was it about Ghazala Khan that gave rise to the notion that she was probably not allowed to speak?

The oppressed Muslim woman trope was called forth because of how Ghazala Khan was dressed. Americans seem obsessed with what Muslim women wear rather than what they do. Barry Brummett has highlighted the role style plays in forming and expressing an identity.<sup>135</sup> He defines style as “a complex system of actions, objects, and behaviors that is used to form messages that announce who we are, who we want to be, and who we want to be considered akin to. It is therefore also a system of communication with rhetorical influence on others.”<sup>136</sup> For example, when one dons a cowboy hat, boots, jeans, and a button-down Western shirt, one is signaling that they are either a cowboy or they fancy

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<sup>134</sup> N. R. Kleinfeld, Richard A. Oppel Jr., and Melissa Eddy, “Moment in Convention Glare Shakes Up Khans' American Life,” *New York Times*, last modified August 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/06/us/khan-soldier-convention-iraq.html>.

<sup>135</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*.

<sup>136</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*, xi.

being a cowboy. Even if a person does not perform cowboy chores, such as herding cattle, the cowboy outfit buys that person a cowboy identity and signals their values and desired affiliations. Brummett further explains that style is a medium of communication; therefore, it conveys social, not individual, meanings.<sup>137</sup> Since style conveys stable social meanings, a person's motive can be ascertained through their style.<sup>138</sup>

Ghazala signaled her Muslim identity and South Asian affiliation with her outfit. Her style was a form of communication, and it gave us information about who she is, who she wants to be, and with whom she wants to be affiliated. Ghazala Khan was wearing the traditional *shalwar* and *kameez* outfit of Pakistani women. A *shalwar* is a loose-fitting pant, and a *kameez* is a long shirt. The flare and cut of a *shalwar* changes as fashion changes, in a manner similar to how the style of ladies' pants changes in the West. The *kameez* also changes in length and cut. The length of the *kameez* can go up or down, and it can be tight-fitting or loose. The *dupatta* is perhaps the most controversial piece of this outfit. A *dupatta* is typically made of chiffon material and custom dyed to match the color scheme of the *shalwar* and *kameez*. In some ways, it is similar to a scarf, as women tend to wear it in different ways across their neck and shoulders or over their head. However, the *dupatta* is not just an accessory. A *dupatta* stands in place of a veil. It symbolizes femininity and honor. The more progressive the woman, the more scarf-like, ornamental quality the *dupatta* acquires. The more traditional the woman, the more of a hijab-like, veiling function the *dupatta* performs. The complete absence of a *dupatta* would be inappropriate unless

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<sup>137</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*.

<sup>138</sup> Brummett, *A Rhetoric of Style*.

the woman was moving about in areas of town that were more Western and upper class. Ghazala's *dupatta* became a site where a struggle of meaning took place. Dick Hebdige explains how simple objects can acquire subversive qualities as people struggle over what they symbolize.<sup>139</sup> Hebdige states that "objects are made to mean and mean again."<sup>140</sup> For example, a jar of petroleum jelly can become a site where heteronormativity gets challenged, and it symbolizes a refusal to accept the norms of sexual orientation enforced by the dominant heterosexual group. Similarly, Ghazala's *dupatta* became a subversive object.

Ghazala's *dupatta* was a refusal to adhere to dominant norms in at least two ways. First, she made a public appearance on national TV wearing a head covering, which signals a refusal to adhere to Western standards of women's clothing. Second, she was not wearing a hijab even though she and her husband were there to represent Muslim Americans. In essence, Ghazala defied both Western and Islamic norms of clothing and chose to signal a South Asian identity, which is neither Western nor Middle Eastern. Hebdige notes that such refusals are worth making even if in the final analysis the refusal is nothing more than "so much graffiti on a prison wall."<sup>141</sup> Ghazala's refusal to conform to either standard of attire announced her presence on the scene, a presence that could not be easily incorporated into known categories.

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<sup>139</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*.

<sup>140</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 3.

<sup>141</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 3.

Even the style of Ghazala Khan's *shalwar/kameez* signaled alterities within identities. Typical of women her age, she wore a simple, single-colored *shalwar* and *kameez*. In Pakistan, younger and/or trendier women tend to mix up colors and patterns, but older women tend to wear simpler outfits. Ghazala placed the *dupatta* over her head and across her bosom to deflect the male gaze. Her outfit may not have been trendy, but she certainly planned it very carefully. Careful planning is evident in how the color of her *shalwar/kameez* matched her husband's tie exactly. Such coordination is rarely random. However, the nuances of Ghazala's stylized silence were lost in the quick reduction of her personhood. Any form of head covering on a Muslim woman is generally seen as a sign of oppression in the West. A veiled Muslim woman, regardless of the form and extent of her veil, is perceived as submissive, voiceless, and a victim. All subtleties are lost in the dichotomy of a liberated Western woman and an oppressed, veiled Muslim woman.

### **The Diffused "You"**

When Donald Trump scorned Ghazala's silence, he was attacking not just Ghazala but all women who identify as Muslim American. The diffusion of oppression occurred because Trump did not address Ghazala Khan directly when he was criticizing her silence. Instead, Trump derided Ghazala in the third person. He stated in two different interviews that he would like to hear from *his* (Khizr's) wife, and that *she* (Ghazala) was not allowed to speak, presumably because of strict Islamic tradition.<sup>142</sup> <sup>143</sup> Trump did not address

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<sup>142</sup> Merod, "Donald Trump Questions."

<sup>143</sup> Dowd, "Trump's Thunderbolts."

Ghazala Khan directly. What could be Trump's motivation in not addressing Ghazala directly?

Trump's motive in addressing Ghazala Khan indirectly was a two-fold attempt at subversion.<sup>144</sup> Walter Fisher states, "Subversive rhetoric is an anti-ethos rhetoric; that is, it invariably is an attempt to undermine the credibility of some person, idea, or institution ... The idea is to make a man, idea, or institution consubstantial with Satanic attributes and intentions."<sup>145</sup> Fisher further explains that subversive rhetoric is used to "discredit critics and dissenters."<sup>146</sup> Both Ghazala and Trump have subversive motives, but they are subverting different images. Ghazala's appearance at the convention was an attempt to subvert the image of a Muslim woman who is absent from public spaces and discourses. On the other hand, Trump wanted to subvert the image that Ghazala signified by her subversive presence at the convention. The images, as Hebdige states, are made to "mean and mean again."<sup>147</sup>

Trump attempted to discredit the Khans as upstanding Muslim American citizens because they attacked him personally. In his speech at the convention, Khizr Khan exclaimed, "Donald Trump, you are asking Americans to trust you with our future. Let me ask you: Have you even read the United States Constitution? I will gladly lend you my copy. In this document, look for the words 'liberty' and 'equal protection of law.'"<sup>148</sup> After thunderous applause, Khizr continued, "Have you ever been to Arlington cemetery? Go

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<sup>144</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication."

<sup>145</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication," 138.

<sup>146</sup> Fisher, "Motive View of Communication," 138.

<sup>147</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 3.

<sup>148</sup> "Full Text: Khizr Khan's Speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention," ABC News.

look at the graves of brave patriots who died defending United States of America—you will see all faiths, genders, and ethnicities.”<sup>149</sup> Khizr’s next sentence: “You have sacrificed nothing and no one.”<sup>150</sup> The attack was direct and personal with the use of the pronoun “you.” Additionally, Khizr assigned Donald Trump tasks: study the US Constitution, go to Arlington cemetery, learn who has died to protect America. Such a public scolding coupled with the assignment of labor to rectify moral failings placed Trump in a defensive position. Trump responded to Khizr’s accusations by attacking what he perceived to be the weakest link in the Khan family—the silent, grieving mother.

The oppressed woman trope often calls forth the savior trope. Americans see themselves as champions or heroes. From literature and movies, we learn that whenever there is a woman in distress, there is sure to be a strong hero who will come to her aid. Contrary to expectation, Trump’s hero complex was not triggered when it came to Ghazala. He did not show compassion for a grieving mother or an allegedly oppressed woman. Even more surprisingly, he turned into a villain. He showed disdain for a woman he believed to be a victim and took a cheap shot at a vulnerable mother. In the feud between Donald Trump and Khizr Khan, Trump treated Ghazala as an object rather than a subject who could be hailed personally. He addressed her in the third person because he was operating from the assumption that Ghazala was forbidden to speak and was therefore not a subject. Trump was gambling: if the charge of oppression stuck, then Khizr would be recast in the American political theater as an abusive husband rather than a hero of the Democratic

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<sup>149</sup> “Full Text: Khizr Khan’s Speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention,” ABC News.

<sup>150</sup> “Full Text: Khizr Khan’s Speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention,” ABC News.

Party; however, Trump's gamble did not pay off. His subversive rhetoric was thwarted by Ghazala Khan when she appeared in television interviews and wrote an op-ed piece.

Trump's second subversive attempt was directed at all Muslim American women. By scorning Ghazala in the third person, he attempted to include all Muslim women under the label of victims of an oppressive tradition. Many Muslim American women responded to Trump's insinuations that Muslim women are voiceless. Because the attack was not on a specific "you" (Ghazala) but a general "you" (all Muslim women), many Muslim women responded to dispel the notion that Muslim women are voiceless. Female activists within the Muslim American community rallied behind Ghazala Khan and launched a Twitter campaign with the hashtag: #CanYouHearUsNow.<sup>151</sup> Some Muslim women uploaded pictures of themselves speaking at public events and participating in sports competitions. Some women shared their statuses as veterans, teachers, and students. Roula Allouch, chair of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), stated, "Any place in society where people are contributing there would be Muslim women present. Muslim women's voices are expressed in their actions—and spoken as well."<sup>152</sup> Allouch reminded Americans to look at Muslim women's actions rather than fixate on their attire. Zainab Chaudry, Maryland's outreach coordinator for CAIR, lamented that Trump's comments "play into these tired stereotypes that so many of us work hard to dismantle."<sup>153</sup> Thus, Trump's two-

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<sup>151</sup> Dana Lleberson, "Muslim American Women Fire Back at Trump: 'Can You Hear Us Now,'" *Huffington Post*, last modified August 1, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/muslim-women-trump-can-you-hear-us-now\\_us\\_579f8ad3e4b0e2e15eb69922](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/muslim-women-trump-can-you-hear-us-now_us_579f8ad3e4b0e2e15eb69922).

<sup>152</sup> Lleberson, "Muslim American Women Fire Back."

<sup>153</sup> Lleberson, "Muslim American Women Fire Back."

fold attempt at subversion seems to have failed. He was thwarted in his mission by Ghazala Khan specifically and Muslim American women generally.

### **Uncodeable and Indigestible**

No one anticipated that Ghazala's few minutes of silence at the podium would become such a public sensation. From the moment the Khan couple walked on to the convention stage, it was quite evident that Ghazala's composure was fragile. Clearly, Ghazala did not want to deliver a teary public spectacle. She did everything she possibly could to hold herself together for a few minutes while Khizr delivered the speech that they had prepared. When the Khans reached the podium, Khizr gave Ghazala a quick, comforting hug. While Khizr spoke, Ghazala wiped tears from under her eyeglasses, mouthed "USA, USA, USA" with the crowd, fixed her *dupatta*, and looked up at her husband a few times. She valiantly tried not to crumble in front of an international audience. But, after the speech, Ghazala was inconsolable backstage. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Khizr described Ghazala's condition:

Emotionally and physically, she just couldn't even stand there, and when we left, as soon as we got off camera, she just broke down. And the people inside, the staff, were holding her, consoling her. She was just totally emotionally spent. Only those parents who have lost their son or daughter could imagine the pain that such a memory causes. Especially when a tribute is being paid. I was holding myself together because one of us had to be strong. Normally, she is the stronger one. But in the matter of Humayun, she just breaks down any time anyone mentions it.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Stephanie McCrummen. "Khizr Khan Responds to the Latest from Trump: 'Typical of a Person without a Soul,'" *Washington Post*, last modified July 31, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/khizr-khan-responds-to-the-latest-from-trump-what-he-said-originally--that-defines-him/2016/07/31/450f78dc-56d6-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main\\_khan0801-110am%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.879ac81f126f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/khizr-khan-responds-to-the-latest-from-trump-what-he-said-originally--that-defines-him/2016/07/31/450f78dc-56d6-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_khan0801-110am%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.879ac81f126f).

Ghazala maintained a dignified presence on stage even though she was distraught. However, she completely lost her composure as soon as she was back stage. Thus, maintaining her dignity in front of a large proximal crowd and an even larger digital crowd was important to Ghazala. She held herself together until the camera was no longer chronicling her grief.

The public demand for Ghazala's speech after her silence at the convention highlights the tension between a person functioning as a prop and a person being a reticent speaker. In the absence of material discourse, the person at the podium can be seen as either a prop or as a reticent speaker. I define a reticent speaker as someone who has a chance to speak but for some reason refrains from speaking. An example of a prop appearance: When the Democratic minority leader, Chuck Schumer, gave a speech in which he criticized Trump's executive order banning Muslims as "mean spirited and un-American," he surrounded himself with Muslim families, including girls in hijab.<sup>155</sup> These people functioned as visual props: they were there not to speak but to support Schumer's message. It is quite clear that Ghazala was a reticent speaker at the convention, not a prop. Her husband invited her to speak, but she declined. However, Ghazala spoke in post-convention interviews and even wrote an op-ed piece. This, I contend, negates her mere prop status. The Khans were interviewed repeatedly, which revealed that Ghazala had helped prepare the speech but did not want to take the risk of shedding tears in front of a large audience. Therefore, her appearance falls under the category of a reticent speaker rather than a visual

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<sup>155</sup> See <http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/01/29/chuck-schumer-emotional-trump-travel-ban-new.wcbs>.

prop. The audience typically does not expect a prop to speak, but a reticent speaker piques public curiosity.

Ghazala did not want to be a national spectacle, but the audience craved a spectacle and did not rest until one was delivered. One explanation of the public demand for Ghazala to speak could be that the public found her silence threatening, and they wanted her to speak to remove the threat of her silence. R. L. Scott posits that silence can be threatening and that any instance of silence needs some verbal interpretation to minimize its threat.<sup>156</sup> Silence has to be explained in words so that the situation is “not quite wordless.”<sup>157</sup> However, it is difficult to construe Ghazala’s silence as threatening when she seemed so vulnerable. It was not simply the image of Ghazala wiping silent tears on stage that made her non-threatening but also her admission that she was not a fighter. In an interview, when asked why she did not speak at the convention, Ghazala explained, “When you were in pain, you fight or you don’t say anything. I’m not a fighter, I can’t fight. So, the best I do was quiet.”<sup>158</sup> Ghazala seemed to personify vulnerability rather than appear threatening. So, the notion that the public needed to hear from her to mitigate the threat of silence appears not to be a satisfactory explanation.

I argue that the public demanded Ghazala Khan’s speech to transform her silence into a spectacle. I define a spectacle as a performance that can be digitalized and commodified. A spectacle can be reproduced, consumed, and excreted, whereas silence is

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<sup>156</sup> Scott. “Rhetoric and Silence.”

<sup>157</sup> Scott. “Rhetoric and Silence,” 147.

<sup>158</sup> Bruce, “Muslim Family of Fallen Army Captain Responds to Trump.”

essentially irreproducible, inconsumable, and indigestible. A spectacle can be reduced to sound bites, video clips, or images, just in time for the evening news, whereas silence needs reflection and interpretation. In the era of digital communication, the efficiency with which data or pixels can be packaged and reproduced is highly prized. Jean-Francois Lyotard asserts that the logic of efficiency determines the nature of knowledge in postmodern times.<sup>159</sup> He further explains that anything that cannot be coded into an information processing machine is discarded as excess.<sup>160</sup> He states, “We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this [digital] way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language.”<sup>161</sup> When it comes to popular convention speeches, the media need to create concise digital copies that can be presented as highlight news/information. For example, sensational images and sound bites of Khizr Khan holding up the US Constitution and asking Donald Trump, “Have you even read the United States Constitution?”<sup>162</sup> were reproduced on national television, newspapers, and the Internet. On the other hand, there was nothing to reproduce in Ghazala’s silence. Her performance defied digital reduction. She said or did nothing that could be turned into a video clip, a sound bite, or an iconic image. One would have to watch Khizr’s speech and Ghazala’s simultaneous silence in its entirety to make any sense of Ghazala’s appearance. To watch something in its entirety after the event has already taken place is not efficient.

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<sup>159</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>160</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

<sup>161</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 4.

<sup>162</sup> “Full Text: Khizr Khan’s Speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention,” ABC News.

Given the logic of efficiency, most people would not make time for it. Because Ghazala's silence could not be reduced to a spectacle, a clamor arose for her speech so she could be coded and consumed.

Ghazala's silence was not only an uncodeable excess but also could not be consumed as a commodity. In capitalist societies, it is common for rebellion to be commodified and ultimately lose its subversive potential. For example, ripped jeans were originally a refusal to support a capitalist economic system that exploited the workers. This process is what John Fiske calls "excorporation," in which a subculture uses the resources available within an oppressive system to resist the same system.<sup>163</sup> However, such tokens of resistance are often "incorporated" back into the system.<sup>164</sup> Textile manufacturers saw the market potential of ripped jeans, and ripped jeans were soon put up for sale. What was once a symbol of a "Refusal"<sup>165</sup> to buy was turned into a commodity for exchange. If we look at Khizr Khan's speech, he held up a pocket copy of the US Constitution as the document under which everyone threatened by Donald Trump could rally. On the Sunday after the convention, the pocket-sized US Constitution was number two on the best-seller booklist on Amazon.<sup>166</sup> A spectacle needs such images that can be widely reproduced and exchanged. Guy Debord explains that images are the new currency. He states, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a

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<sup>163</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1989).

<sup>164</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*.

<sup>165</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*.

<sup>166</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/khan-speech-pocket-constitution-becomes-amazon-best-seller/> and <http://money.cnn.com/2016/08/01/technology/us-constitution-amazon-dnc/>.

representation.”<sup>167</sup> Debord elaborates that our reality is made of digital images rather than daily experiences. Indeed, our experiences are influenced by the spectacle so much that the spectacle becomes the real. Debord notes, “The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order ... reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.”<sup>168</sup> Therefore, not only do people experience reality in spectacles but they also participate in reproducing the spectacular reality. For example, people can participate in a spectacle simply by purchasing a \$1 copy of the US Constitution. What happens to knowledge that cannot be reproduced and consumed? Lyotard predicts that knowledge that cannot be expressed in computer language will be discarded. Ghazala’s silence at the 2016 Democratic convention was not a spectacle since it defied digitalization and commodification. By the logic of efficiency, it should have been abandoned, but it was not. Her silence was not discarded because it was recognized as a subversive move, a move that stalled the engine of consumption.

To produce a performance that stalls incessant consumption is an act of resistance. The inconsumable cannot be swallowed and digested, and therefore it produces discomfort. In a capitalist society, the dominant value is consumption. Everything must be ultimately rendered consumable. Critical Art Ensemble describe how excessive consumption has taken over the subject so that it ultimately consumes the subject.<sup>169</sup> They state, “What

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<sup>167</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1983), 1.

<sup>168</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 8.

<sup>169</sup> Critical Art Ensemble collectively wrote the book titled *The Electronic Disturbance*. Individual members of the group are not named.

remains after the system digests everything? A nomadic tongue riding the waves of digital secretions.”<sup>170</sup> Critical Art Ensemble explain that when such conditions prevail where people are reduced to images and digital twins are valued more than the corporeal body, resistance must also occur in the digital spaces. They state:

The rules of cultural and political resistance have dramatically changed. The revolution in technology brought about by the rapid development of the computer and video has created a new geography of power relations ... people are reduced to data, surveillance occurs on a global scale, minds are melded to screenal reality, and an authoritarian power emerges that thrives on absence. The new geography is a virtual geography, and the core of political and cultural resistance must assert itself in this electronic space.<sup>171</sup>

In other words, for social change to occur in a world dominated by the virtual, the electronic system must be disrupted frequently enough so that it becomes unreliable; the tech experts need to cause electronic disturbances so that the aesthetic of efficiency collapses. Critical Art Ensemble claim, “One should seek an aesthetics of confusion that reveals potential choices, thus collapsing the bourgeois aesthetic of efficiency.”<sup>172</sup> Critical Art Ensemble offer two strategies for resistance—contaminate data or pass counterfeit data—so that digital information will lose its reliability.<sup>173</sup> I argue that rhetorical silence can cause an electronic disturbance without incurring criminal charges. Rhetorical silence is certainly not efficient: it requires time to interpret someone’s silence. Ghazala’s silence did not fit into known categories. Instead, she invited reflection, which is a time-intensive activity.

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<sup>170</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1994), 64.

<sup>171</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, 3.

<sup>172</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, 66.

<sup>173</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, 63.

Critical Art Ensemble urge an alliance between the tech class and the cultural workers to disrupt the digitalized reduction of our humanity. They state, “Although the resistant technocratic class can provide the imagination for the hardware and the programming, resistant cultural workers are responsible for providing the sensibility necessary for popular support ... This class must attempt to disturb the paternal spectacle of electronic centralization.”<sup>174</sup> In other words, activists must raise awareness of how the spectacular reality is robbing us of the full richness of our humanity and garner support for disruptions of the system. Ghazala Khan may not have set out to be an activist, but she became one when she disrupted the incessant consumption of images with her silence. She produced a performance that disrupted the spectacular reduction and consumption. Her silence was the excess that could not be digitalized and consumed.

