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Of things not said: Silence and writing

Abstract:

Of things not said incorporates prose and theory, non-fiction and interpieces, in an ongoing dialogue about writing and an author's reflections on creating fiction. As a way of making sense of silence and of things not said this non-fiction essay looks at how a writer engages with silence when researching a person in their absence. The piece follows the author's own writing process from the initial proposal to write about her father's 'immigrant journey' (Hron 2009) and the difficulties of such a task as a result of past trauma and his death. Within the essay are interpieces of spoken and unspoken communications, of individual and familial memories which have been 'shared', 'corrected ... – and last not least, written down' (Assman cited in Hirsch 2008). Re-examining silence is an empowering tool for second-generation immigrants and writers to observe what is and cannot be expressed. Being able to mediate her father's silence and re-interpret 'what is unsaid' (Pinter 2003) this essay creates a space for creative thoughts to emerge in fiction.

Biographical note:

Suzanne Hermanoczi is an emerging writer of fiction and creative non-fiction. Presently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at The University of Melbourne, her research examines multi-cultural and immigrant texts exploring the themes of death and photography, memory and the familial traumascapes of home and place, and the topography of the immigrant's journey. Her fictional work-in-progress is a contemporary / historical novel and complements her doctoral research. Her creative works which feature people, place and identity, mixed code, bi-ethnicity and multiculturalism have appeared in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *The Hong Kong U Anthology* and *SWAMP An Online Journal*.

Keywords:

Silence – Immigrant – Death – Writing – Trauma – Non-fiction – Fiction

Of things not said

When I began writing about my father he was still alive. He was chronically ill with lung fatigue and advanced rheumatoid arthritis. Even