Performances that cannot be digested cause discomfort, and the indigestion demands treatment. The only way to digest the inconsumable is to transform its nature. For example, if a plant is too fibrous to be edible in its raw form, it is cooked to change the nature of its fiber. Similarly, steaks are cooked to denature the protein, which makes it possible to absorb the nutrients. Even the raw fish in sushi is made edible by treating it with salt or vinegar. Similarly, indigestible silence must be denatured to make it available for consumption. In other words, silence must be rendered material or transformed into words so that it can be coded, packaged, and exchanged as a commodity. Thus, it can be argued that the public demand for Ghazala to speak occurred to end the mass American

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<sup>174</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, 125.

indigestion that was caused by her silence. Her silence was made available for assimilation by turning it into words. There was a public clamor for her speech disguised as curiosity and sympathy, on one hand, and on the other hand, the demand for a spectacle was made based on the gamble that she would be unable to provide speech, which would act as proof that she was indeed an oppressed Muslim woman.

The forced choice robbed Ghazala of her agency. If she speaks, she makes herself digestible; if she does not speak, she inadvertently confirms the oppressed Muslim woman stereotype. Her silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was her choice. She had decided beforehand that she would make an appearance and help write the speech but not actually deliver the words. When the demand for a spectacle arose, she was forced to speak to dispel the notion that her husband or her faith kept her silent. She was coerced into publicly shedding the tears that she had so valiantly held back at the convention. Once she had delivered the teary, wordy spectacle, the public was cured of its indigestion. Ghazala was coded and consumed. Now, people could move on to their next consumptive endeavor.

It may be hard to imagine a public sphere that is not tainted by digital spectacles, but that difficulty does not absolve us of the responsibility to act in ethical ways. Consumption is not an inevitable choice. Critical Art Ensemble call for “an electronic disruption” that disrupts the bourgeois logic of efficiency. However, when we counter images with images and spectacle with spectacle, we are still operating at the level of the simulacra. A problem cannot be solved by the same logic that created the problem in the first place. Amid so much digital chatter, rhetorical silence can be a significant strategy in

the process of persuasion. The American public's encounter with Ghazala's silence was a brief interlude outside of computer language. Although Ghazala was ultimately incorporated back into the spectacular reality, the disruption caused by her silence taught us that spectacular reality is vulnerable and can be fractured to make room for human and humane factors.

To summarize, several themes emerged from analyzing Ghazala Khan's silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. First, in the absence of words, meanings were attributed to Ghazala's silence that either overlapped with or diverged from her own explanations. Second, Ghazala's South Asian attire challenged stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and announced an alternate identity that is neither Islamic nor Western European. Third, Ghazala's silence interrupted the public consumption of spectacles. The pipeline of consumption became jammed with her silence, which resulted in a demand for Ghazala's words and tears. Once Ghazala had produced a consumable performance of a grieving mother, she was allowed to retreat from public scrutiny. However brief, Ghazala's silent disruption taught that us digital reality is not as invincible as we may think, and it can be disrupted to make room for the corporeal body.

### **Disruptive Silence**

My analysis of Ghazala Khan's silence shows that silence is not simply the absence of discourse. Intentional and strategic use of silence can be powerful, political, and subversive. Cheryl Glenn reminds us that "silence continues to be, too often, read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power and has, in fact,

transformed the rhetorical situation itself.”<sup>175</sup> Ghazala’s silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was an instance of rhetorical silence that caused electronic indigestion and became a subversive move. Even though Ghazala Khan was ultimately coded and consumed, the subversive attempt was worth making, as it stalled the engine of consumption. Rhetorical silence can shift the balance of power by breaking the cycle of consumption and inviting reflection.

Ghazala’s public comments post-convention and her subsequent disappearance from public discourse have led me to the tentative conclusion that rhetorical silence remains in tension with speech. The strategy of silence is most effective when people explain their silence in words. Since silence can have polysemic propositional content, the meaning of silence can be restricted by providing explanations for the silence; however, the tension between rhetorical speech and rhetorical silence must be negotiated carefully. If one speaks too soon or too much, the opportunity to sway public opinion could be lost. At the same time, a prolonged rhetorical silence that has no preface or epilogue might also have a detrimental effect on the persuasive effort. The more strategic and intentional the silence, the more rhetorical power it acquires.

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<sup>175</sup> Glenn, *Unspoken*, 155.

## Chapter 3

### **Day of Silence: From Information Overload to Social Change**

In the previous chapter, I argued that Ghazala Khan's brief silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was an indigestible performance that created a demand for speech. When speech was produced, the inconsumable silence was transformed into a consumable good, which restarted the consumption cycle that was interrupted by the silence. In the gap between no speech and speech, an opportunity existed for the audience to reflect on the issues that might have led to a silent performance. Although Ghazala's silence sparked public debate on both Muslim women's agency and respect for minority families who have sacrificed their children to defend the United States, it appears that Ghazala's brief silence led to an equally brief subversion of the consumption cycle. When public demand for her speech grew, Ghazala felt compelled to explain the reasons behind her silence. Once she had produced a teary, wordy spectacle on national television, the subversive potential of her silence was lost. Ghazala's comments post-convention restarted the consumption cycle that was disrupted by her silence at the convention. The spectacle simultaneously validated her grief and erased her from public discourse.

In this chapter, I investigate a social movement campaign that utilizes silence as a strategy to create a safe educational environment for LGBTQ youth.<sup>176</sup> Typically, social

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<sup>176</sup> The term "social movement" refers to a group of people acting together toward a reform that challenges the status quo of a society. A social movement typically organizes campaigns to keep their cause at the forefront of public thought and agenda. The term "campaign" refers to the events and tools that participants in a social movement employ to drum up support and raise awareness of the cause, including ephemera

movement campaigns entail noise: activists organize marches or sit-ins, chant slogans, carry signs, and give speeches. It seems counterintuitive that to be heard one must remain silent. However, in an age when people receive persuasive messages almost continuously, silence is becoming a significant resource for people working toward social reform. One of the earliest examples of rhetorical silence in US politics is the silent parade of 1917 in which 8,000 to 10,000 African Americans marched to protest lynching and other forms of anti-black violence.<sup>177</sup> Another prime example is the eerie silence of UC Davis students: On November 18, 2011, students at UC Davis were peacefully protesting on campus when police in riot gear doused them with pepper spray.<sup>178</sup> The next day, hundreds of students lined up outside the chancellor's office to protest the excessive use of force and delivered an uncanny silence to the UC Davis chancellor as she walked from her office to her car.<sup>179</sup> Even the enduring pro-life movement is now employing silence in its campaigns. For example, Bound4Life activists meet for silent prayer outside courthouses with red duct tape on their mouths and the word "life" written on it in black.<sup>180</sup> Silence has always been a resource for people, but people are increasingly using silence to draw attention to an issue and to register dissent. Activists are choosing to remain silent, as silence interrupts the

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such as pamphlets, symbols such as rainbow flags, clubs such as the Gay Straight Alliance, and events such as a march or a Day of Silence.

<sup>177</sup> For information on the Silent Parade, see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/1917-silent-parade\\_us\\_597b3c01e4b0da64e8789bff](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/1917-silent-parade_us_597b3c01e4b0da64e8789bff).

<sup>178</sup> For the pepper spray incident at UC Davis, see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/19/uc-davis-police-pepper-spray-students\\_n\\_1102728.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/19/uc-davis-police-pepper-spray-students_n_1102728.html).

<sup>179</sup> For more information on the silent protest at UC Davis, see <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/11/20/142562402/video-after-pepper-spraying-a-powerfully-silent-protest-at-uc-davis>

<sup>180</sup> See <http://bound4life.com/>.

constant flow of messages and creates space for the possibility of reflection and attitude change.

The focus of this chapter is a campaign called Day of Silence in which activists take a vow of silence for one day to protest the bullying of LGBTQ youth in educational settings.<sup>181</sup> I selected the Day of Silence as my case study because silence is employed as a master strategy by the activists. Since this campaign takes place on the same day every year across the United States, the strategy of silence is well developed by the organization, and resources are available to support the activists. The Day of Silence participants are much further on the continua of intentionality and strategy in their choice to keep silent than was Ghazala Khan. Although Ghazala's strategy of making a silent appearance was premediated, it was certainly not as organized and deliberate as the strategies employed by the Day of Silence participants. Since my dissertation focuses on an intentional and strategic use of silence to persuade, analyzing the Day of Silence helps me answer my dissertation question.

My dissertation asks whether rhetorical silence is emerging as a genre of public discourse that has acquired persuasive power in a social climate that is becoming increasingly saturated with digital messages. Typically, genre scholars study the situation that gives rise to the discourse, the conventional responses in a situation, the expectations of the audience, the motivations of the speaker, and the substantive and stylistic features of the discourse. Since the goal of genre criticism is to discern cultural patterns that enable

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<sup>181</sup> See <https://www.glsen.org/day-of-silence>.

and constrain rhetorical action, a generic claim needs to be substantiated with case studies that are drawn from different areas of public discourse. In the previous chapter, I analyzed Ghazala Khan's silence, which occurred in a public address context, and in this chapter, I examine a social movement campaign. The goal of my dissertation is to see if a genre of rhetorical silence is emerging and to identify the characteristics of the genre. I would like to emphasize that this chapter is not a study of social movements in general or of the LGBTQ movement in particular. Rather, I study the Day of Silence to understand how the strategy of silence is being employed intentionally and strategically to a predetermined end. I begin by providing a brief description of the Day of Silence and then present a detailed analysis of the silent strategy employed in the Day of Silence campaign. I end with concluding remarks on the popular conflation of nonviolence with silence, which brings into focus the defining characteristics of the genre of rhetorical silence.

### **Day of Silence—April 21, 2017**

Day of Silence is a national social movement campaign organized in schools across the United States to bring attention to the discrimination against LGBTQ youth in educational settings.<sup>182</sup> Students take a vow of silence for one day to raise awareness of the bullying, name calling, and harassment experienced by LGBTQ students and their allies.<sup>183</sup> The Day is one of the campaigns offered by GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network), a national organization formed in 1990 by a group of Massachusetts teachers

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<sup>182</sup> "What is the GLSEN Day of Silence?" GLSEN, accessed September 19, 2017, <https://www.glsen.org/day-of-silence/faq#f1>.

<sup>183</sup> "What is the GLSEN Day of Silence?" GLSEN.

who wanted to provide a safe educational environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.<sup>184</sup> Although GLSEN (pronounced glisten) is not the founder of the Day of Silence, it became the official sponsor in 2001.<sup>185</sup> <sup>186</sup> The goal of GLSEN is to change the culture of bullying and name calling in schools by advocating for school policies that are more inclusive, providing teacher training for effective responses to the bullying, and organizing school campaigns such as Day of Silence, Ally Week, and No Name-Calling Week.<sup>187 188</sup>

Resources are available for those who want to participate in the Day of Silence. Students are encouraged to register their schools and download printable resources. The website offers flyers, posters, checklists, a manual, selfie signs, and palm cards to name a few resources.<sup>189</sup> The palm cards are carried by students to explain why they are silent:

Please understand my reason for not speaking today. I am participating in the Day of Silence (DOS), a national youth movement bringing attention to the silence faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies. My deliberate silence echoes that silence, which is caused by anti-LGBT bullying, name calling, and harassment. I believe that ending the silence is the first step toward building awareness and making a commitment to address these injustices. Think about the voices you ARE NOT hearing today.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> “Who We Are,” GLSEN, accessed September 19, 2017, <https://www.glsen.org/learn/about-glsen>.

<sup>185</sup> “What is the GLSEN Day of Silence?” GLSEN.

<sup>186</sup> The first Day of Silence was organized in 1996 by students at the University of Virginia. Over 150 students participated. In 1997, Day of Silence became national, and in 2001, GLSEN adopted the campaign.

<sup>187</sup> “Policies That Matter,” GLSEN, accessed September 19, 2017, <https://www.glsen.org/policy>.

<sup>188</sup> “Programs,” GLSEN, accessed September 19, 2017, <https://www.glsen.org/participate/programs>.

<sup>189</sup> “Day of Silence,” GLSEN, accessed September 20, 2017, <https://www.glsen.org/day-of-silence/resources>.

<sup>190</sup> “Day of Silence,” GLSEN.

The palm card explains that the student is observing the Day to end the silence that is forced upon LGBTQ youth and expresses the student's commitment to address the injustices experienced by a vulnerable population. In addition to the palm cards, the website provides a template for a sign for selfies, on which students could write their names and state how they will end the silence.<sup>191</sup> The resources on the website not only make it easy to host the Day but also provide a sameness to the experience regardless of where the campaign takes place. The printable materials make the protest recognizable as the Day and give it the character of a national campaign.

The GLSEN website advises students on how to exercise their First Amendment rights without violating school policies.<sup>192</sup> Students are encouraged to solicit the cooperation of teachers and administrators by obtaining permission for the Day and giving teachers notice. The GLSEN webpage clarifies that students have the right to not speak before school, after school, during recess and lunch, and while passing in the hallways, but not during instructional time.<sup>193</sup> In other words, if a teacher asks a question in class, students are required to respond. A letter from ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) is also posted on GLSEN's website. The ACLU letter addresses school principals, asking them to support students who wish to participate in the Day and explaining that a complete moratorium on student protest would be unconstitutional.<sup>194</sup> It is important for both

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<sup>191</sup> "Day of Silence," GLSEN.

<sup>192</sup> "Day of Silence," GLSEN.

<sup>193</sup> "Day of Silence," GLSEN.

<sup>194</sup> "Day of Silence" GLSEN.

students and school officials to know what rights students have so that rights can be exercised without unnecessary disciplining.

The Day of Silence typically culminates in a “break the silence” moment when students who had taken a vow of silence come together to make noise and share their experiences.<sup>195</sup> During these meetings, students also discuss ways in which the silencing of LGBTQ youth can be addressed and redressed. The “break the silence” moment can range anywhere from an after-school meeting to a large rally advertised on the GLSEN webpage. Where the vow of silence highlights the discrimination, the “break the silence” moment offers an opportunity for dialogue, strategizing for the future, and community building.

My analysis is guided by the probes identified in chapter 1, even though the probes are not mentioned here. Instead, I discuss themes that emerged as I applied the probes to the Day of Silence case study. I first discuss GLSEN’s goals and rationale for employing the strategy of silence and then examine student voices that add more layers of meaning to the goals and rationale articulated by GLSEN. This theme answers the probe that inquires into meaning attribution in the absence of words. Second, I analyze the unintended consequences of taking a vow of silence, such as increased harassment from peers, missed opportunities for dialogue, and resistance of the school staff. This theme answers the probes that ask about the connection between the intent of the rhetor and the effect of the discourse, as well as the reactions of the audience when they are delivered silence instead of speech.

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<sup>195</sup> “Day of Silence,” GLSEN.

A third theme emerges when I analyze the reason speech is demanded from students. Schools demand an emesis of signs to keep students docile and prevent the kind of indigestion that occurs that when people accidentally consume something that cannot be assimilated, like they did with Ghazala's silence. This theme pertains to the significance of the length of the silence. Since students take a vow of silence that lasts an entire school day, school officials reserve the right to demand responses during instructional time. The final theme examines the contemporary communicative situation in which a silent response is considered fitting. The power of a silent protest lies in the fact that the form does not appear to be consistent with social movements. Social movements typically aim to saturate the moment of activism with speech acts—chants, slogans, speeches, signs, and noise. However, silent protests are becoming increasingly common because they circumvent algorithmic logic by presenting audiences with rhetorical silence that invites reflection and understanding of perspectives rather than reducing subversive messages to byte-sized spectacles. The themes discussed in the analysis arise out of the probes that were identified in chapter 1, even though the probes are not reiterated here. I end the chapter with preliminary remarks regarding the characteristics of the genre of rhetorical silence.

## **Method**

Although I encountered some difficulty in acquiring texts that gave me access into the silence of the student-participants, I overcame the challenge by analyzing student blogs on the GLSEN website, essays published by GLSEN in a zine, the GLSEN website, and some data from a published research article. I will first describe the challenge of finding

appropriate texts for analysis and then explain the selection rationale. As a rhetorical critic, I rely on texts for evidence, so my first choice was to study GLSEN's webpage on the Day of Silence. However, I soon realized that studying the Day exclusively through a website has limitations. GLSEN's website is designed to be a support site that provides information on the Day and downloadable resources for participants, such as flyers. The website does not employ rhetorical silence; it merely facilitates the organizing of the Day. Studying the website alone would have resulted in a critique of the rhetorical features of the website rather than gaining a deeper appreciation of how the strategy of silence works. Indeed, a silent website would be a blank page that most people would assume to be a broken link. There is an embodied aspect to rhetorical silence that cannot be accessed by studying a website, which led me to observing silence on the Day (April 21, 2017).

I participated in the Day to understand the pragmatics of the strategy of silence rather than having to rely exclusively on the information provided on the GLSEN webpage. However, I was not entirely successful in this endeavor. I was not able to keep my vow of silence as I moved about my day. I had to speak to wake up my son for school, coordinate my schedule with my partner, dismiss class at the end of student presentations, and man a table for the Day. Also, I am not trained in the method of autoethnography, so I was not able to produce the thick descriptions that could count as evidence. In the final cut, I share a few insights that I gleaned from participating in the Day of Silence; however, these insights illustrate or check what I learned from other artifacts and do not function as evidence for conclusions.

Since the website and my own experiences provided limited opportunities, my search for artifacts led me to three rich sources of data: student blogs posted on GLSEN's webpage, a zine published by GLSEN to support the 2016–17 Day of Silence, and a three-year ethnographic study of a high school's GSA club and its events, which included Day of Silence. I was directed to the blogs and the zine by a GLSEN employee via email. The blogs and the zine proved useful because students described not only their intentions but also their experiences of going through a school day without speaking. Essentially, the blogs and the zine provided an up-close look into how the strategy of silence works in praxis. Another source of data was an ethnographic study conducted at a high school. This study was useful because the researcher's conclusions were negative, which contrasted with the information gleaned from student blogs and essays.<sup>196</sup> I use the ethnographic study to understand the unintended consequences of the silent strategy. To summarize, the artifacts included in this study are student blogs about participating in the Day, student essays in a zine published by GLSEN in support of the Day, students' experiences of the Day as discussed in an ethnographic study conducted at a high school, and materials published by GLSEN on their website. These artifacts became my access points for studying the silence of the student-participants.

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<sup>196</sup> I emailed the researcher to see if she would share her field notes with me, but I did not receive a response.

## Why Silence?

Voice is often paired with agency and silence with oppression.<sup>197</sup> Therefore, employing silence to register dissent appears, at first glance, to be a counterproductive strategy. A closer look reveals a reasonable rationale. GLSEN explains its choice to organize a campaign around a trope that is not usually associated with empowerment:

Why silence? Aren't we trying to fight against silence? A silent demonstration can be a **peaceful** way to bring urgent **attention** to an important issue. Silence as a method of organizing is much different than silence that is coerced or forced through oppressive bullying, harassment and intimidation. A silent demonstration is **active**, rather than passive, and causes people to pay attention. Silent demonstration can bring attention to an issue and encourage **reflection** on the issue; **simulate** how others are silenced; focus the attention on the **issue** or cause and not the protester; demonstrate that the demonstrators desire a peaceful resolution; spark discussion and **dialogue**.<sup>198</sup> (emphasis mine)

More recently, a spokesperson for GLSEN articulates that the goal of the organization in employing the strategy of silence is to reclaim a tool of oppression:

I want to recommend that we use the phrase “Silence is **Ours**” as the primary slogan of Day of Silence, with the overall theme emphasizing the **reclaiming** of silence as a **tool** for **advocacy**, rather than a means of oppression.<sup>199</sup> (emphasis mine)

The organization frames the strategy of silence around three themes: silence is described as peaceful *and* active, goals are identified as bringing attention to the issue and creating opportunities for reflection and dialogue, and the proposed rationale is that a vow of silence

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<sup>197</sup> Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra, “Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound,” in *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, ed. Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

<sup>198</sup> “Why Silence?” *GLSEN Blog*, accessed September 20, 2016, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/why-silence>.

<sup>199</sup> Gabby Rivera, “Reclaiming a Generation,” *Silence is Ours: Reclaiming Silence: One Generation to the Next* (zine), 2016–2017, <https://www.glsen.org/article/day-silence-zine>.

can simulate the experience of marginalization for the allies and reclaim the instrument of oppression from the oppressors. The themes identified by GLSEN are broad and somewhat abstract, allowing students to discover personal reasons for participating in the Day of Silence.

Students report many reasons for taking a vow of silence on the Day. Some student voices add a more concrete and visceral understanding of the themes articulated by GLSEN, and some add a fresh perspective acquired from the vantage point of being part of the school-aged population that GLSEN wants to influence. I have organized student perspectives into six categories. Each category adds a distinct element that not only clarifies why silence was chosen to register dissent but also provides a vivid description of what occurs when a body is not allowed to speak.

### **RAISES AWARENESS**

In blog posts and essays, students reiterate GLSEN's articulated goal of employing the strategy of silence to raise awareness of the discrimination that LGBTQ youth face in schools. Student-participants provide a more nuanced understanding of how silence performs the desired function. Kristen, in her blog post, states:

It's a day where myself and hundreds of other kids can show other people who haven't been in our footsteps that yes, there are kids out there who can't speak up. That there are kids out here that harm themselves because they have to keep everything bundled up inside...This day shows people that we are silent for a reason.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Kristin J., "What Day of Silence Means to Me," *GLSEN Blog*, January 4, 2015, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/featured-essay-what-day-silence-means-me>.

Kristen’s post highlights two different kinds of silences: the silence that is created when students are not allowed to speak up and the silence that is intentionally created to draw attention to the forced silence. The difference between the two silences is significant: one is oppressive, and the other is agentive. Kristen also emphasizes that the problem is real, not imaginary, when she states that “yes, there are kids out there who can’t speak up.”

Anthony—an intern at GLSEN—also draws attention to the reality of the anti-LGBTQ environment in school, although his focus is on facelessness rather than on the absence of LGBTQ voices. Anthony blogs, “These faceless students are exactly what the Day of Silence represents... The Day of Silence is a day when these faceless students make the news. For one day the entire country will stop and acknowledge the existence of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment.”<sup>201</sup> Anthony’s post suggests that when the marginalization of LGBTQ students is ignored by school officials, the marginalized students cease to exist (become faceless). On the other hand, when student-participants voluntarily stay silent on the Day, people are forced to acknowledge the existence of the faces that were erased. Kian, in an essay featured in GLSEN’s zine,<sup>202</sup> echoes Anthony’s position that silence on the Day brings visibility to an issue that is frequently ignored. Kian writes, “By participating in Day of Silence, you are not only making your voice heard but also bringing attention to the voices that aren’t.”<sup>203</sup> Kian emphasizes how intentionality transforms

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<sup>201</sup> Anthony Crisci, “The Day They Heard Their Silence,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 14, 2011, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-they-heard-their-silence-anthony-crisci>.

<sup>202</sup> A zine is a printer-friendly, small-circulation magazine.

<sup>203</sup> Kian T., “True Life: Day of Silence Woke Up My School,” *Silence Is Ours: Reclaiming Silence: One Generation to the Next* (zine), 2016–2017, <https://www.glsen.org/article/day-silence-zine>.

silence from oppression to advocacy and reclaims the instrument of oppression from the oppressors.

### INVITES REFLECTION

The vow of silence invites reflection not only in the audiences who are witnessing the silence of their peers but also in the participants who begin to understand their own journeys in the space created by silence. Kristen writes, “It’s a day where I can look back at all the times I haven’t been able to speak, talk out, and express myself.”<sup>204</sup> Kristen’s post suggests that the Day holds commemorative significance for her. Her silence on the Day memorializes the times she felt voiceless and faceless and serves as a reminder of why participating in the Day is important to her. Aiden echoes Kristen’s sentiments: “LGBTQ youth often don’t have a choice of whether or not to be silent, but on GLSEN’s Day of Silence, we recognize this. We hold a memorial for all the words unsaid.”<sup>205</sup> The memorialization aspect is significant because it allows students to validate those who are routinely silenced and erased from public culture.

Rebekah, in her zine essay, employs a poetic metaphor to explain how silence can make a difference in a social climate that is saturated with messages:

Like a sword, it [silence] slices through the constant, every day chatter. Silence offers a moment for people to reflect and ponder. In our everyday world, consistent chatter is the norm. People are constantly connected through social media, and we are often forced into social situations where

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<sup>204</sup> Kristin J., “What Day of Silence Means to Me,” *GLSEN Blog*, January 4, 2015, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/featured-essay-what-day-silence-means-me>.

<sup>205</sup> Aiden Ramirez-Tatum, “Unapologetically Silent,” *GLSEN Blog*, accessed September 20, 2016, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/unapologetically-silent>.

communication is expected. In this way, remaining silent serves as an act of civil disobedience.<sup>206</sup>

Rebekah's insight is significant for two reasons. Her observation that silence cuts through everyday chatter is a philosophical take on the strategy of silence. Rebekah, perhaps unknowingly, is paraphrasing Martin Heidegger's position that idle chatter produces a surface deep understanding and forecloses the possibility of deeper intelligibility.<sup>207</sup> Heidegger states, "Keeping silent another essential possibility of discourse...In talking with one another, the person who keeps silent can 'make one understand' (that is, he can develop an understanding), and he can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words."<sup>208</sup> Rebekah's observation that silence gets heard because it overcomes the constant chatter on social media underscores the subversive potential of rhetorical silence. A willful silence upsets the norms of polite social interactions and the expected form of protest and is therefore "a powerful tool."<sup>209</sup>

Carly's blog draws attention to the pedagogical opportunities created by the Day.

She blogs:

I decided to hold a Day of Silence event at my school because it was a place where students needed to be educated about people whose identities and experiences are different from their own. Having this awareness can prevent the use of hurtful language and a hostile school climate...Let's create an environment where everyone feels free to have their own unique voice and be themselves, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Rebekah R., "A Personal Essay on Silence," *Silence Is Ours: Reclaiming Silence: One Generation to the Next* (zine), 2016–2017, <https://www.glsen.org/article/day-silence-zine>.

<sup>207</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>208</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 208.

<sup>209</sup> Rebekah R., "A Personal Essay on Silence."

<sup>210</sup> Carly F., "The Day of Silence is Worth It: Carly's Story," *GLSEN Blog*, accessed September 20, 2016, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-silence-worth-it-carlys-story-0>.

Carly highlights the educational opportunities created by an intentional and strategic silence and expresses how silence on the Day invites people to learn about alternate identities and experiences.

### **BUILDS COMMUNITY**

Some students articulate that the Day of Silence creates a community where the LGBTQ youth do not feel isolated. Kian, in his essay for the zine, notes, “Seeing people at my school participate in Day of Silence made me feel less alone. It assured me that people within my school were willing to stand up for me when I experienced anti-LGBTQ harassment.”<sup>211</sup> Audrey blogs, “I feel like I am part of something bigger than myself.”<sup>212</sup> Amelia writes, “I’m choosing to participate in Day of Silence, not just because I want to make a point that this bullying needs to stop, but also so I can stand with other victims of anti-LGBT name calling.”<sup>213</sup> Nowmee blogs, “It [Day of Silence] gives students a platform to stand up against bullying and show solidarity with LGBT students.”<sup>214</sup> Red O writes, “I will show support to those have been muzzled in fear by giving up my voice for a day.”<sup>215</sup> The theme of community and solidarity is emphasized by both the LGBTQ students and

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<sup>211</sup> Kian T., “True Life: Day of Silence Woke Up My School,” *Silence Is Ours: Reclaiming Silence: One Generation to the Next* (zine), 2016–2017, <https://www.glsen.org/article/day-silence-zine>.

<sup>212</sup> Audri, “Day of Silence Student Voices,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 14, 2010, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-silence-student-voices-audri-laurel-ms>.

<sup>213</sup> Amelia, “Is It My Fault That I’m Bullied?” *GLSEN Blog*, April 12, 2012, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/it-my-fault-im-bullied>.

<sup>214</sup> Nowmee S., “Day of Silence Student Voices: Coming Out in Silence,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 13, 2011, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-silence-student-voices-coming-out-silence-nowmee>.

<sup>215</sup> Red O., “Day of Silence Student Voices: Red O.,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 11, 2011, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-silence-student-voices-red-o>.

their allies. However, some allies also describe the discomfort involved in holding back their voices on the Day.

### **LEADS TO PRODUCTIVE DISCOMFORT**

GLSEN’s rationale for utilizing silence in their campaign is that silence can simulate the experience of marginalization for those who are allies of the LGBTQ community. The descriptions given by students provide insight into how such a simulation occurs and what the allies experience when they silence themselves in solidarity. Meghann explains the physiological effects of staying silent on the Day:

The meaning of Day of Silence is so much more powerful when experiencing it, hearing about it doesn’t compare. The feeling of isolation puts you in a daze, where you forget about the ‘importance’ of everyday conversations. The lack of talking even dries out your throat and when you do speak again your voice cracks on the choked out words.<sup>216</sup>

Meghann draws attention to the visceral experience of maintaining silence: the bewilderment, the drying out of her throat, and the cracking of her voice when she finally speaks.

Going beyond the physiological impact of staying silent, Meghann observes that silence on the Day influences the participants more than anyone else. She writes:

Day of Silence isn’t just a protest against bullying or something to bring attention to others, but it’s to bring a more intense, tangible, awareness to the participants. I tell people it’s not hard as it sounds, just to get them to do it, but in all reality it is hard and stressful and saddening to an extent; however it is also enlightening and eye-opening and incredibly, absolutely powerful. Anyone who has participated the whole day would know. It’s inspirational.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Meghann G., “Day of Silence Student Voices: Meghann G.,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 15, 2011, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-silence-student-voices-meghann-g>.

<sup>217</sup> Meghann G., “Day of Silence Student Voices: Meghann G.”

Meghann expresses that the Day of Silence brings “intense” and “tangible” awareness to the participants, which is simultaneously saddening and inspirational. Meghann’s testimony suggests that allies who hold back their words gain a deeper appreciation of the difficulties experienced by the LGBTQ students who routinely stifle their words.

My own experience of taking a vow of silence on the Day corroborates Meghann’s insight. When I took a vow of silence on April 21, 2017, I had imagined that my Day would turn out to be like any other day, and the only thing different would be that I would go through it in silence. I was not prepared for how much harder my day would be and how ordinary decisions would become weighty. I wanted to hide in my office so I would not feel conspicuous and vulnerable. Every act that required interacting with people whose responses I was uncertain of seemed threatening. Even small acts like taking an elevator, buying coffee or lunch, and walking to the restroom loomed large and consumed mental and emotional energy, and I had to talk myself into interacting with people. My discomfort for a short time on the Day heightened my awareness of what it is like to have a body that is constantly under threat and has increased my commitment to be sensitive to the needs of my LGBTQ students.

Meghann’s comment and my own experience suggest that the strategy of silence has the most influence on ally-participants. According to my observation, there are two groups who participate in the Day: those who are members of the LGBTQ community and those who are allies. The members do not need a Day of Silence to make them aware of the marginalization, discrimination, silencing, bullying, name calling, and harassment that

they experience. It is a reality that many members manage and negotiate every moment of their lives. I venture that the most change is wrought in the allies who voluntarily stay silent to show support for their LGBTQ peers. I know from my own experience that keeping silent on the Day heightened my awareness of the silencing that is experienced by those who identify as LGBTQ. The swallowing of my words, the hyper-awareness of my body, the minute decisions that loomed large, and the exhaustion that accompanied the worrying are all examples of things that must be experienced rather than explained. Before participating in the Day, I had only a surface understanding of the experiential component of having a body that does not conform to the sexual and gender norms of society. However, after my participation, I developed a more nuanced understanding of what it means to have a body that is hyper-visible *and* silenced, and this experience has deepened my commitment to the cause.

Carly and Rebekah remind us that the discomfort of silence is worth enduring, as it can lead to social change. Carly writes, “Because it may be really hard—just like staying silent for a whole day (and I’m a talker, so I know it’s tough)—but it can also bring a lot of people together to produce incredible understanding and change.”<sup>218</sup> Rebekah observes, “Wielding the power of silence forces people to consider why certain voices are missing at the table. It forces people outside of their norm and sometimes into a state of discomfort. This place of discomfort is often the most effective place for people to learn.”<sup>219</sup> Silence

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<sup>218</sup> Carly F., “The Day of Silence is Worth It: Carly’s Story.”

<sup>219</sup> Rebekah R., “A Personal Essay on Silence.”

may be uncomfortable for the allies, but ultimately the discomfort is productive because it can bring about the desired change.

### **PROVIDES SPACE FOR LISTENING**

Although GLSEN mentions dialogue and reflection, the organization does not emphasize the listening component of silence. The notion that listening could occur in the absence of noise is unique to student-participants. Rachel pens a poem that implores people to still their voices and hear what the silence signifies:

This is a day to listen;  
this is a day to think;  
what do you hear?  
Do you hear the slurs  
The insults of the bully who picks on the weak?  
Or maybe you hear  
Crying—the near silent tears  
Of one who is hurt.  
So many people;  
Their calls for help swallowed up  
By your own voices.  
So today do not speak.  
Listen instead, and see  
What you now can hear.<sup>220</sup>

Ilana explains in her poem that she stays silent to create the conditions in which those who are routinely silenced would have the chance to be heard:

I put away my voice for a day  
To bring attention to all the people  
Who are forced into the silence  
Not necessarily because they don't have anything to say  
But because people don't listen.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Rachel S., "Untitled," *GLSEN Blog*, January 4, 2015, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/featured-poem-untitled>.

<sup>221</sup> Ilana K., "Silence," *GLSEN Blog*, January 4, 2015, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/featured-poem-silence>.

Rachel and Ilana both emphasize that if people stop talking for a while, they will hear messages that are usually drowned out by the constant chatter. These students articulate that the Day of Silence is also a day to listen because when a person willingly stops talking, they can then hear what often goes unnoticed or unheard.<sup>222</sup>

### **SILENCE IS A MODE OF SPEECH**

Another perspective added by the students is that silence is a mode of speech. Some students express that their silence “speaks more” on the Day. Ilana blogs:

Even when I am silent I am speaking so many words  
So one day a year my silence speaks more  
Than I ever could out loud  
My silence speaks for those who do stop talking.<sup>223</sup>

Ilana notes that her silence speaks for those who stop speaking. Another blogger, Red O, also emphasizes the audibility of silence, and she implores her peers to let silence “roar through our communities.” She writes, “It is important that we all stand together to make the echo of silence roar through our communities. Let kids know that they are not alone and that some people really do care.”<sup>224</sup> These students realize the difference between a communicative silence, in which the author employs the mode of silence to express their inner word, and a non-communicative silence, in which the author uses the strategy of silence to end the discursive activity. The difference is significant since the former is a way to communicate and the latter is a refusal to communicate.

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<sup>222</sup> The focus of my dissertation is silence as a mode of speaking rather than as a mode of listening; therefore, a full development of listening as theoretical construct is outside the scope of this project.

<sup>223</sup> Ilana K., “Silence.”

<sup>224</sup> Red O., “Day of Silence Student Voices: Red O.”

## Unintended Consequences

So far, I have discussed only positive outcomes of staying silent on the Day.; however, the silent strategy can also result in negative experiences for the participants. Some unintended consequences are increased bullying from peers due to hyper-visibility, missed opportunities for dialogue, and disciplining from school officials. Being harassed and disciplined dampens the excitement of having a national day that specifically addresses the challenges faced by the LGBTQ youth in educational settings.

Some students report an increase in bullying on the Day of Silence due to hypervisibility. J.A. describes her experience on the Day:

We were met with statements such as ‘Oh my god...I see Faggots.’ or ‘Why do you support the Fags.’ and sometimes worse. One of my best friends was told ‘Just be like your father and kill yourself; then you can be silent forever.’ We spent the whole bus ride home comforting her. I am sickened that people in our school used our beliefs as an excuse to make fun of us.<sup>225</sup>

J.A.’s friend was told to kill herself so she could be silent forever. Such comments reveal that, even though the participants may see their silence as a form of protest speech, others may view silence as absence. It is not unusual to think of silence as death or absence, since speech is associated with agency and personhood and silence with an absence that signifies the lack of an agentive subject. However, I venture that the notion of silence as the absence of a speaking subject is an outdated mode of thinking, and comments that refer to silence as death arise out of learned habits of speech from older generations whose public cultures

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<sup>225</sup> J. A., “We Were Met with Disheartening Actions...,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 25, 2008, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/we-were-met-disheartening-actions>.

were not saturated with messages. Some students bully the silent participants precisely because silence registers as dissent and subversion rather than as absence.

Susan Woolley's three-year ethnographic study of McArthur High school's GSA club and club events, which includes the Day of Silence, corroborates J.A.'s report of increased bullying on the Day. Woolley describes the experiences of a student who was harassed by her peers all day long and could not defend herself because she wanted to keep her vow of silence:

For some students, the strategy of silence opened them up to even more verbal harassment than usual on this day. In 2009, Fani—a lesbian and white-identified young girl—was followed around by a group of boys and called “faggot” repeatedly all day long, but she wanted to stay silent for the duration of the school day, so she did not respond to her harassers and her teachers never intervened.<sup>226</sup>

The students' frustration at not being able to defend themselves leads Woolley to conclude that the strategy of silence takes away “the valuable weapon of their voices to defend themselves and to educate others, thus failing to provide a critical platform” for addressing the issue of harassment of LGBTQ students.<sup>227</sup> The strategy of silence can sometimes backfire and, instead of students feeling empowered by withholding their voices, they can feel further marginalized and helpless in the moment when oppression occurs. But this risk is not unique to silent protests.

The risk of harm appears to be a perpetual companion of activism regardless of who is protesting, how, and why. A person may stand at the pulpit and deliver a passionate

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<sup>226</sup> Susan W. Woolley, “‘The Silence Itself Is Enough of a Statement:’ The Day of Silence and LGBTQ Awareness Raising,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2012): 278.

<sup>227</sup> Woolley, “Silence Itself,” 279.

speech to which the audience response may be to throw rotten tomatoes at the speaker or to deliver state-sanctioned violence. Activists take on the risk of harm in order to change an unjust system: the suffragettes were arrested and force-fed in prison; the Civil Rights Movement activists had fire hoses and dogs turned on them; the Occupy Wall Street protesters were sprayed with tear gas; the Black Lives Matter proponents were met with police in riot gear. The risk of harm can range anywhere from school bullies harassing a person who has taken a vow of silence to a white supremacist running over counter-protestors in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>228</sup> Protest, whether it takes the form of speech or silence, entails risk, and it is difficult to subtract the risk of hateful rhetoric or physical violence from activism.

Another unintended consequence of rhetorical silence is that it sometimes results in missed opportunities for dialogue, especially when a counter-protest is held in school on the same day. Susan Woolley writes that a group called Youth for Christ held a counter-protest not only on the same day as the Day of Silence but also in the same location.<sup>229</sup> Youth for Christ members played Christian rock, spun records, and sang songs, which obliterated the silence of the LGBTQ group and resulted in missed opportunities for meaningful dialogue between the two groups.<sup>230</sup> Woolley states:

The learning that could have taken place between these two student groups was cut short, as silence barred the GSA's students' participation in any vocal conversation. In this situation, silence foreclosed the possibility of the students engaging in dialogue with individuals who held differing views,

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<sup>228</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html?mcubz=0>.

<sup>229</sup> Woolley, "Silence Itself."

<sup>230</sup> Woolley, "Silence Itself."

and silence limited their methods of responding to an epithet thrown their way.<sup>231</sup>

Woolley emphasizes the limitations of the silent strategy. Although I do not deny that the limitation exists, my experience has led me to a different viewpoint regarding missed opportunities for dialogue.

When I observed silence on the Day, I was tempted to break my vow when I handed a written order to my barista on the backside of the palm card and my barista told me that she is gay. I wanted to speak to her and tell her that I appreciated her trust in me. I wanted to produce a response that would reflect my inner state. Instead, I was bound by my vow. Woolley notes that the strategy of silence results in missed opportunities for dialogue,<sup>232</sup> but my experience was that the opportunity to have a dialogue was created by my silence. In the word gap, a space for meaningful talk was created and, even though the opportunity was not taken advantage of on that day, the possibility for future dialogue remains open. What is important to note is that my silence on the Day created the opportunity in the first place.

In addition to increased bullying and missed opportunities for dialogue, participants also report being disciplined by school officials. On their blog post, GLSEN posted several messages it received from students:

By 10 am this morning more than 30 students had already been called to the office for participating in the Day of Silence. They were told to participate they had to go home with an unexcused absence, but they were an educational distraction to be silent all day.

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<sup>231</sup> Woolley, "Silence Itself," 279–80.

<sup>232</sup> Woolley, "Silence Itself."

School personnel are telling me that I cannot support it by putting a printed piece of paper on my shirt telling why I am not talking. And an attendance clerk said to me “I am not playing these stupid little games.”

Administrator sent an e-mail saying to bring all the students participating in the day of silence to the office.

We can not discuss in class nor give materials to students. Students who choose to participate must report to a counselor. We have been denied having a GSA even after several groups of students have asked for one. We have a transgender student who needs our support. I'm being asked to take down the poster in the library and not hand out bracelets to my group.<sup>233</sup>

Some students emailed GLSEN and reported that their schools were blocking their efforts to hold a Day of Silence. Students were told to go home, accused of playing games, called into the office, told to remove their posters, or were not permitted to distribute materials. The disciplinary actions taken by school officials immediately raise the question: why is speech being demanded from students? The answer to this question is the subject of the next theme.

### **Emesis of Signs**

GLSEN's webpage for the Day of Silence makes it clear that students have the right to stay silent during free time but not during instructional time. An open letter from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) posted on GLSEN's webpage informs school principals or superintendents that the right to not speak is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution of United States, and “a blanket school policy against ‘protests’ such as the Day of Silence violates the First Amendment.”<sup>234</sup> The letter asks the

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<sup>233</sup> “Student Experiences of Day of Silence Resistance,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 15, 2011, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/student-experiences-day-silence-resistance>.

<sup>234</sup> “Day of Silence,” GLSEN.

schools to allow the participating students to engage in silent lessons or be given written assignments or at least allow them peaceful expressions during non-instructional time.

The question that immediately comes to mind is why schools would require students to speak. Typically, schools restrict disruptive behavior to maintain discipline and maximize learning time. Therefore, behaviors that are perceived as interruptions, such as side conversations, are curtailed with warnings and other disciplinary actions. But what is so disruptive about silence that schools have been given the right to demand speech? If silence were viewed as simple passivity, then students participating in the Day would not be required to respond with speech during class time. Surely a passive student is a common enough phenomenon in schools that it would not raise any red flags. An intentional and strategic silence registers as protest rather than passivity, and therefore the counter-demand for speech is made to thwart the protest and to keep the engine of heteronormativity running.

The disruption that the Day causes is not accidental but intentional, as the Day attempts to normalize what society has thus far labeled deviant. Arny, a student-participant, blogs, “The majority of us [are] rebelling from traditional values, ignorant peers, and a society that shuns us for who we are whether it be based on race or sexual orientation.”<sup>235</sup> Rebekah writes, “Some associate silence with passivity, but if one truly embraces the silence and wields it in a powerfully disruptive way, so much more can happen when we

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<sup>235</sup> Arny, “Day of Silence Student Voices: Arny,” *GLSEN Blog*, April 15, 2010, <https://www.glsen.org/blog/day-silence-student-voices-arny-lodi-nj>.

take control and reclaim our silence.”<sup>236</sup> The verbs employed by the students—rebel, wield, disrupt, control, reclaim—suggest that the students are not only aware of the disruptions that their silence will cause but also hopeful. Schools demand speech from the silent protestors because silence is a refusal to follow the norms of society. Dick Hebdige explains that subcultures announce their “sinister presence” by giving objects double meanings.<sup>237</sup> For example, a tube of petroleum jelly becomes a site where the struggle between dominant and subordinate groups becomes apparent. Although silence is not an object, it functions as a sign of “Refusal” that is just as “sinister” as a tube of petroleum jelly. Silence becomes a sign of “forbidden identity” and “deviations.” Therefore, the demand for speech is made and students are required to emit signs of compliance to override their defiance.

The demand made of the silent students is different from the demand made for Ghazala’s speech. Ghazala’s silence stalled the engine of consumption because her silence represented qualities that could not be efficiently assimilated within the system. Her silence had to be transformed into speech so that the system could consume the familiar and defecate the indigestible excess. The situation with the protesting students is different: Middle school and high school students have less agency than Ghazala Khan in a society that does not confer full personhood until age eighteen. Ghazala is an adult, and there is no law that could compel her to speak. She could be persuaded or manipulated into speaking, but no one could legally demand speech from her, especially since she did not violate any

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<sup>236</sup> Rebekah R., “A Personal Essay on Silence.”

<sup>237</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*.

law by staying silent at the convention. On the other hand, speech can be demanded from the silent students because they are considered minors and are required to follow school rules or face consequences such as suspension or expulsion.

Since GLSEN's strategy of silence is planned and advertised, schools are equally prepared to counter the silence. Ghazala's silence happened without warning. Only the Khan couple knew that she was planning to appear but not speak. The American people had swallowed her silence before we were aware that we had just consumed something that could not be digested. The demand for Ghazala's speech was made to *treat* the discomfort of indigestion, not to *prevent* it. However, schools demand speech from student-participants to *prevent* indigestion from occurring rather than look for treatment after the fact. Schools can ask students to vomit signs so that the discomfort is felt only by the student-participants. Word preserves order and keeps school-aged bodies docile. The involuntary emesis of signs leaves bodies weak, sweaty, and shaky from the forced expulsion, and bodies that are weakened can be controlled.

### **New Responses in New Situations**

Silent campaigns are powerful because the form does not appear to be consistent with social movements. Typically, social movement campaigns are composed of noise—speeches, chants, slogans, songs, signs, and music. It is because several elements come together in a predictable manner that a campaign is recognized as such. Let's take the example of the airport protests that occurred on Friday, January 27, 2017, after President Trump signed an executive order banning immigration from seven predominantly Muslim

countries.<sup>238</sup> Spectators knew that it was a protest because people were opposing the executive order (*situation*); the *intent* of the protestors was to question the legitimacy of an order that required a religious test to enter the country; the protest was made up of chants, signs, and speeches (*content*); the *stylistic* elements like cardboard signs were indicative of a rushed response; and the protest was similar to other protests such as civil rights and gay pride (*convention*). When audiences viewed video footage from the airports, they knew it was a protest because it met their generic *expectations*. Generic similarities make a protest recognizable as a protest. However, sometimes genres begin to decay because either the situation or the audience demands a different/new response.

Silent protests are occurring in the age of mass communication, which calls for a change in the genre of protests. One of the positive outcomes of technology and social media is that citizens have the power to influence public opinion by providing alternate news. One of the downsides of the digital age is information overload. People are plugged into the Internet for almost every moment of the day. When we are awake, advertisements and political messages are delivered on our cell phones, computers, tablets, televisions, and radios. Even when we are asleep, devices like Fitbits record our resting heart rates and sleep cycles and regurgitate that information to us upon waking. Just like pollution is a byproduct of the Industrial Age, data smog is the byproduct of the Information Age. Data smog is:

an expression for the noxious muck and druck of the information age. Data smog gets in the way; it crowds out quiet moments, and obstructs much needed contemplation ...The blank spaces and silent moments in life are

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<sup>238</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/29/protest-trump-travel-ban-muslims-airports>.

fast disappearing. Mostly because we have asked for it, media is everywhere.<sup>239</sup>

One of the problems with information glut is that more information does not necessarily lead to more clarity. Indeed, an excess of information has paralyzed us. Shenk explains that “the psychological reaction to such an overabundance of information and competing expert opinion is to simply avoid coming to conclusions.”<sup>240</sup> Information helped us make rational decisions until it became so abundant and contradictory that it began to deter rational and efficient decision making.<sup>241</sup> For example, the jury is perpetually out on whether people can safely consume a moderate amount of caffeine. This uncertainty leads to people basing their coffee decisions on social motives and personal preferences rather than on research-based (rational) advice. More data has produced more confusion rather than more understanding.

In conditions of information chaos and information overload, silence can persuade people by offering space for reflection and consideration of perspectives other than our own. The model of invitational rhetoric offered by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin is especially relevant in this context.<sup>242</sup> The goal of invitational rhetoric is to create understanding rather than to persuade an opponent with superior arguments.<sup>243</sup> Foss and Griffin state, “Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the

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<sup>239</sup> David Shenk, *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut* (New York: Harper Edge, 1997), 31.

<sup>240</sup> Shenk, *Data Smog*, 93.

<sup>241</sup> Shenk, *Data Smog*.

<sup>242</sup> Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995).

<sup>243</sup> Foss and Griffin, “Invitational Rhetoric.”

rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does."<sup>244</sup> The strategy of silence promoted by GLSEN is an invitation to allies to experience the world from the perspective of a body that defies heteronormativity and gender norms, and therefore is forced into an oppressive silence. Invitational rhetoric is based on feminist principles that seek to create relationships of equality by acknowledging that human beings have inherent value and a right to make their own decisions.<sup>245</sup> The strategy of silence provides the space needed to encounter the perspectives of others and thus see that all human beings are unique, are inherently valuable, and have the right of self-determination. By operating outside of argumentative logic, rhetorical silence can create the possibility of understanding, which is often a precursor to social change. The silence of the activists provides a refuge from the constant churning of messages and invites citizens to see the world from the LGBTQ perspective so that society may acknowledge inherent value and grant the right of self-determination.

The Day of Silence case study has allowed me to closely study the strategic and intentional use of silence to influence people. By applying the probes to the Day campaign, what emerges is that silence is not the absence of discourse but a mode of discourse. Moreover, it is a mode of discourse that can express resistance to traditional norms of sexuality and gender identity/expression. The silent participants may have personal reasons for participating in the Day, but, collectively, the protest disrupts norms to crack open a space for the LGBTQ folks at the table. Silent protests disrupt the efficiency and speed of communication by adopting a form that is more suitable for a message-saturated digital

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<sup>244</sup> Foss and Griffin, "Invitational Rhetoric," 5.

<sup>245</sup> Foss and Griffin, "Invitational Rhetoric."

culture. Instead of adding to the information overload, silent activists invite people to slow down, reflect, and understand to create a more inclusive society.

### **Nonviolence vs. Rhetorical Silence**

As I was writing the conclusion of this chapter, a news story caught my eye because it reiterated the common conflation of silence with nonviolence. A headline from the *St. Louis American* read: “‘St. Louis is the New Selma:’ Protestors March Silently through Downtown Monday Morning.”<sup>246</sup> The news story from September 18, 2017, described the actions taken by the protestors in St. Louis who wanted to oppose the not-guilty verdict given in the trial of former police officer Jason Stockley in the 2011 shooting death of Anthony Lamar Smith. Protesters in several cities marched through the streets with the predictable elements that define protests—chants, signs, and speeches. However, some 200 activists in St. Louis not only marched “uncharacteristically slow for the typical fervent pace of protest march” but also maintained “utter silence.”<sup>247</sup> They walked with their “arms locked, heads held high and mouths closed.”<sup>248</sup> Once they reached city hall, the protesters paused for 10 minutes of speeches and expressed that their goal was “to let people know that our presence is powerful ... this was power walking down this street.”<sup>249</sup> I venture that the only thing in common between the St. Louis protest of 2017 and Selma of 1965 is the

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<sup>246</sup> Kenya Vaughn, “‘St. Louis is the New Selma’: Protesters March Silently Through Downtown Monday Morning,” *St. Louis American*, last modified September 18, 2017, [http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local\\_news/st-louis-is-the-new-selma-protesters-march-silently-through/article\\_40717f42-9cac-11e7-aaab-477d973c4972.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/st-louis-is-the-new-selma-protesters-march-silently-through/article_40717f42-9cac-11e7-aaab-477d973c4972.html).

<sup>247</sup> Vaughn, “St. Louis is the New Selma.”

<sup>248</sup> Vaught, “St. Louis is the New Selma.”

<sup>249</sup> Vaughn, “St. Louis is the New Selma.”

goal of the activists—equal rights for all. But similarity of goal is not enough to classify nonviolent protests with silent protests.

Rhetorical silence and nonviolence are two distinct genres despite popular misunderstanding that the two are coterminous. Silence and nonviolence are often conflated because both are considered to be passive reactions. The parade in St. Louis is more like the Silent Parade of 1917—when thousands of African Americans marched in silence in New York City to oppose lynching and other forms of violence on black bodies—and less like Selma which was noisy and bloody. Although nonviolent protests accomplished major goals in India (Gandhi) and the US (Martin Luther King Jr.), these movements are distinct from silent protests. Not only is the current moment significantly different from the 1960s but also the strategies employed are quite different. The nonstop chatter from multiple devices has fogged up our agora, and, in response, a genre of rhetorical silence is emerging for shaping public opinion. Silence and nonviolence are not passive and not coterminous; rather, they are two different genres with different strategies that work in different situations.

Three characteristics of the genre of rhetorical silence emerge as I conclude my second case study: bookending of silence with speech, the subversive potential of rhetorical silence, and the desire to know the rhetor's intended meaning. As for the first characteristic, the Day of Silence case study shows that silent protests are bookended by speech to make the meaning of silence clear. Activists who choose silence as their strategy tend to mark the beginning and end of their silent moments with speech to explain the reasons for their silence. Ghazala's silence was not prefaced by an explanation, which is why she was not

able to contain the meaning of her silence. When the mode of silence is balanced with speech, the meaning of silence is restricted so that objectives can be achieved.

A second characteristic of the genre is that rhetorical silence has subversive potential, as evident from both Ghazala Khan's silence at the convention and the silence of the student-participants. Ghazala attempted to subvert gendered stereotypes of Muslim women by making a public appearance, and Day of Silence participants attempt to subvert a heteronormative educational agenda by disrupting school order for one day. On the surface, the two subversions have different aims; however, the common element underlying both silences is the subversion of the principles of efficiency and speed. Rhetorical silence invites responses that are human and humane by disrupting the principle of efficiency that drives technological communication. Jean-Francois Lyotard explains that the logic of efficiency leads to the discarding of information that cannot be translated into computer language.<sup>250</sup> Information that cannot be efficiently and speedily converted into data has become the refuse, the waste-product of digital cultures. Rhetorical silence is surging even though (or because) it operates on the principle that our humanity cannot be reduced to zeroes and ones. Silence is neither speedy nor efficient because it slows down time and requires human interpretation. Silent activists attempt to reduce our data consumption so that we might encounter alterity and respond ethically. The computer is neither human nor humane, whereas people have the potential to be both. The silent

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<sup>250</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

activists announce their presence by saying nothing: they do not add to the information glut but instead invite us to slow down, encounter, reflect, and understand.

The third characteristic is the mystery created by an unexplained silence. When rhetorical silences are not prefaced with speech, they evoke a desire in the audience to know the author's intended meaning. Ghazala's silence generated a broad interest in knowing the reasons for her silent appearance, but the same cannot be said about the Day of Silence. Although the Day of Silence participants attempt to subvert hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender identity, the mystery factor appears to be missing. The news stories *report* that the Day was held and reiterate the reasons for the silence rather than *investigate* the reasons to whet or satisfy public curiosity.<sup>251</sup> This dissonance leads me to the tentative conclusion that although some explanation for the silence must be provided before and after the silent event to achieve an objective, a lack of explanation on the front end can result in a mystery that captures audience interest.

A shrewd rhetor must balance the need to communicate a specific goal with the need to create audience interest. An audience needs to be primed to receive the silence, but too much explanation could leave the audience not only bored but also prepared to counter the protest. On the other hand, too much mystery squanders the opportunity to influence the audience and constrain action. Rhetorical speech and rhetorical silence share a symbiotic relationship: silence creates the opportunity for discourse (and influence), but

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<sup>251</sup> See <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/annual-day-silence-combats-anti-lgbtq-hate-bias-n749331>, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/glsen-day-of-silence-2016\\_us\\_570fae17e4b0ffa5937e55c2](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/glsen-day-of-silence-2016_us_570fae17e4b0ffa5937e55c2), and <https://hornetapp.com/stories/national-day-silence-april-21/> for examples of news media reporting on Day of Silence.

without speech, silence remains unintelligible. Rhetorical silence needs artful application to influence public opinion. More discussion of the generic characteristics of rhetorical silence follow in the final chapter, after the third case study (on Meher Baba) is complete.

## Chapter 4

### **Meher Baba: From Man to Myth**

So far, my dissertation has examined intentional and strategic uses of silence in two contexts: Ghazala Khan's silent appearance at the 2016 Democratic National Convention and the Day of Silence social movement campaign. The Ghazala Khan case study yielded three important results: (a) in the absence of substance or words, meanings are attributed to silence; (b) meanings can exceed what was intended by the rhetor, e.g., Ghazala was not able to contain the meaning of her silence to grief, and she inadvertently created a demand for a spectacle, which robbed her of her choice to remain silent; and (c) rhetorical silence can subvert the logic of efficiency and consumption that regulates digital cultures. Ghazala's silence was an excess that could not be consumed and resulted in mass American indigestion that could only be cured with a teary spectacle on national television. These results led me to the conclusion that rhetorical silence remains in tension with speech. On one hand, rhetorical silence disrupts consumptive behavior and invites people to encounter alterity. On the other hand, some explanation for the silence must be given to constrain meaning. A careful balance between speech and silence needs to be struck in terms of timing and content for control over the message.

The Day of Silence case study generated some results that are similar to the Ghazala Khan study and some results that add more depth to the concept of rhetorical silence. The similar results are that (a) silence can be a mode of discourse rather than an absence of discourse; (b) rhetorical silence can disrupt calcified norms or stereotypes by slowing down

time and inviting encounters with differing perspectives; and (c) the disruption is physiologically uncomfortable for the proponents of the status quo, which is why speech is demanded from the silent ones. In addition to the overlapping results, the Day of Silence analysis yielded two more insights: rhetorical silence involves (a) bookending of silence with speech and (b) striking a balance between creating a mystery and containing the message. The study demonstrated that bookending the silent strategy with speech gives a rhetor the best opportunity to limit the meaning of silence, but too much explanation before a silent protest not only dilutes the mystery factor but also gives other organizations an opportunity to plan a disruption of the silent campaign. As the Day campaign becomes increasingly well known, the silence of the students does not generate a keen interest in the meaning of the silence. Additionally, schools are prepared not to let silence become disruptive by enacting measures that seek to contain the disruptive silences. Some Christian groups organize counter-campaigns, such as Day of Dialogue, to resist the messages disseminated by GLSEN.<sup>252</sup> These results have led me to the conclusion that the mystery element is an important aspect of the influential power of rhetorical silence. In sum, three things need to be balanced when employing rhetorical silence: speech, silence, and mystery (or audience interest).

In this final case study, I examine an intentional and strategic use of silence in the realm of spiritual discourse. Although silence is not a novel concept in the spiritual discourse of the East or the West, Meher Baba's silence is unique. I have selected Meher

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<sup>252</sup> See <http://www.dayofdialogue.com/>.

Baba for my study because (a) his extended silence coincided with an active life of service rather than with a withdrawal from public life; (b) even after Baba's death, his followers remain devoted and keep his legacy alive; (c) Baba did not proclaim a new religion; and (d) Baba did not seek material benefits from his fame. First, Meher Baba maintained a lengthy silence while engaged in public service. Baba proclaimed himself to be an avatar—God in human form—and stayed silent for forty-four years because he wanted to awaken people to God rather than give humanity words or precepts that people have historically ignored. Baba did not use silence as a reason to withdraw from public life. Instead, he communicated through an alphabet board and gestures, traveled the world to spread his universal message of love, and continuously served the poor and the sick. Second, Baba's extended silence made him unforgettable and mysterious. Fifty years after his death, Baba's followers in the US remain devoted and continue to cherish him. There are Meher centers in California, Oregon, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and New York, where people go for spiritual renewal. The Meher Center in South Carolina, for example, is a retreat where special buildings such as Baba's house and meeting areas are carefully preserved.<sup>253</sup> The Meher Center in Oklahoma is built at the site of Baba's car accident in 1952.<sup>254</sup> Besides the centers, there are several websites that meticulously archive information pertaining to Baba's life: photographs, news stories, travels, major events, and his universal message.<sup>255</sup> Interest in Baba remains vibrant even decades after his death. The third reason Baba is

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<sup>253</sup> See <http://www.mehercenter.org/>.

<sup>254</sup> See <http://www.ambhc.org/>.

<sup>255</sup> See <http://ambppct.org/index.php>, <https://www.meherbabatravels.com/>, <http://www.avatarmeherbaba.org/>, and <http://www.lordmeher.org/rev/index.jsp>.

unique is because he did not instantiate a new religion, which would have created more divisions among people. Instead, he accepted all religions as legitimate paths to salvation and instructed his followers to observe the rituals and practices of their own faiths. With his inclusivity, Baba demonstrated how to enact the principle of unity. Fourth, Baba lived an ascetic life of service and did not seek wealth or comfort for himself, which makes him consubstantial with other revered figures such as Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed. These aspects of Baba's life make him an exemplary figure to study. I would like to emphasize that my analysis seeks neither to discredit Baba as delusional or deceptive nor to validate his avatar claim. My goal is simply to understand the choice of employing silence toward an end and the outcome of that choice. In the process of understanding and writing, I have chosen to show respect toward Baba's followers as I would toward any community that I study.

The task in the last case study is to continue to ask if rhetorical silence is emerging as a genre that has acquired persuasive power because of message saturation in the age of mass communication. Genres develop because there are recurring situations in which a fitting response must be made.<sup>256</sup> Since the situation of message saturation and fierce competition for audience interest is ubiquitous, I argue that a pattern is emerging in which rhetors employ rhetorical silence to shape public opinion. When viewed in isolation, a text can appear to be distinct; however, a close examination reveals similarities or patterns across texts that not only provide information on "societal truths" but also set the standard

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<sup>256</sup> Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*.

for subsequent message construction.<sup>257</sup> Since the question is whether a genre is emerging or not, I study a strategic and intentional use of silence in three different areas of public discourse to determine if a genre of rhetorical silence is indeed taking shape, identify the generic characteristics of rhetorical silence, and explain how the genre is changing the available means of persuasion in the current situation.

### **The Tower, The Kiss, The Rock**

Meher Baba was born Merwan Sheriar Irani on February 25, 1894, to a family of Zoroastrian faith in Poona, India.<sup>258</sup> There was nothing unusual about his childhood except that at the age of twelve or thirteen, Merwan began to spend hours in solitude at the Tower of Silence—a place where people of Zoroastrian faith (known as Parsis) “expose their dead in gratings to be devoured by vultures.”<sup>259</sup> Both Merwan’s father and grandfather were keepers of the Tower in the Persian village where they lived, and now “young Merwan found the tower near Poona his natural retreat for silent contemplation.”<sup>260</sup> The towers are usually built outside the town and overlook a wide countryside, making them ideal locations for Merwan’s meditative habits.<sup>261</sup>

During his time in Deccan college, a kiss altered the course of Merwan’s life. In May of 1913, Merwan was riding his bicycle home from college when he was beckoned

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<sup>257</sup> Hart, “Analyzing Form.”

<sup>258</sup> Tom Hopkinson and Dorothy Hopkinson, *Much Silence: Meher Baba: His Life and Work* (Bombay: Meher House Publications, 1981).

<sup>259</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 26.

<sup>260</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 26.

<sup>261</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

by an ancient Muslim female sage, Hazrat Babajan, who lived under a neem tree.<sup>262</sup> Merwan knew of her, as he often passed by her, and was also aware that she was highly regarded in the community as someone who had achieved full God-realization.<sup>263</sup> He had never interacted with her, but on that particular day, Hazrat Babajan motioned to Merwan to come to her, and as Merwan got off his bicycle and walked over to her, she stood up, embraced him with tears running down her face, and said, “*Mera piarra beta*” (my beloved son).<sup>264</sup> After this encounter, Merwan lost interest in his studies and spent seven months sitting with Babajan under the neem tree, barely talking.<sup>265</sup> In January of 1914, when Merwan was about to go home for the night, Babajan kissed him on the forehead, which put him in a trance that lasted until November 1914 when he regained “a little consciousness.”<sup>266</sup> While Merwan was in a trance-like state, he experienced electric shocks in his body, and he barely ate or slept.<sup>267</sup> Babajan’s kiss carried Merwan “into the bliss of God-realization,” and the pain that he experienced was “due to an unwillingness to come down to normal consciousness.”<sup>268</sup> The kiss from Babajan began Merwan’s journey toward becoming an avatar, and he was “inwardly prompted” to contact four other perfect masters.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> C. B. Purdom, *The God-Man* (Crescent Beach, S.C: Sheriar Press, 1971).

<sup>263</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>264</sup> “Meher Baba Travels, Trips & Journeys: Chronology,” Meher Baba’s Life and Travels, accessed December 28, 2017, <https://www.meherbabatravels.com/trips-journeys/>.

<sup>265</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>266</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 20.

<sup>267</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>268</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 31.

<sup>269</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust, accessed December 28, 2017, <http://ambppct.org/biography.php>.

In December of 1915, Merwan decided to visit the sage Upsani Maharaj who lived in the Hindu temple of Khandoba.<sup>270</sup> <sup>271</sup> Upsani Maharaj was no less remarkable than Babajan and played a decisive role in Merwan’s life. When Merwan neared the sage, Upsani Maharaj threw a rock at Merwan that landed in the same spot where Babajan had kissed him, and the blow returned Merwan to ordinary consciousness.<sup>272</sup> After the rock incident, Merwan returned home and resumed a somewhat normal life that included working jobs and helping with the family business.<sup>273</sup> He also visited Babajan for an hour each evening and retreated to the Tower of Silence or the jungles almost daily.<sup>274</sup> Merwan would also visit Upsani Maharaj once or twice a month, and in July 1921, he went to live with Upsani Maharaj for six months.<sup>275</sup> Upsani Maharaj and Merwan would spend hours together, sitting in silence or occasionally singing.<sup>276</sup> By the end of the year, Merwan “was restored to full normal consciousness,” and Upsani Maharaj instructed his disciples to follow Merwan as *adi-shakti*, “primal power,” and an avatar.<sup>277</sup> Thus, at the age of twenty-seven, Merwan attained a status that went beyond that of a perfect master and became an avatar—God-man. Soon, he would leave Upsani Maharaj to begin his universal work, and disciples would begin to gather around him.

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<sup>270</sup> Between Hazrat Babajan and Upsani Maharaj, Merwan contacted three other perfect masters—Narayan Maharaj, Tajuddin Baba, and Sai Baba—who influenced him.

<sup>271</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>272</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>273</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>274</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 33.

<sup>275</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>276</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>277</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 26.

## The Silent Avatar

After Upsani Maharaj and the other four perfect masters acknowledged Merwan's avatar status, Merwan began to live in a small *jhopdi* (thatched hut) surrounded by his *mandali*,<sup>278</sup> who called him Meher Baba (compassionate father).<sup>279</sup> <sup>280</sup> After a period of intense work, Baba announced on July 8, 1925, that he would cease speaking.<sup>281</sup> He said, "Hear well my voice: you will not hear it for a long time."<sup>282</sup> Originally, Baba had declared that he would keep silent for one year.<sup>283</sup> Once he commenced his silence on July 10, 1925, he maintained it until his death on January 31, 1969.<sup>284</sup> Eighteen months after beginning his silence, in January 1927, Baba also stopped writing<sup>285</sup> and instead communicated by pointing to letters on an alphabet board.<sup>286</sup> In October 1954, Baba gave up the alphabet board as well and relied solely on what his followers call "gesturing."<sup>287</sup> The gestures were interpreted by his *mandali*—especially Eruch Jessawala, who was quite adept at reading Baba's facial expressions and gestures.<sup>288</sup>

Baba's work as an avatar can be conceptualized into five stages: establishing Meherabad, traveling the world, working with the *masts*, second round of traveling, and seclusion. In the 1920s, Baba established Meherabad, an ashram community that offered

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<sup>278</sup> *Mandali* is a Sanskrit word that means a circle or a community. Baba used the term *mandali* to refer to his closest disciples.

<sup>279</sup> From this point forward, I will refer to Merwan as Meher Baba.

<sup>280</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>281</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>282</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 47.

<sup>283</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>284</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>285</sup> The whereabouts of the book in which Baba used to write are unknown.

<sup>286</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>287</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>288</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*

free schooling for children of all castes and a free hospital and dispensary for the poor.<sup>289</sup> From 1931 to 1937, Baba travelled to China, the Far East, Europe (ten times), and America (three times).<sup>290</sup> From 1937 to 1949, he worked with the *masts*—people who appear to be mentally ill but are actually spiritually advanced souls who have become intoxicated with God-awareness.<sup>291</sup> During this time and throughout his life, Baba cared for the lepers and washed the feet of the poor and gave them cloth, grain, and money.<sup>292</sup> During 1950s, Baba traveled to the West again, staying at the places his devotees had prepared for him (Myrtle Beach, SC, and Queensland, Australia).<sup>293</sup> In 1952, Baba met with an automobile accident in Prague, Oklahoma, which is considered by his devotees to be a form of sacrifice in which God takes pain upon himself for the salvation of people.<sup>294</sup> Baba suffered another car accident in India in 1956, which contributed to a gradual decline in his health.<sup>295</sup> After 1958, Baba discontinued travelling and receiving people, withdrawing into seclusion.<sup>296</sup> He emerged from his seclusion to give his devotees the benefit of his *darshan* (viewing) in 1962 and 1965.<sup>297</sup> On January 31, 1969, Baba dropped his earthly body and was buried in Ahmedabad, where thousands go every year to pay homage to someone they consider to be an avatar of this age.

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<sup>289</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>290</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>291</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>292</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>293</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>294</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>295</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>296</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

<sup>297</sup> “Biography,” Avatar Meher Baba Trust.

Similarly to the other two chapters, my analysis in this chapter is guided by the probes identified in chapter 1 even though the probes are not reiterated in the analysis. Applying the probes to the Meher Baba case study resulted in four major themes. The first theme discusses the intimate nature of Baba's silence and answers the probes that investigate how silence is maintained by the rhetor how silence is stylized. The second theme examines the meanings attributed to Baba's silence—by himself and by his followers—and is guided by the probes that study meaning attribution in the absence of spoken words and the situation in which silence is considered a fitting response. The third theme discusses how Baba acquired mythical attributes despite being a Modern man. This theme is guided by the probes that examine the connections among the intent of the rhetor, the effect of the discourse, and the significance of the length of the silence. The final theme analyzes the mystery of the promised Word: what kind of Word would Baba utter when he broke his silence, what the Word would accomplish, and whether the Word was ever uttered. This theme is also guided by two probes: how the silence is broken by the rhetor and how the audience reacts when they are delivered silence instead of words.

The texts I analyze in the Baba case study are four books and several websites. Two of the books were “dictated” by Baba: *The Everything and the Nothing* and *God Speaks*. I chose these two texts because *God Speaks* provides a cosmogony and is considered to be the principal text of Meher Baba and because *The Everything and the Nothing* contains sixty-five messages from Baba on various subjects. Collectively, these two texts provide a fair understanding of Baba's philosophy and cosmogony. I also analyze two books written by Baba's devotees: *Much Silence* by Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson and *God-Man* by C.

B. Purdom. The Hopkinsons and Purdom were Baba's disciples: they wrote about Baba's silence and his other behaviors from a first-person perspective, which I found quite valuable for my study. Finally, my analysis includes information gained from several websites maintained by the devotees for archival purposes. The archive is quite extensive and seeks to preserve all traces, big or small, left by Baba. Since rhetorical silence, by definition, lacks material or substance, I rely on these texts and websites to give me access points into Baba's silence—its nature, the reasons for it, and its effects.

### **An Intimate Silence**

Baba's silence has been described as intimate by his followers, which runs contrary to notions that silence can be "threatening,"<sup>298</sup> a lack of "verbal symbols" can deny a political relationship,<sup>299</sup> or silence can create an "ambiguous void" in an interpersonal relationship.<sup>300</sup> Baba's devotees might have feared that their relationship with Baba would lose its closeness if Baba did not speak to them; however, Baba's silence brought them closer rather than farther apart. The Hopkinsons describe how Baba's silence felt:

A loss of contact and intimacy with the mandali and others close to him might have been expected when the Master no longer spoke directly to them. Yet surprisingly the opposite was true, for Baba did not adopt a reserve or maintain a stony speechlessness. On the contrary, he gave himself through his ever-changing facial expressions; through his eyes which saw without illusion and yet radiated love; and through the forceful gestures of his hands and fingers...And the combination of silence with this dynamic visual expression produced on even casual visitors the awe-inspiring sense of a Being living simultaneously in the finite world and in the infinite.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Scott, "Rhetoric and Silence."

<sup>299</sup> Brummett, "Silence as a Political Strategy."

<sup>300</sup> Bruneau, "Communicative Silences."

<sup>301</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 51.

Baba was able to maintain intimacy with his *mandali* because he communicated with an alphabet board, vivid facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures. J. Vernon Jensen explains that “silence binds people together” and can “permit a firm bond to be created and maintained without words being uttered.”<sup>302</sup> Baba’s silence created a bond that remains firm decades after his death. The combination of silence with breath, communication with gestures, and interpretation provided by the *mandali* made even a casual visitor feel like she had an extra-ordinary contact with an extra-ordinary person.

Baba’s silence was not only intimate rather stony but also commanded the full attention of those with whom he interacted. Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson explain that “the very fact that he did not speak compelled all who came into contact with him to concentrate their full attention in the effort to comprehend what he was seeking to convey.”<sup>303</sup> Instead of silence signifying the absence of a thinking, choosing subject, Baba’s silence brought out intense concentration in those who interacted with him. Silence is a revered phenomenon in Eastern cultures. Mahatma Gandhi explains that “silence is part of the spiritual discipline of a votary of truth.”<sup>304</sup> Gandhi clarifies why such a discipline is needed: “Proneness to exaggerate, to suppress or modify the truth, wittingly or unwittingly, is a natural weakness of man, and silence is necessary to surmount it.”<sup>305</sup> In other words, a person who claims to know and speak the truth should be accustomed to the discipline of silence so that truth does not become altered by human tendencies of exaggeration and

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<sup>302</sup> Jensen, “Communicative Functions of Silence.”

<sup>303</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 51.

<sup>304</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Gandhi’s Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1948), 84.

<sup>305</sup> Gandhi, *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, 84.

modification. Gandhi explains that speech acquires significance when a person does not speak excessively. He states, “a man of few words will rarely be thoughtless in his speech: he will measure every word”<sup>306</sup> Baba was not a man of few words: he was a man of no words. Thus, a keen interest in deciphering his intended message developed in everyone who visited him. Baba’s silence not only communicated but also, when accompanied with expressive gestures, created an intimate bond between him and his followers and a strong desire in the interlocutors to comprehend Baba’s message.

### **Awakening Mankind**

Baba’s silence subverted the image of a talking, teaching God and instead crafted a new image of a silent God. Walter Fisher identifies four motives that characterize rhetorical situations: affirming or creating an image, reaffirming or revitalizing an image, purifying or correcting an image, and subverting or undermining an image.<sup>307</sup> Fisher further explains that there can be more than one motive operating; for example, a rhetor could subvert one image and simultaneously create a new image.<sup>308</sup> I posit that Baba was subverting the popular image of a God who gives commandments. By presenting himself as a silent God, Baba provided a new image of a God who has come not to teach but to awaken. In this section, I first summarize the reasons Baba provided for his lengthy silence and then discuss the characteristics of the silent God.

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<sup>306</sup> Gandhi, *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, 84.

<sup>307</sup> Fisher, “Motive View of Communication.”

<sup>308</sup> Fisher, “Motive View of Communication.”

Baba explained that he stayed silent because people had ignored God's Word throughout history. Therefore, in his avataric form, he withheld the Word until the consciousness of people had been prepared for transcendence by experiencing God's silence. An explanation of his silence is encoded in Baba's universal message:

I have not come to teach, but to awaken. Understand therefore that I lay down no precepts...Because man has been deaf to the principles and precepts laid down by God in the past, in this present Avataric form, I observe silence. You have asked for and been given enough words—it is now time to live them.<sup>309</sup>

Baba explained that human beings have ignored God's teachings throughout history, and, instead of learning the lesson of love and compassion, people have inflicted pain upon one another. Thus, God has been mocked rather than obeyed. Baba further explained that since people have ignored God's Word, as an avatar Baba will offer no more words with the hope/intention that his silence will awaken people to live according to the plentiful words that have already been given to guide mankind.

The characteristics of a silent God can be mined from the four distinctions Baba provided to explain the purpose behind his silence: (a) speaking and talking, (b) mortal talk and divine talk, (c) idle talk and action, and (d) the heart and the mind. These distinctions shed light on the characteristics of a silent God and clarify the rationale behind the new image. Regarding the difference between speaking and talking, Baba explained that he speaks even though he does not talk. He stated:

If you were to ask me why I do not speak, I would say I am not silent, and that I speak more eloquently through gestures and the alphabet board.

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<sup>309</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 48–49.

If you were to ask me why I do not talk, I would say, mostly for three reasons. Firstly, I feel that through you all I am talking eternally. Secondly, to relieve the boredom of talking incessantly through your forms, I keep silence in my personal physical form. And thirdly, because all talk in itself is idle talk. Lectures, messages, statements, discourses of any kind, spiritual or otherwise, imparted through utterances or writings, are just idle talk when not acted upon or lived up to.<sup>310</sup>

Baba explained that his silence was a form of speech even though he did not talk with his breath. He may not have talked in the strict sense of using breath to make words, but he spoke quite eloquently with his gestures and the alphabet board. Baba employed the mode of silence to raise awareness of God. Once again, an agentive use of silence is described by the silent ones as a form of speech rather than as an absence of speech.

The distinction between mortal talk and divine talk created ambiguity of meaning and established a divine/mortal hierarchy. Baba expressed that he spoke through human forms continuously and therefore preferred to stay silent in his avataric form. He stated, “To relieve the boredom of talking incessantly through your forms, I keep silence in my personal physical form.”<sup>311</sup> Baba not only talked through people but also translated divine language into human language. He stated:

My language is such that none can understand or grasp the underlying meaning of what I say; therefore, when I want to say a thing I have simultaneously to make use of your language also, knowing well that you would understand nothing whatsoever if I were to make use of my language alone.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 410.

<sup>311</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 410.

<sup>312</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 53.

Baba explained that divine communication occurred in his own language, which he translated into human language so that people could understand him. The division of divine and human language created ambiguity of meaning. Baba's disciples could not reliably tell which language Baba was employing at a specific time. Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson describe the confusion of not knowing whether Baba had said something in normal language or divine language. In September of 1954, Baba said that his earlier statement about the Word destroying three-fourths of the world was uttered in his own language.<sup>313</sup> Then Baba "went on to clarify which of the statements in his 'Final Declaration' had been made in terms of normal speech, and which in his own 'language,' or in both."<sup>314</sup> The slippage in meaning enhanced the mystery of Baba's silence, which in turn reinforced the hierarchy of the divine and the mortal. A lack of understanding was attributed to human failure in decoding the speech of the gods. The mortals, according to Baba, had failed not only at following God's teachings but also could not decipher divine language. Therefore, God had manifested among them in his silent form. Baba was careful to not articulate a division between God and people, and instead emphasized that "you and I are not 'We' but 'One'" and "I am God. You are God, and we are all one."<sup>315</sup> Although Baba aimed to unify God and creation, the distinction between divine language and ordinary language amplified Baba's avatar claim.

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<sup>313</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 52.

<sup>314</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 53.

<sup>315</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 223.

Baba also highlighted the difference between idle talk and action. He claimed that all discourse is merely chatter or idle talk when people do not act upon the precepts that have already been given by God. Baba explained that he did not talk because: “Lectures, messages, statements, discourses of any kind, spiritual or otherwise, imparted through utterances or writings, are just idle talk when not acted upon or lived up to.”<sup>316</sup> By his actions, Baba showed his devotees how to live according to God’s teachings. Baba treated everyone the same way regardless of caste, religion, or sex. His *mandali* consisted of both men and women, and they came from various faiths. In his school, he cleaned the toilets and bathed the children himself, including the untouchables. When some high-caste Brahmins came to seek his blessings, Baba asked them to bathe the untouchables.<sup>317</sup> Baba washed the feet of the lepers and gave them money and labored to feed the poor. By his actions, he demonstrated how people should serve one another irrespective of sex, caste, religion, class, and other artificial divisions. By emphasizing service over sermons, Baba elevated good deeds above good intentions or good discourse and asked his *mandali* to follow his example in order to create a culture of service rather than lip service.

Finally, Baba articulated a distinction between the mind and the heart. He observed that words are for the mind, which mankind has received in plenty, and that silence is for people’s hearts. Baba wanted to appeal to people’s hearts so they could know God’s love.

This time of your being with me, I do not intend giving you a lot of words to exercise your minds. I want your minds to sleep so that your hearts may awaken to my love. You have had enough of words, I have had enough of words. It is not through words that I give you what I have to give. In the

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<sup>316</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 410.

<sup>317</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 43.

silence of your perfect surrender, my love which is always silent can flow to you—to be yours always to keep and to share with those who seek me.<sup>318</sup>

Baba expressed that his intention was to awaken love in people's hearts through the mode of keeping silent. He suggested that love, unfettered by the mind, would flow freely from him—the source of love—to anyone who sought him. Bill and Dorothy Hopkinson state that Baba kept silent because “his message was not to man's mind but to his heart, and the heart can only be reached when the mind is bypassed or induced to abdicate its dictatorial role.”<sup>319</sup> Bill and Dorothy Hopkinson echo Baba's belief that the mind is a barrier to realizing God's love, and, once people bracket their rational thinking and learn to listen to their intuition, they will feel or experience an internal transformation that will connect them to the divine.

The characteristics of a silent God can be construed from the distinctions of speaking/talking, divine talk/mortal talk, idle talk/service, and heart/mind. A silent God talks to people without uttering words, his messages can seem contradictory or ambiguous because divine language has to be translated into human language, he serves the unfortunate rather than giving sermons in comfortable settings, and he appeals to people's hearts in order to awaken their slumbering consciousness. Thus, Baba gave his followers a new model/image of a silent God who does not lay down commandments for people to follow but asks them to live according to the spirit of love and brotherhood that permeates the precepts already given.

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<sup>318</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 50.

<sup>319</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 50.

## Interpretation vs. Documentation

One of Baba's *mandali*, C. B. Purdom, offers an explanation of Baba's silence that differs from Baba's explanation. C. B. Purdom suggests that Baba kept silent because he wanted to be interpreted, not documented.<sup>320</sup> He states, "Baba's silence places him among the intangible, the unrecorded and not documented, a positive sign that he does not wholly belong to the rational world of facts and events but to the inner world of insight and intuition."<sup>321</sup> Rather than ensuring accuracy through documentation, Baba was comfortable with the variations associated with the medium of interpretation.

The mediation of the interpreter is evident in all discourse attributed to Baba. Purdom explains that when encountering Baba's work, one must "never forget" that it comes to us through an interpreter:

Despite all the published matter, he has not spoken a word, neither has any written word of his been published...It is very necessary to remember that all the writing that bears Baba's name reaches us through others. What he used to 'say' on the alphabet board was interpreted...I do not mean to say that Baba is not responsible for these declarations and writings; but so far as the reader is concerned he should know that they reach him at second hand.<sup>322</sup>

Purdom clarifies that he is not suggesting that the mediation of the interpreter absolves Baba of the responsibility of what is attributed to him. Rather, he wants readers to remember that Baba's discourse was not traditionally written, spoken, or dictated by him. He explains that even when Baba was using the alphabet board, he would not dictate word for word:

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<sup>320</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 410.

<sup>321</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 410.

<sup>322</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 411.

Even when Baba used the board, it is necessary to remember how the words were conveyed. He would dictate, usually not word for word, a general idea or theme, from which the writer would compose a discourse; it would then be read to Baba, who would indicate alterations, after that he would be finished with it...It should especially be noticed how often in messages Baba is made to refer to himself in the second person, which clearly indicates that someone is speaking for him.<sup>323</sup>

Whether Baba dictated his discourse via an alphabet board or gestures, the final product was inflected by the interpretations of the listener. The same listening session would lead to variances in what was recorded, and the idiosyncrasies of the interpreter would find their way into the text. Purdom claims that he has read “almost every word that has been printed or circulated under Baba’s name” and has found that the “records show discrepancies.”<sup>324</sup> Purdom concludes that people do not always hear the same things, and the reader should remember that they are not getting the words straight from Baba’s lips or hands. Rather, the words reach us through the mediation of the interpreter.

Baba was not bothered by the lack of accuracy or lack of control over the message, a disadvantage that often accompanies the mode of silence. Purdom explains that even though the interpreters strived for accuracy, their accounts tend to differ. He elaborates, “Those who serve him [Baba] do so with complete devotion and singleness of heart, and I am certain that they would give their lives for the truth. Never in the very slightest degree do they intend to convey anything from him but with the most meticulous accuracy.”<sup>325</sup> Despite the care taken to record Baba’s message exactly, there were omissions and

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<sup>323</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 411.

<sup>324</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 413.

<sup>325</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 411.

additions. By sacrificing accuracy, Baba gained something much bigger. In the next section, I discuss how Baba acquired mythical properties by his silence and his willingness to give up control over his message.

### **From Man to Myth**

I venture that rhetorical silence transformed Baba into a myth. William Bascom defines myths as “truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past” and identifies five characteristics that differentiate myths from folktales or legends: (a) myths are considered sacred by the community, (b) myths explain events that took place in the remote past (cosmogony), (c) the “main characters are not usually human beings but often have human attributes,” (d) “the actions are set in an earlier world ... or in another world,” and (d) the account is considered true or factual by the believers.<sup>326 327</sup> Each characteristic of the myth applies to Baba, which is quite a remarkable feat for a modern man.

William Bascom, a noted folklorist, states that myths are theological in the sense that they provide a story of creation that is considered sacred and true by the believers.<sup>328</sup> These characteristics are quite evident in Baba’s story. Baba provided a genesis story that is considered true and sacred by his devotees:

God is Infinite and Eternal, And His imagination is also Infinite and Eternal. God’s imagination is unending, and the Creation which is a product of His imagination goes on endlessly expanding...In what is called space numberless universes are continuously created, sustained and destroyed.

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<sup>326</sup> William Bascom, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” *Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 307 (1965): 4.

<sup>327</sup> I employ William Bascom’s definition of myth because, according to the commentary of Alan Dundes in *Sacred Narrative*, most folklorists agree on the distinctions provided by Bascom regarding myth, legend, and folktale.

<sup>328</sup> Bascom, “Forms of Folklore.”

This process of creation continues so long as God goes on imagining. And when God's Imagination is suspended, as it is at moments in Eternity when God withdraws Himself into His Sound Sleep State (just as man's imagination ceases when is in deep sleep), the Creation is withdrawn and dissolved.<sup>329</sup>

Baba explained that creation is a product of God's infinite imagination as God seeks answers to the question, who am I?<sup>330</sup> <sup>331</sup> As God continues to imagine the answers, creation goes through many phases, and, when God sleeps, the musings come to an end and creation is dissolved. Baba's explanation of how the world was created and how it will end is treated by Baba's followers as sacred and true. Baba also explained other events that occurred in the distant past, such as the comings of Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, and Zoroaster.

Through endless time God's greatest gift is continuously given in silence. But when mankind becomes deaf to the thunder of His Silence God incarnates as Man. He uses a physical body for His universal work, to discard it in final sacrifice as soon as it has served its purpose...I was Rama, I was Krishna, I was this One, I was that One, and now I am Meher Baba.<sup>332</sup>

Baba explained that the different manifestations of God (prophets) "are regulated by the habits and customs of the time," and an Avatar "adopts the attitude" that is most suitable for the people of that region and time period.<sup>333</sup> Thus, Baba provided an explanation of how and why the world was created and how it will end, and he discussed some significant events of the past, such as previous manifestations of God in human form.

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<sup>329</sup> Meher Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing* (Sydney, Australia: Meher House Publications, 1963): 54.

<sup>330</sup> Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing*, 49.

<sup>331</sup> For more information on Baba's cosmogony, also consult Meher Baba, *God Speaks: The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1955).

<sup>332</sup> Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing*, 48.

<sup>333</sup> "All the Prophets Were the Incarnation of God," Avatar Meher Baba , accessed January 1, 2018, <http://www.avatarmeherbaba.org/erics/example.html>.

The other two mythic characteristics identified by Bascom—non-human agent who acts in an earlier or different world—are not so easily attributed to any modern man. However, I contend that Baba’s extraordinary silence facilitates the attribution of a being who was non-human or extra-human and whose actions occurred outside of time and place. Even though the story of Baba’s transcendence from man to God is told in most books and websites about him, the transformation narrative by itself could not possibly mark him far different from the *sudgurus* (perfect masters) who trained him and then acknowledged him as an avatar.<sup>334</sup> Many *sudgurus* come and go, and the silence of the mystics is not an unusual phenomenon in Eastern cultures. Mahatma Gandhi explains in a 1932 letter that silence, sage, and sagehood are derived from the same root word: “*Samadhi* means silence. *Muni* (sage) and *mauna* (sagehood, silence) are both derived from the same root.”<sup>335</sup> It is not unusual for an Indian mystic to keep silent, but Baba has left a lasting mark on the world. What differentiates Baba from other *sudgurus* is that Baba maintained an extended silence while simultaneously helping the poor and the sick, traveling the world, and gesturing his discourses. Many mystics withdraw from public life when they take on an ascetic life of few words and few material comforts. Baba was the opposite. He not only led an active life of service and traveled the world but also “dictated” books, met with

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<sup>334</sup> The five perfect masters who first trained and then acknowledged Meher Baba as God in Human Form were Hazrat Babajan, Narayan Maharaj, Tajuddin Baba, Sai Baba, and Upsani Maharaj.

<sup>335</sup> Mahadev Desai, *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*, ed. and trans. Valji Govindji Desai (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1953), 313. Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s secretary, kept notes of Gandhi’s letters, speeches, and interviews in a diary with the hope that he would write Gandhi’s biography, but he died before he could fulfill his wish.

thousands of people, and gave interviews. Instead of allowing silence to be his excuse to live a reclusive life, Baba disseminated his silence all over the world.

Mythic qualities can be attributed to Baba because there is no text in which he or his discourse can be fixed. Baba communicated through interpretations of his gestures, so there is no discourse that has been directly authored by his breath or hands. The lack of an authored text enhances Baba's transcendental image. Purdom suggests, "Baba's silence places him among the intangible, the unrecorded and not documented, a positive sign that he does not wholly belong to the rational world of facts and events but to the inner world of insight and intuition."<sup>336</sup> Baba's silence places him in a different world—not the world that we encounter through our senses or rationality but a world that is known through insight and intuition. A text has a permanent quality to it, whereas interpretations of texts can be as numerous as the interpreters, keeping the process of interpretation alive and never wholly finished. As with Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Prophet Mohammed, there is no text that can be attributed directly to Baba, and all that remains is the disciples' record of what Baba said. There was a secret book that Baba began writing three days after he acquired silence, and he wrote in it every day; however, the whereabouts of the book remain a mystery. Eruch Jessawala asked Baba about the book shortly before Baba's death, but Baba did not reveal the location of the book. Some say that parts of the book are now in *The Everything and the Nothing* and *God Speaks*, but these assertions are mere hearsay.<sup>337</sup> Perhaps it was fortuitous or perhaps strategy or perhaps a little bit of both, but

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<sup>336</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 410.

<sup>337</sup> See <http://www.mischievouspeeps.com/controversy-corner/the-book/>.

lack of documentation places Baba in the mythic realm rather than in the realm of a popular author with a cult-like following. Baba cannot be fixed in a specific text, which allows him to transcend the limitations of place.

It is not only the absence of a primary text that gives Baba mythic qualities but also that his silence divorces him from the restraints of time. Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson state that “the combination of silence with this dynamic visual expression produced in even casual visitors the awe-inspiring sense of a Being living simultaneously in the finite world and in the infinite.”<sup>338</sup> Finitude is a temporal concept associated with speech, whereas infinity is atemporal and closely connected to silence. Silence is the infinite that absorbs both noise and time. Max Picard postulates, “It is as though time had been sown into silence, as though silence had absorbed it; as though silence were the soil in which time grows to fullness.”<sup>339</sup> Picard further states: “Time is expanded by silence. If silence is so preponderant in time that time is completely absorbed by it, then time stands still. There is then nothing but silence: the silence of eternity.”<sup>340</sup> In other words, silence is atemporal and infinite whereas speech is finite and takes place in-time. In Baba’s silence, time got absorbed so that he did not wholly belong to the present or to the past but to both. His silence placed him outside of time and place; his silence gave him the quality of the eternal and infinite. In the strictest sense, a mythical figure belongs to the remote past of pre-creation and occupies a different or earlier world. However, Baba, a fairly modern figure,

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<sup>338</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 51.

<sup>339</sup> Picard, *The World of Silence*.

<sup>340</sup> Picard, *The World of Silence*, 117.

acquired mythical properties by escaping documentation and communicating in the mode of silence.

The question could be raised, If Baba was seeking the mythical status of Buddha, Jesus, or Mohammed, then why not instantiate a religion? Baba did not start a new religion because he was adamantly against giving people precepts that they would later fail to follow. Instead, he said that he had come to awaken people's consciousness of God so that they would better follow whatever religion they had already embraced. Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson explain that Baba's silence

served to impress upon the world that he had not come to add one more to the list of the great religions which man persistently misunderstands and distorts, using them to sanctify the self-interest, greed and hatred they were intended to help him overcome. Baba realized very well that if he put forward any 'new religion', it would inevitably go the way of all the rest...Instead of putting forward a competing religion, Baba called attention through his silence to the underlying truth which is the same in all religions, and by means of which, he said, he would one day draw all religions and creeds together 'like beads on a string.'<sup>341</sup>

Baba did not want to offer a competing religion because of the hierarchy that often accompanies organized religions. Rather, with this silence, he wanted to draw attention to the Oneness that lies underneath the multitudes. The Meher Baba Trust maintains a free school, dispensary, cataract clinic, and veterinary clinic but does not seek to evangelize. The followers' gatherings are informal and their practices personal rather than prescribed or ritualized. Despite Baba's resistance to documentation, his devotees are quite enthusiastic about preserving every photograph, every word written about Baba or dictated

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<sup>341</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 49.

by him, the furniture and rooms that he occupied, and even minutiae of Baba's schedule and travel details. It is quite ironic that as a person who did not seek documentation, Baba has been thoroughly chronicled and archived.

### **The Promised Word**

Baba often promised that he would deliver the Word that would change the consciousness of mankind, but it is unclear whether he kept his promise or not. Most followers believe that the Word was never spoken and that Baba died in silence. However, the promise created suspense for the followers who lived in anticipation that, at any moment, Baba would utter the Word and change the world. The mystery of the Word was heightened by Baba's promises that the Word would be uttered, must be uttered, and the timing had to be just right because the Word would have a mega effect. Regarding the necessity of uttering the Word, Baba said:

My silence must break. There is no escape from it. I shall not lay down my body until I have given the WORD to the world...As I am the pivot of the Universe, the full pressure of the universal upheaval will bear on me, and correspondingly my suffering will be so infinitely overwhelming that the WORD will escape from out of the silence.<sup>342</sup>

Baba explained that the Word would escape out of his silence because the burden of the universe would be too much to bear. From his suffering, the Word would come to alter the universe.

The Word was not supposed to be a sermon or a speech but a sound that people would hear through their inner ear:

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<sup>342</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 356.

When I break my silence and speak, it will be this Primal Oceanic ‘M-m-m’ which I will utter through my human mouth... As the Word will be an inner word, heard by the inner ear only by those able to hear it, those who, in Goethe’s words, can bear ‘the living and instantaneous revelation of the unfathomable’, they will know that they hear it and what they hear.<sup>343</sup>

The promised Word would sound like the yogi’s “om,” but it would only be heard by the inner ear and only by those who were capable of hearing it.

Even though the Word might be a simple sound, Baba promised that the effect of the Word would be mighty. Baba provided contradictory accounts of what the Word would accomplish. Baba specified that when the word “is uttered by me it will reverberate in all people and creatures and all will know that I have broken my silence and have uttered that Sound or Word.”<sup>344</sup> Baba even suggested that the Word would have the effect of atom bombs: “My silence has a purpose behind it. When I break it, all will know. The breaking of my Silence will be as forceful as thousands of atom bombs exploding together.”<sup>345</sup> The sound would not only carry the force of atom bombs but also have long-lasting effect: “Indeed, he says, his word would reverberate for seven hundred years, and thus he has to choose the time because of the danger of men hearing what exceeds the possibility of what they are able to hear: it might destroy the balance of mankind.”<sup>346</sup> Baba also explained that the timing of the utterance had to be right otherwise the Word would create havoc for humanity. Baba also gestured that the Word would have an individualized effect on people:

The effective force of this Word and their reaction to it will be in accordance with the magnitude and receptivity of each individual mind. And the

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<sup>343</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 413-14.

<sup>344</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 413.

<sup>345</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 52.

<sup>346</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 413.

reaction will be instantaneous and as various as the reaction of people in a room through which a cobra suddenly and swiftly passes, when some would nervously laugh, some lose control of their bowels, and some feel great courage or reasonless hope and joy.<sup>347</sup>

Whether the Word would alter the world like an atom bomb or have more of an individualized effect, the Word was not supposed to be destructive or harmful; rather, the Word would be an act of love from God to humanity: “When I break my Silence, the impact of my Love will be universal, and all life in creation will know, feel and receive of it. It will help every individual to break himself free from his bondage in his own way.”<sup>348</sup> Baba asserted that his Word would unfetter mankind from the chains of ignorance and lead them to God-realization. However, the question is: Was the Word delivered?

During Baba’s lifetime, his followers lived in anticipation that the Word would be uttered soon and the world would change forever. Several times Baba announced that he would break his silence and deliver the Word, but he would withdraw from the arrangement at the last minute. The first time was as early as 1927—a mere two years after he began his silence. Baba announced that he would break his silence, but he did not.<sup>349</sup> In 1932, he was supposed to deliver the Word by a radio broadcast in Hollywood, but he rescinded.<sup>350</sup> The newspaper headline reads “Silent Hindu Defers Radio Talk,” and the reporter goes on to state that “East-Indian ‘holy man’ who has supposedly not uttered a word for seven years, will not deliver his ‘message to the world’ tomorrow over a national broadcast from

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<sup>347</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 413-14.

<sup>348</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 52.

<sup>349</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>350</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

Hollywood” because “conditions are not yet ripe.”<sup>351</sup> The third time Baba was supposed to break his silence was February 15, 1942. He said that he would “publicly and universally speak” and his “world manifestation would come to full expression.”<sup>352</sup> Alas, he did not speak on that day either. In November 1962, he promised that 1963 would be spent in “preparation for the urge to speak.”<sup>353</sup> However, 1964 came and went, and Baba never said anything. Indeed, “no one has ever heard him speak to himself,” not even those who were close to him until the end.<sup>354</sup> Thus, it appears that Baba passed away without keeping his promise to utter the Word that would alter the consciousness of mankind.

Several reasons are given by Baba’s disciples for the broken promises and capricious behavior. Purdom posits that Baba was unpredictable because he acted “according to vision or intuition,” not according to “any apparent plan.”<sup>355</sup> Some say that Baba was training his disciples and that he did not break his silence because the followers were not prepared to accept his Word.<sup>356</sup> Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson quote Eruch Jessawala: “The delay that we feel to be made by Baba in carrying out His word is but the reflection of the delay within us in our preparedness to accept His Word of words.”<sup>357</sup> The explanations for why Baba would make arrangements to speak and then not fulfill his

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<sup>351</sup> “Newspaper Articles - America,” Meher Baba’s Life and Travels, accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.meherbabatravels.com/newspaper-mag-articles/america/>.

<sup>352</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 412.

<sup>353</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 412.

<sup>354</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 412-13.

<sup>355</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 433.

<sup>356</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*.

<sup>357</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 53.

promise range anywhere from “a God acts in ways that humans cannot grasp” to human failure in preparing themselves to receive the Word.

Regardless of the reasons why the Word was not delivered, Baba’s behavior exhausted the disciples. Purdom states:

He allows them to think what pleases them, makes promises—or allows them to be made in his name—and disappoints those who are led to expect something or other at some time or other; so that they are made to feel let down, even deceived... Thus Baba seems to abuse the faith of his disciples, while exhorting them to hold on to his *daaman*<sup>358</sup>, and warning them in the strongest terms that they will leave him.<sup>359</sup>

Purdom explains that Baba’s unpredictable behavior was not easy for his *mandali* to accommodate, and people reacted to Baba’s capricious behavior in different ways. Some devotees felt deceived and left Baba, some bore the suffering quietly, and some offered “active antagonism.”<sup>360</sup> However, everyone who associated with Baba received shocks sooner or later.<sup>361</sup> The shocks, I suppose, are part and parcel of consorting with an avatar.

In stark contradiction to popular belief that Baba died without speaking the promised Word, some followers believe that Baba did utter the Word at the moment when he dropped his earthly body. “There are many followers who believe that Baba did in his own way ‘break the silence,’ either shortly before or at the moment when he laid down his earthly life. They believe this because they experience his presence even more closely

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<sup>358</sup> Hem of the garment, which is a metaphor of holding fast to one’s spiritual leader.

<sup>359</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 434.

<sup>360</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

<sup>361</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*.

today than they did while he was still on earth.”<sup>362</sup> Eruch Jessawala, one of Baba’s closest disciples, states,

He seems to have come into their hearts more forcefully than ever before. They feel His presence without seeming Him, and I can quite believe that, because I too feel that way. Although I miss Him, I feel His presence without seeing Him—the same as when Baba used to send me away on some errand, He being where he was.<sup>363</sup>

Some disciples feel Baba’s presence even stronger in death than when they interacted with him, which for them means that the Word was spoken. There is even an account of Eruch Jessawala stating that Baba uttered the oceanic sound—*mmmmm*—right before passing away, and Baba even said, “*Yad rakh*” (remember this) the day before his passing.<sup>364</sup> *Yad rakh* was not supposed to be the special word but simply an expression to indicate that Baba could still speak.<sup>365</sup> There were rumors that Baba had become mute because of his extended silence. Therefore, Baba said “*yad rakh*” to dispel rumors of his muteness and demonstrate his ability to utter the Word. The mystery lives on: did Baba speak, or did he die silent? Tom and Dorothy Hopkinson suggest, “Perhaps every Avatar leaves a mystery for man to think over. Buddha left a mystery in the manner of his death. Jesus left the mystery of his Second Coming...Meher Baba left the mystery of his long silence and his seemingly Unspoken Word.”<sup>366</sup> Purdom states, “How many of his nearest really understand

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<sup>362</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 53.

<sup>363</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 53–54.

<sup>364</sup> See <http://www.meherbabamanifesting.com/did-he-speak/did-he-utter-the-word/> and <http://www.meherbabamanifesting.com/did-he-speak/yad-rakh/>.

<sup>365</sup> See <http://www.meherbabamanifesting.com/did-he-speak/yad-rakh/>.

<sup>366</sup> Hopkinson and Hopkinson, *Much Silence*, 54.

what he is doing by his silence, seclusions, and his extraordinary methods? He is a mystery to all.”<sup>367</sup> Baba seems to have maximized the mystery factor of rhetorical silence.

### **Mysterious Silence**

My analysis of Meher Baba’s silence reveals four themes. First, when investigating the nature of his silence, I discovered that Baba’s silence was intimate rather than distancing or alienating. Baba maintained a close bond with his *mandali*, but the combination of silence with breath and communication via gestures commanded full attention from all the visitors. Second, Baba subverted the image of a teaching God and presented an alternate image of a silent God. Baba’s purpose was to awaken people to God-consciousness, so he stayed silent instead of giving people new teachings that they would fail to follow. A silent God serves humanity through selfless deeds and appeals to his devotees’ hearts to make them more god-like. Third, Baba acquired mythic attributes because he gave up control over his message and became comfortable with interpretations of his message. Lack of direct authorship allowed Baba to escape the limitations of a textual space. Additionally, silence allowed Baba to transcend the limitations of time. Speech is temporal whereas silence is timeless, and, by employing silence, Baba became dissociated from finitude. Finally, the mystery of the Word—whether it was uttered or not—performed a specific function: it not only heightened interest in Baba’s silence but kept the followers in a state of suspense that appears unresolved even after his death.

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<sup>367</sup> Purdom, *God-Man*, 434.

The four elements of rhetorical silence—discoursing in the mode of silence, bookending silence with speech, kindling a mystery, and disrupting norms—gather in Baba’s silence. Baba engaged in discourse without forming words with his breath or marking paper. Instead, he disseminated his silence all over the world. When Baba first acquired silence, he informed his *mandali* about it. So there was a clear preface to Baba’s silence but no public epilogue. The incomplete bookending left his devotees hungry for catharsis. Ghazala Khan explained her silence after the fact, and Baba explained his silence on the front end. The Day of Silence participants close the speech-silence loop but leave no room for mystery. An incomplete speech-silence loop produces a mystery that captivates the audience, but the rhetor gives up control over the message. Baba struck the speech-silence balance remarkably well. By prefacing his silence with speech, he reassured his *mandali* that his silence was intentional. By promising an epic end to the silence, he kept his followers mesmerized. By using the alphabet board and gestures, he was able to put forth relatively stable messages. Finally, he diluted the discomfort of subversion by validating all faiths. In Baba’s silence, the potency of an intentional and strategic silence is quite evident. More discussion of the genre of rhetorical silence will follow in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### Rhetorical Silence: An Emerging Genre

My dissertation asked if a genre of rhetorical silence is emerging as a response to message saturation in digital cultures. I defined rhetorical silence as an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence people. To answer the dissertation question, I analyzed three case studies drawn from three areas of public discourse: Ghazala Khan from the area of political communication or public address, Day of Silence from the realm of social movement campaigns, and Meher Baba from the area of spiritual communication. These case studies were chosen because they met my tentative definition of rhetorical silence. The goal of genre studies is not to simply classify but to understand a culture through its textual products. By studying similarities across texts, a genre scholar can comment not only on the characteristics of a culture but also recommend strategies that have the most persuasive potential. The goal of my study is to understand how social change can occur in digitalized cultures.

By studying the silences of Ghazala Khan, the student-participants, and Meher Baba, I discovered that some elements recur to form a genre of rhetorical silence and that the generic characteristics are bound by an internal logic. The genre also has certain limitations, which can be minimized by an artful application of the generic elements. My study is significant because it locates the vulnerabilities of the digital order and reveals that the dominance of digital communication can be disrupted to engage the demands of

corporeal bodies. In this final chapter, I first summarize the three case studies and then discuss the characteristics and limitations of the genre of rhetorical silence.

Before I summarize the individual case studies, let me reiterate the probes that I applied to each case study:

Probe 1: How is silence maintained and broken by the rhetors?

Probe 2: What is the significance of the length of the silence?

Probe 3: In the absence of substance, what are the meanings attributed to the silence?

Probe 4: What is the connection between the intent of the rhetor and the effect of the discourse?

Probe 5: What are the reactions of the audience when they are delivered silence instead of speech?

Probe 6: Are there situational similarities that bring the silence into existence?

Probe 7: Over which aspects of the rhetor's style does the struggle of meaning take place?

Applying the probes to the case studies led to discoveries that I organized as themes in each substantive chapter.

### **Ghazala Khan's Silence: From Oppression to Subversion**

My first case study was Ghazala Khan's silence at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Analyzing Ghazala Khan's silence yielded three themes: layers of meaning (first-person, missing second-person, and third-person), stylized subversion, and an

uncodeable and indigestible excess that disrupted the consumptive behavior of audiences. First, several meanings were attributed to Ghazala's silence at the convention. In post-convention interviews, Ghazala explained that she was silent at the convention because she was still grieving for her son, who died while protecting his men on a tour of duty in Iraq. Ghazala's composure was fragile because she and her husband, Khizr, were scheduled to be on stage immediately after a tribute to their son. Instead of falling apart in front of a national audience, Ghazala elected to maintain a dignified posture in silence. However, Donald Trump, the nominee of the Republican Party for the 2016 presidential election, insinuated that Ghazala was silent at the convention because her Islamic faith did not allow her to speak. Trump's disdain for her as a subject was evident in his failure to address her directly. Instead of addressing his remarks to her, he referred to her in the third person as Khizr's wife. Trump was operating on the assumption that Ghazala would be unable to produce the speech that he was demanding, which would recast her husband as a villain rather than as the hero of the Democratic Party. But, Trump's subversive attempt failed when Ghazala wrote an op-ed piece explaining her position and expressed herself in televised interviews. Moreover, since Trump's attack on Ghazala was indirect, many Muslim women answered Trump via a Twitter campaign with the hashtag #CanYouHearUsNow. Thus, Trump's attempt to discredit Ghazala and Khizr Khan failed at both personal and general levels.

The second theme emerged from examining Ghazala's convention outfit, which did not conform to stereotypes of either liberated or oppressed women. Ghazala's silence at the convention was more complex than the silent grieving mother narrative. In interviews,

Ghazala revealed that she never planned to speak. The decision to remain silent was not made in a moment of grief triggered by the Democratic Party's tribute to her son but was premeditated. Even though Ghazala was aware that she would be too emotional to speak, she decided to make an appearance wearing the traditional outfit of Pakistani women. She wore a *shalwar/kameez/dupatta* combination that signaled a South Asian rather an Islamic identity. Ghazala's outfit subverted both Western and Islamic norms of appropriate attire for women and announced her presence on a scene that mostly views women as either liberated Western women or oppressed Muslim women.

Finally, Ghazala's silence at the convention was an uncodeable and indigestible excess that stalled the consumption cycle. Although Ghazala did not want to perform a grief spectacle in front of a national audience, the public craved a spectacle and did not rest until she had delivered one. Ghazala's silent appearance at the convention was an uncodeable excess that could not be packaged as a sound bite, a video clip, or a meme for efficient distribution through mass communication channels. According to the logic of speed and efficiency that drives digital communication, her silent performance should have been discarded as an excess that cannot be reproduced and consumed. Instead, Ghazala's silence became the focal point of news stories for several days. A clamor for her speech arose because her silence at the convention temporarily stalled mass consumption of data bytes. The public could not efficiently and speedily put her in the known categories of a liberated Western woman or an oppressed Muslim woman. Without a grief spectacle, she could not be reduced, reproduced, consumed, and defecated. Her silent appearance caused discomfort because it stalled the consumption cycle. In physiological terms, her silence can

be understood as causing indigestion in the audience. Mass public indigestion led to a clamor for a spectacle. When Ghazala cried in interviews and publicly voiced her grief, she restarted the consumption cycle and cured the American people of their indigestion, but this forced choice robbed Ghazala of her agency. Her most authentic choice was to remain silent, but she was compelled to speak in order to dispel the notion that her husband or her faith kept her silent.

Ghazala's brief silence taught us that spectacular reality can be disturbed in an unexpected way. Some writers have argued that electronic systems can be destabilized by corrupting data or passing counterfeit data so that digital information becomes unreliable.<sup>368</sup> But altering data could be considered a criminal activity. Fortunately, the choice is not between criminal resistance or no resistance. Instead of giving up the fight, we need to find new ways of destabilizing digital reality. I argued that the silence of a corporeal body disrupts the digital order because it resists reproduction. Since there was nothing to reproduce and consume in Ghazala's silence, she cracked the supposedly invincible layer of digital reality. The corporeal body demanded and received a physiological response. The disruption caused by Ghazala's silence taught us that consumption is not an inevitable choice and that we can respond in human and humane ways that the machine cannot compute.

Ghazala's silence was intentional and strategic, but, because Ghazala did not explain the reasons for her silence beforehand, she was not able to constrain her message.

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<sup>368</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*.

Trump and his supporters provided a vitriolic interpretation of her silence, which forced her into speaking. When Ghazala explained the meaning of her silence, she regained control of her narrative. This cycle led me to the conclusion that silence must have a worded preface or an epilogue. Although speech gives meaning to silence, the suddenness of rhetorical silence creates a disruption. The public was not prepared to receive Ghazala's silence, which triggered a desire to know the meaning of her silence. Once the mystery was resolved, Ghazala was allowed to retreat from public scrutiny. Therefore, the mystery created by an unexpected silence needs to be artfully balanced with explanations. Explanations can limit meaning but can also cause the audience to lose interest. Too much mystery can result in audiences constructing idiosyncratic or even malicious interpretations. A savvy rhetor would balance the mystery factor with message construction. Sustaining a mystery is crucial in digital cultures that are saturated with messages. Under conditions of fierce competition for audience interest, a shrewd rhetor would realize that she cannot afford to dilute the mystery element that captivates an audience.

### **Day of Silence: From Information Overload to Social Change**

My second case study was the social movement campaign called Day of Silence, in which student-participants take a vow of silence for one day to highlight the bullying of LGBTQ youth in schools. Applying the probes to the Day of Silence campaign led to four themes: meanings attributed to the silence of the students, unintended consequences of staying silent, a forced emesis of signs, and silence being a fitting response for bringing

about social change in message-saturated cultures. GLSEN, the organization that sponsors the Day of Silence, explains its rationale and goals on its website. The rationale is that silence is a way to simulate the experience of marginalization for the allies and take possession of the instrument of oppression. The goal is to bring attention to the problem of bullying of LGBTQ youth in schools and to create opportunities for reflection and dialogue. The student-participants add their own voices to the goals articulated by GLSEN. In blog posts and essays, they explain that an intentional silence raises awareness of the forced silence, allows participants to reflect on their journey, validates those who are routinely erased from public discourses, upsets the norms of both politeness and protest, produces physiological effects that mimic the experience of being silenced, and creates conditions in which the silenced have a chance to be heard. Although the students highlight the positive impact of the silent strategy, an ethnographic study found that the strategy can also lead to undesirable consequences.

The unintended consequences of silence on the Day are increased bullying due to hyper visibility, missed opportunities for dialogue, and disciplining from school officials. Some student-participants report an increase in harassment on the Day. Since the students have taken a vow of silence, they are unable to defend themselves or ask for help. Although it is disheartening for the student-participants to be bullied rather than supported on the Day, such experiences are not unique to silent protests. Protest entails risk, and it is difficult to subtract the chance of hateful rhetoric and physical violence from activism, regardless of whether the protest takes the form of speech or silence. Another unintended consequence of the silent strategy is missed opportunities for dialogue. Occasionally, opposing groups

hold counter protests on the same day, and they play music, sing songs, and talk to their peers about their organization. But the silent students cannot engage with their peers over this noise, which obliterates their presence. Although a vow of silence complicates the possibility of dialogic encounters, the dialogue need not take place on the same day as the Day of Silence. Indeed, the fact that there are counter-protests indicates that a dialogue has already been sparked. The third undesirable consequence of silence on the Day is that the student-participants experience disciplinary actions enforced by school officials. Teachers can legally demand speech from students during instructional time, which raises the question of why students are required to emit signs.

Speech is demanded from the student-participants because their silence registers as dissent rather than as passivity. The disruption caused by the silent students on the Day is intentional rather than accidental, which is evident in the verbs employed. Participants use verbs like rebel, wield, disrupt, control, and reclaim, which reveal their subversive motives. The silence of the students is seen by school officials as a protest; therefore, students are required to speak during instructional time. The involuntary emission of signs leaves bodies weak, and weak bodies are easier to control. The demand for speech from the student-participants is different from the demand that Ghazala faced. The American public had already swallowed Ghazala's silence before we were aware that it was indigestible, and we demanded a grief spectacle in order to treat the indigestion. However, the Day of Silence does not entail a sudden, involuntary swallowing of silence. The Day is an annual, national campaign, and its goals are clearly articulated. Schools are equally prepared to prevent the involuntary swallowing of silence. Schools reserve the right to ask students to vomit signs

so that the discomfort is felt only by the student-participants. Word preserves order and keeps school-aged bodies docile.

Silent campaigns are powerful because the form does not appear to be consistent with social movements. Typically, campaigns are composed of noise: speeches, chants, slogans, songs, signs, and music. These elements come together in a predictable manner that makes make an event recognizable as a social movement campaign. However, silent protests are occurring in the age of digital communication, which has modified the available means of persuasion. One of the downsides of technology is information overload. Information has become so abundant and contradictory that it is deterring rational and efficient decision-making. Under such conditions, silence can persuade people by offering space for reflection and consideration of differing perspectives. Silent protests disrupt the aesthetics of efficiency and speed that drive digital communication. By operating outside of algorithmic logic, rhetorical silence invites people to slow down, reflect, and understand to create a more inclusive society. The machine is neither human or humane, but people have the potential to be both.

From analyzing the Day of Silence, I realized that rhetorical silence and nonviolence are two distinct genres even though they may share the same goals. Three characteristics of rhetorical silence emerge from studying the Day: bookending of silence with speech, balancing the intended message with the intrigue created by the silence, and the subversive potential of rhetorical silence. The Day of Silence case study shows that rhetorical silence can be bookended by speech to make the meaning of silence clear. Ghazala Khan did not preface her silence with speech and was therefore unable to contain

the meaning of her silence. On the other hand, the student-participants bookend their vow of silence with speech and therefore are able to restrict the meaning of their silence. The second characteristic of rhetorical silence is that rhetors have to balance the mystery created by their silence with the message they want to disseminate. When rhetors attempt to limit the meaning of their silence too much, they lose audience interest. The students participating in the Day are successful in limiting their message, but they appear not to be benefitting from the mystery created by the silence. On the other hand, Ghazala's silence led to much audience interest, but she lost control of the message until she explained her silence in interviews. Once she spoke, the mystery of her silence was resolved, and she disappeared from public discourse. An audience needs to be primed to receive the silence, but too much explanation can leave an audience bored or prepared to make counter moves. Finally, the logic that binds the generic elements together is subversion of society's calcified norms. Students participating in the Day attempt to subvert a heteronormative curriculum, and Ghazala Khan was subverting stereotypes of Muslim women. Although the two subversions appear to be different, the common element underlying both is the disruption of the principles of speed and efficiency, which underlie technological communication. Silent activists attempt to reduce our data consumption so that we might encounter alterity and respond ethically. The situation is new, and, therefore, the response is new as well.

## **Meher Baba: From Man to Myth**

My final case study is Meher Baba—an Indian guru who stayed silent for forty-four years in order to awaken humanity to God’s presence. Analyzing Meher Baba’s silence led to four themes: the intimate nature of Baba’s silence, meanings attributed to Baba’s silence (by himself and by his followers), the attribution of mythic properties to a Modern man, and the mystery of the promised word. Baba’s silence has been described by his followers as intimate rather than as stony or distancing. Baba was able to maintain intimacy with his *mandali* because he communicated with an alphabet board at first and with gestures later. Even casual visitors would give Baba’s silence their full attention in order to comprehend his message.

Baba’s silence subverted the image of a teaching, talking God and crafted a new image of a silent God. Baba explained that human beings have ignored God’s teachings throughout history and mocked God by waging wars in His name. Therefore, in the form of Meher Baba, God stayed silent with the hope that silence would do the job where words have failed. From Baba’s messages and actions, four characteristics of a silent God can be construed. A silent God talks to people without uttering words, God’s message can seem contradictory or ambiguous because of translation from divine language into human language, God labors to serve the unfortunate rather than give sermons, and God appeals to people’s hearts rather than their minds to awaken their slumbering consciousnesses.

Although Baba explained his silence in terms of awakening, one of Baba’s followers, C. B. Purdom, suggests that Baba kept silent because he wanted to be interpreted, not documented. Rather than ensuring accuracy through documentation, Baba

was comfortable with the variations associated with the medium of interpretation. Regardless of whether Baba “dictated” his discourse through an alphabet board or gestures, the final version carried the inflections of the interpreters. However, Baba appeared undisturbed by the lack of control over his message. I argued that by sacrificing accuracy, Baba was able to gain a mythic status.

Rhetorical silence transformed Baba into a myth. Using Bascom’s criteria of myths, my analysis showed that Baba gained mythic attributes because of his silence. Baba provided a cosmogony, which is taken by his followers to be a true account of how and why the world was created and how it will end. More significantly, mythic qualities were attributed to Baba because there is no text in which he can be permanently fixed. Since Baba communicated through the medium of interpretation there is no primary text that bears his signature. Like Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, all people have is the disciples’ accounts of what Baba said. Moreover, Baba’s silence permitted him to escape the restraints of time—no easy feat for a Modern man. Speech is temporal whereas silence is infinite and atemporal. In Baba’s silence, time got absorbed so that he did not belong to the past or to the present but to a position outside of time. Thus, Baba became a mythical figure for his followers.

Finally, Baba’s capricious behavior regarding his utterance that would alter the consciousness of the universe kept his followers in a tense state of suspense that remains even after his death. Many times Baba promised that he would utter the word, but he would rescind at the last minute. His capricious behavior was not easy for his *mandali* to live with, so they rationalized it in different ways. However, most agree that Baba passed away

without speaking the Word that was supposed to have the effect of a thousand atom bombs. There are some who believe that Baba did speak before dropping his earthly body because they feel his presence more than before. Regardless of which account one believes, it seems that Baba passed away without providing a catharsis for the mystery that his silence created. Baba seems to have maximized the mystery factor of rhetorical silence.

From analyzing Baba's silence, I learned that an incomplete loop of speech and silence heightens audience interest. Baba announced to his *mandali* that he would commence his silence on July 10, 1925. A clear preface to his silence exists but no decisive epilogue. The incomplete loop left his followers hungry for catharsis. Similar to Baba, Ghazala Khan also presented the public with an incomplete loop. Her comments post-convention provided an epilogue to her silence, but the missing preface created an incomplete bookending. On the other hand, the student-participants close the speech-silence loop. There is no room for mystery, as audiences are familiar with the Day of Silence campaign. A complete loop limits the message but does not captivate the audience. An incomplete loop produces a captivating mystery, but the rhetor loses control of the message. Baba appears to have struck an artful balance between restricting the message and maintaining a mystery. He prefaced his silence with speech and promised an epic end to his silence—one he ultimately did not deliver. Since he communicated with an alphabet board and gestures for the duration of his silence, he was able to retain control over his message. In Baba's silence, the characteristics of rhetorical silence were artfully balanced.

## **Generic Characteristics of Rhetorical Silence**

The case studies suggest that there are six characteristics of the rhetorical silence genre: (a) rhetorical silence is employed to oppose calcified norms, (b) rhetorical silence invites reflection, (c) rhetorical silence interrupts the production-consumption cycle, (d) rhetorical silence subverts the aesthetics of speech and efficiency, (e) the rhetor is able to limit the message by bookending silence with speech, and (f) the form evokes interest in decoding the mystery created by the silence.

### **OPPOSES NORMS**

Rhetorical silence—an intentional and strategic use of silence—is typically employed to oppose calcified norms of society. Ghazala Khan’s silent appearance at the convention subverted the stereotype of an oppressed Muslim woman who is absent from the public sphere. Just like one’s speech can say more than what one intended, silence can also signify meanings that go beyond the rhetor’s intentions. Ghazala explained in post-convention interviews that she was silent because she was still grieving for her son; however, her presence at the convention signified a meaning greater than that of a grieving mother. Ghazala signaled a South Asian identity that is neither Islamic nor Western but represents an alternate identity that embraces the modesty taught by Islam while remaining a political subject. On the Day of Silence, student-participants take a vow of silence to oppose the sexuality and gender norms of society that not only exclude LGBTQ youth from full participation but also make them targets for bullies. Meher Baba toppled the traditional image of a teaching/talking God and presented an image of a silent God who serves instead

of giving sermons. In each case study, the rhetors are opposing norms, which is why rhetorical silence is not a form of passivity but a form of resistance.

### **INVITES REFLECTION**

The case studies show that the goal of rhetorical silence is to invite reflection rather than to propose a specific policy or a bill. Ghazala's silence invited us to rethink the relationship between a woman's attire and her oppression or liberation. Western audiences often see a veil or a hijab as a sign of oppression and Western clothing as a symbol of liberation or female empowerment. Since Ghazala's outfit did not fall into common categories, it invited us to reflect on Western biases in clothing. When the student-participants stay silent on the Day, they are hoping that their silence will spark internal reflection in audiences. The goal is to instigate a change in the culture of bullying that is so prevalent in schools and to encourage students to respond humanely to differing perspectives. Meher Baba's silence was an invitation to move toward a higher form of consciousness so that people would turn toward fellow human beings with love and compassion rather than with cruelty. The silences of Ghazala Khan, the student-participants, and Meher Baba are invitations to change habits of thinking and acting that are detrimental to the overarching goals of equality, self-determination, and global peace. Instead of proposing legislation, rhetorical silence aims to change attitudes.

### **STALLS THE PRODUCTION-CONSUMPTION CYCLE**

In the genre of rhetorical silence, reflection is sparked by stalling the production-consumption cycle—a prominent feature of capitalist societies. Capitalist societies depend

on a continuous chain of commodity production and consumption, so most human labor is marketed in consumable units, such as a superhero film or tube of toothpaste. In contemporary cultures, the notion of a product has expanded to include digital items such as a firewall or a YouTube video. The production-consumption cycle stalls when humans produce something that cannot be packaged and consumed efficiently. In such cases, attempts are made to transform the something into a commodity. Ghazala's silence at the convention was not a good that could be easily packaged as a news commodity. There was nothing in her silence that could be bought and sold: no sound bites, no video clips, no iconic images. Her silence stalled the production-consumption cycle, and, therefore, a grief spectacle was demanded from her. A grief spectacle can be reduced to images, sound bites, memes, video clips, and quotes. Ghazala's grief spectacle restarted the production-consumption cycle that had been stalled by her silence. The student-participants also stall the cycle with their refusal to speak on the Day. Education is a commodity that depends on students producing signs demonstrating that sufficient information has been consumed to earn a high-value product, such as a high school diploma. Any interruption of this process is considered undesirable, so school officials have been given the authority to restart the production-consumption cycle by requiring student-participants to speak during instructional time. Meher Baba's silence also defied commodification. Most religious organizations participate in the production-consumption cycle by encouraging a stylized identity. Goods can range from specific clothing that signifies a religious affiliation to prayer books to a bake sale to a yoga mat. Baba's silence sold nothing, and Baba and his *mandali* lived an ascetic life of service to the poor. Essentially, rhetorical silence is the

antithesis of capitalism because it thwarts consumption—the backbone of capitalist societies. Noise facilitates an exchange of commodities, whereas silence invites an inward reflection.

#### **SUBVERTS THE AESTHETICS OF SPEED AND EFFICIENCY**

Rhetorical silence not only halts consumption but also subverts the aesthetics of speed and efficiency that drive digital communication. I will first explain the subversion caused by rhetorical silence with the metaphor of a viral infection and then describe why such an infection/subversion is necessary. The subversive potential of rhetorical silence can be conceptualized with the metaphor of a virus, electronic or biological. When a virus strain is new or unexpected, the existing defenses are not substantive enough to block the attack, and the host becomes infected. However, once the strain is documented, anti-viral measures are sufficient to overcome the virus or localize the damage. Imagine rhetorical silence as a virus that disrupts the calcified norms of society that exist not only in humans but also in human products such as websites and search engines. When the subversion is new and sudden, it succeeds in causing a disruption. But, when the subversion becomes known, it loses its power to disrupt. In Ghazala Khan's case, the silence came upon us suddenly and unexpectedly, and the public had very few defenses against it. Her silence caused discomfort because it could not pass through the system without changing us or itself. When Ghazala consented to speak, the infection of the public body was cured. In the case of Day of Silence, the subversion is a known entity because it is a national, annual event. Since the student-participants are well prepared, school officials are also prepared

to counter the subversion. In terms of the virus metaphor, the body has been inoculated to the silence of the student-participants and responds quickly to neutralize the virus. Meher Baba's silence was not as sudden as Ghazala's silence. People in the US had heard of the silent mystic and were already immunized against a sudden viral attack. However, Baba's silence was unusually long, which made it difficult to neutralize efficiently. Moreover, Baba's subversion was not caustic, so the public did not feel ill. Baba did not denounce any religion; instead, he showed respect for all faiths. Baba did not teach anything controversial; rather, he asked his devotees to follow their faiths closely and to serve humanity with love and compassion. The lack of a defensive reaction allowed Baba's virus (subversion) to continue for a long time.

While the machine operates on the aesthetics of speed and efficiency, humans generally hold a complex set of values for making decisions they consider to be right or ethical. In the film *I, Robot*, a robot rescues a Chicago police detective instead of a child because the robot calculates that the detective has a 45% chance of surviving, whereas the child has only an 11% chance.<sup>369</sup> The detective mistrusts the robot because its decision was based on probability of survival. By contrast, a human would have placed more value on the life of a child. This example shows that people can make value-based decisions on factors that go beyond machine aesthetics. Machine aesthetics are the antithesis of human aesthetics. When a body is infected with a virus, it needs to rest so it can get better. Similarly, when rhetorical silence invades the body, it invites a slowdown so that we may

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<sup>369</sup> *I, Robot*, directed by Alex Proyas (2004; Westwood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox), DVD.

respond humanely to difference. Rhetorical silence invites people to slow down, encounter the body of the silent one, reflect on differing perspectives, and respond in ethical ways. These processes are messy and take time, but they allow us to evaluate our decisions for ethical soundness. While the machine is neither human or humane, people have the potential to be both.

The aesthetics of the machine also influence what we consider knowledge. Since the digital machine has become ubiquitous, knowledge and wisdom have been reduced to information that can be accessed through search engines. If knowledge cannot be translated into computer language, it loses its value because people cannot access it. Given the logic of speed and efficiency, rhetorical silence should be discarded as a waste product because there is no text to convert into data bytes. However, rhetorical silence gets a reaction from people because it is an embodied phenomenon. Information can exist without a body, but silence inserts the body back into the world in order to remind us that the physical world is not coterminous with the virtual world. Rhetorical silence opens up avenues for knowing and learning as embodied phenomena rather than bodiless processes.

The subversion of the machine aesthetic is the binding element of the genre of rhetorical silence. The situation is that we live in message-saturated societies. To be heard, people have to invent communicative forms that do not entail adding to the information chaos. Rhetorical silence has become a persuasive communicative form because it operates outside the logic of digital communication. It slows down time, disrupts virtual reality, invites us to encounter the corporeal body, and triggers the ethical impulse. Silence has always been a resource for people, but it has now acquired persuasive potential and generic

characteristics. Genres develop because people tend to respond to similar situations in similar ways. The contemporary situation is that there are more messages than there are people, and our devices have advanced filters for blocking out uncomfortable perspectives on digital platforms. However, there is no filter for rhetorical silence, as it has no data. And therein lies the value of the genre of rhetorical silence. Rhetorical silence invites us to step outside of our echo chambers and filter bubbles to engage difference.

### **BOOKENDING SILENCE WITH SPEECH**

Speech and silence share a symbiotic relationship in the genre of rhetorical silence. Silence creates an opportunity for discourse to occur. At the same time, the silence of the rhetor would be too ambiguous if not explained in words. Because silence can have polysemic propositional content, a spoken or written explanation is needed to decipher the silence. The case studies suggest that meaning is best limited when rhetors bookend their silence with speech. The student-participants preface their vow of silence with much speech: they obtain permission from school administration, inform their teachers about the Day, hang posters, distribute flyers, and make/buy T-shirts to wear on the Day. Their preparation indicates that the silence is intentional and strategic. Once the school day ends, the student-participants get together for a “break the silence” moment where they share their experiences of keeping silent and strategize for the future. The silence of the student-participants is bookended by speech so that the reasons for the silence can be publicly understood. When silence has a worded preface and epilogue, rhetors are able to contain their message and influence their audience.

In the other two case studies (Ghazala Khan and Meher Baba), the bookending was incomplete. Ghazala Khan's silence did not have a preface. At no point was the public aware that Ghazala was going to make a silent appearance at the convention. Although Ghazala's silence did not have a preface, it did have an epilogue. Post-convention, Ghazala explained her silence in interviews and an op-ed piece to satisfy public curiosity. My research shows that Ghazala had difficulty limiting her message because she did not complete the speech-silence loop. However, the incomplete loop aroused public interest in her silence. Meher Baba's bookending was the opposite of Ghazala Khan's. Baba prefaced his silence with an announcement to his *mandali*, but there was no conclusive end to his silence even though he had promised an apocalyptic epilogue. Like Ghazala, Baba's bookending was incomplete. Unlike Ghazala, Baba seems to have delivered fairly stable meanings of his silence. Baba's silence generated consistent meanings because his followers provided interpretations of his silence. The case studies led me to conclude that silence by itself is too ambiguous to be rhetorically effective. A rhetorical silence needs some explanation in order to influence minds. Meaning can be restricted most effectively when silence is bookended by speech. Alternately, allies can provide interpretations during a lengthy silence to retain control of the message. Rhetorical silence is not intrapersonal rhetoric but a category of public discourse. People give and receive access to the silence through speech.

## **THE MYSTERY FACTOR**

Rhetorical silence evokes a desire in the audience to seek out the author's meaning. Ghazala's silence at the convention created a frenzy to decode the mystery of her silence. The public wanted to hear in her own words why she stood silent on the convention stage while her husband delivered a blistering critique. To satisfy public curiosity, Ghazala appeared on national television several times and performed a worded, teary spectacle. Similarly, Baba's 44-year silence became a global phenomenon. The reasons for Baba's silence had already been communicated by his disciples, but people still longed to hear his voice—especially since he had promised that his Word would alter the consciousness of the universe. However, by most accounts, he seems to have passed away without delivering the promised apocalyptic change. Since he did not provide a catharsis for the mystery that his silence created, he left his followers in a state of suspense that appears unresolved even after his death. On the other hand, the silence of the student-participants does not lead to a public clamor for speech. Since the strategy has been thoroughly explained, there is no mystery to decode in the silence of the student-participants. The case studies suggest that an incomplete speech-silence loop creates a mystery that draws the audience into the cause. Although bookending silence with speech limits the meaning of the silence, it leaves no room for the mystery element. A mystery not only captivates an audience but can even create an audience. Therefore, the rhetorical potential of intrigue cannot be ignored in digital cultures that are saturated with messages.

In addition to incomplete bookending, the length of the silence also influences audience interest. Ghazala's silence lasted for only six minutes and three seconds, but,

because her silence was not prefaced with speech, it created a mystery that kept the news cycle busy for several days. The student-participants keep silent for the entire school day (approximately seven hours), but, because the message is already well-known, it does not captivate or create an audience. Baba's silence lasted for forty-four years. Although Baba prefaced his silence with an announcement and his *mandali* explained the meaning of his silence, the mystery was sustained by the length of the silence. A savvy rhetor will artfully balance message construction with the mystery factor in order to influence her audience.

In sum, rhetorical silence—an intentional and strategic use of silence—has six generic characteristics. First, rhetorical silence is employed in opposition to calcified norms of society. Second, rhetorical silence invites reflection and attitude change rather than policy change. Third, rhetorical silence stalls the production-consumption cycle because it is not a commodity with an exchange value. Fourth, rhetorical silence subverts the aesthetics of speed and efficiency on which the digital machine depends (controlling element). By inserting the body into public discourse, rhetorical silence invites ethical encounters and emphasizes embodied ways of knowing and learning. Fifth, rhetorical silence is often bookended with speech to limit meaning. Sixth, rhetorical silence can captivate an audience by evoking a desire to know the meaning of the silence. When these six characteristics occur together, we are looking at an instance of rhetorical silence.

## **Limitations of the Genre of Rhetorical Silence**

Like any genre, rhetorical silence has certain limitations. I have identified three: the threat of violence to the bodies of the silent ones, the possibility of erasure of the silent subjects from public discourse, and difficulty escalating the action.

### **THE THREAT OF VIOLENCE**

Speech can normalize and lubricate social interactions, whereas silence can make a person conspicuous and vulnerable. Ghazala Khan became hyper-visible because she kept silent at the podium. The students participating in the Day of Silence become conspicuous because they are silent. Student-participants are not only highly visible but also vulnerable to verbal attacks such as teasing and name-calling due to their silence. Meher Baba stood out from other saints and gurus because he held his silence for an extraordinary period of time. Although Baba earned much respect and devotion, he also had his share of critics who wrote that he was “suffering from colossal delusions about his own greatness.”<sup>370</sup> The silent ones become hyper visible and vulnerable because of their silence. But such vulnerability is not limited to the genre of rhetorical silence.

The threat of violence is not unique to the silent form of protest. Activists routinely put their bodies in the way of harm to make an unjust system more responsive to their needs: the suffragettes were arrested and force-fed in prison; the Civil Rights Movement activists had fire hoses and dogs turned on them; the Occupy Wall Street protesters were sprayed with tear gas; the Black Lives Matter proponents were met with police in riot gear.

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<sup>370</sup> Paul Brunton, *A Search in Secret India* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1970), 253.

Mark and Paul Engler explain that suffering not only fuels support for the cause but also mobilizes the allies.<sup>371</sup> They state, “When people decide to risk their safety or to face arrest, their decisions have the effect of mobilizing the communities closest to them.”<sup>372</sup> Suffering not only gives power to a cause but also deflects “negative reactions” from the public and turns “crackdowns” into an asset. The risk of personal harm is always present whether it is school bullies harassing a person who has taken a vow of silence or a white supremacist running over counter protestors in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>373</sup> Danger of violence—symbolic or physical—cannot be redacted from any effort that entails changing the status quo. Indeed, a cause draws power from the suffering of the activists, and those who embody rhetorical silence are no different.

#### **THE POSSIBILITY OF ERASURE**

Another generic limitation is the possibility of erasure of silent subjects from public discourse. Although there is no evidence of erasure in the case studies that my dissertation analyzed, erasure is plausible. Laura Brown’s research on the lunch counter sit-ins shows how a tactical decision to remain silent can erase people from history:

The women at Bennett College had begun planning the sit-ins on their own in the fall of 1959. However, AT&T students eventually became involved in the discussion, and the four men launched the demonstration early the next semester. News reports never correctly credited the Bennett students for their role in planning the sit-ins. Instead, the narrative began to solidify with claims that Khazan, McCain, McNeil, and Richmond came up with the idea during a bull session in their dormitory the night before the sit-ins began. Even as it became clear that the Bennett students’ leadership was to

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<sup>371</sup> Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 150.

<sup>372</sup> Engler and Engler, *This Is an Uprising*.

<sup>373</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html?mcubz=0>.

go unacknowledged at that time, the women did not speak publicly about the extent of their involvement, choosing instead to maintain a cohesive public image of the larger student group.”<sup>374</sup>

The women of Bennett College played a significant role in the ideation of the sit-ins, but the news media acknowledged only the four men who began the sit-ins at Woolworth’s and erased the contributions made by the Bennett women. Although such erasure can occur when silence is chosen, it is less likely when the silence is prefaced or epilogued by speech or amplified by allies.

#### **LACKS POTENTIAL FOR ESCALATION**

A movement relies not only on disruption and sacrifice but also on escalation. Mark and Paul Engler explain that protests explode when the element of escalation is added to disruption and sacrifice.<sup>375</sup> They state that “demonstrations are especially effective when they create a dilemma for those in power, producing situations in which any response the authorities choose helps the movement.”<sup>376</sup> However, rhetorical silence does not lend itself to escalation without risking erasure or loss of interest. Repeated occurrences of the same silence can dilute the mystery, as occurs with the annual Day of Silence campaign. And, Baba’s long silence led to a cult-like following rather than to the desired change in universal consciousness. If Ghazala makes another silent public appearance, I doubt it will have the effect of escalation. Therefore, a significant limitation of rhetorical silence is its inability to put increasing pressure on the officials to bring about the desired social change.

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<sup>374</sup> Laura Michael Brown, “Remembering Silence: Bennett College Women and the 1960 Greensboro Student Sit-Ins,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2017): 50.

<sup>375</sup> Engler and Engler, *This Is an Uprising*.

<sup>376</sup> Engler and Engler, *This Is an Uprising*, 156.

However, this limitation does not mean that the genre of silence is ineffective in influencing outcomes. If silence is not being heard, we need not only more silence but also more artful applications of that silence.

## Implications

As the world moves toward more advanced forms of technology, I anticipate that people will increasingly attempt to disrupt the monopoly of the machine with rhetorical silence. I do not mean to imply that rhetorical silence will supplant traditional methods of registering dissent. Rather, I posit that rhetorical silence—an intentional and strategic use of silence to influence—will gain recognition as an effective way of accomplishing social goals. For example, as I was writing this concluding chapter, Emma Gonzalez appeared on national television to speak at the March for Our Lives rally for gun control, and, once again, the public involuntarily swallowed an intentional and strategic silence. Emma, a high school senior at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, is a survivor of a school shooting that killed seventeen of her peers in six minutes and twenty seconds.<sup>377</sup> Since the incident at her school, Emma has spearheaded the #NeverAgain movement for gun control.<sup>378</sup> On March 24, 2018, Emma gave a speech at the nationwide rally, March for Our

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<sup>377</sup> Kyle Swenson and Samantha Schmidt, “‘I’m Not Really Shocked’: Florida High School Prepared for the Worst. Then It Happened,” *Washington Post*, last modified February 15, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/02/15/im-not-really-shocked-florida-high-school-prepared-for-the-worst-then-it-happened/?utm\\_term=.91f3fc75b34b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/02/15/im-not-really-shocked-florida-high-school-prepared-for-the-worst-then-it-happened/?utm_term=.91f3fc75b34b).

<sup>378</sup> Emily Witt, “How the Survivors of Parkland Began the Never Again Movement,” *New Yorker*, last modified February 19, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-survivors-of-parkland-began-the-never-again-movement>.

Lives, where she took the stage for approximately six and a half minutes.<sup>379</sup> Emma described the horror of the incident, named each student who was killed at her school, and then abruptly went silent mid-sentence. For approximately four and a half minutes, Emma stood silently at the podium, facing the audience with an unwavering gaze. Some people attempted to cheer Emma on by clapping, shouting “love you, Emma,” and chanting “never again,” but their chatter fizzled away in the heat of her silence. Some people in the crowd held up a V sign and some had tears streaming down their faces. A worker even came up on the stage and said something to her off-mic, but Emma maintained her stance. During the silence, her breath was ragged, which communicated the intense labor involved in keeping silent. Exactly six minutes and twenty seconds into the “speech,” a phone alarm that Emma had set went off, and she uttered three sentences to mark the end of her silence. Emma’s silence at the rally demonstrated the audibility and impact of rhetorical silence in crowded, word-filled environments. The genre of rhetorical silence has become a powerful resource for people who want to bring about social change in a world where the machine is overtaking our humanity. The digital order exists everywhere and all the time, but it is not invincible. It remains vulnerable to communicative forms of silence such as rhetorical silence. Rhetorical silence not only inserts the body back into the world but also expands human experiences beyond the digital.

My research shows that the body can communicate in ways that can upset the digital order. Like smell and touch, silence has an experiential component to it that is not easily

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<sup>379</sup> Michael Livingston, Jenny Jarvie, and Andrea Castillo, “‘Welcome to the Revolution’: In Tears, Silence and Anger, Thousands March Worldwide to Demand Action on Guns,” *Los Angeles Times*, last modified March 24, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-march-for-our-lives-20180324-story.html>.

transmittable via digital platforms. We can look at pictures of beautiful flowers, but a human body needs to encounter the body of a flower in order to smell its fragrance. We need the encounter not only to smell but also to differentiate between smells. After all, a rose not only looks far different from a jasmine but also smells different. The sense of touch needs an even closer encounter than the sense of smell. One has to touch a flower to feel its softness whereas smell can be experienced in proximity. Virtual reality attempts to overcome the barriers of smell and touch by hooking up a body to a machine that will stimulate a specific region of the brain to obtain the desired effect. However, the effect of rhetorical silence cannot be localized to a specific region in the brain. The goal of rhetorical silence is to invite reflection, simulate the experience of marginalization, trigger the ethical impulse, and rethink the norms of society. Such endeavors depend on bodies encountering the silence of other bodies. As the machine comes to dominate our lives, the body will attempt to obstruct the machine and bring reality back to the corporeal level.

The digital order reduces human experience to data bytes, but rhetorical silence expands human existence. One of the challenges of digital cultures is the reduction of human experiences to digital experiences. For example, we build communities by liking each other's Facebook posts, or we feel popular when we have a large number of followers on Instagram and Twitter, or we experience satisfaction by enhancing our images with Photoshop. Besides positive emotions, technology and social media are also connected to undesirable feelings such as isolation and dissatisfaction. The neglect of the body has consequences: we become unhealthy physically and psychologically when we live a life of thralldom to the machine. The body will (or must) fight back in order to thrive. Rhetorical

silence is one way to crack the seemingly impenetrable digital layer that suffocates the life out of us. By operating outside of computer logic, rhetorical silence invites us to encounter others and to respond in ethical ways to differences. Human knowledge exceeds what the code can represent. The body has ways of knowing, learning, and acting that the machine cannot compute. Rhetorical silence operates at the level of body logic rather than of machine logic and gives us a way to counter the overreach of the digital machine.

My study is significant for rhetorical theory because it locates a shift in the available means of persuasion. Means of persuasion change when the audience or the situation changes to the extent that previous means are no longer sufficient. For example, the advent of social media necessitated an online presence for politicians. It is no longer enough for politicians to make periodic public speeches. Rather, they tend to produce frequent messages in formats suitable for posting and sharing on social media platforms. However, now that our public agora is saturated with messages, silence is acquiring rhetorical potential. If words are being filtered by algorithms, then we need a form of persuasion that bypasses the algorithms. Social change requires a genuine public dialogue rather than engaging only with people in our filter bubbles. Filter bubbles avoid the discomfort of having to deal with differing people and perspectives. On the other hand, rhetorical silence does not prompt a retreat into individual camps. Since rhetorical silence is non-adversarial, it has the potential to pull people rather than to repel. My study shows that rhetorical silence is emerging as a way to construct and disseminate messages that address humans rather than their digital twins. Digital audiences respond to memes, video clips, and sound bites—forms of discourse that depend on reduction of complex issues so that the end result is more

entertaining than informative. Rhetorical silence thrusts the body into the agora to prevent digital reduction. Only humans can listen to rhetorical silence.

Arguments have always been the backbone of rhetoric, and we have advanced theories for constructing and analyzing arguments. But argumentative logic depends on the ability of words—spoken or written—to reach the public’s ears. Rhetorical silence creates a hush around the audience so that the words that were spoken immediately before and immediately after the silence acquire significance. It is not only the preface and the epilogue that are important, but the silence itself is rhetorical. This was recently demonstrated by Emma Gonzalez at the March for Our Lives Rally. Her silence not only represented but also amplified the silence of the dead so that they are not erased from the discourse on gun violence. Her silence invited us to reflect on lives just begun that will never live to complete their sentences or their stories. Rhetorical silence is not the absence of discourse, and it does not indicate the absence of a subject; rather, it has become a way of saying something that has the potential to resonate and to evoke physiological responses. It takes a human to listen to the silence of a human whereas the machine sees silence only as a gap to compress. Silence is an immense, unending resource, which can become rhetorical when it takes the form of an intentional and strategic silence.

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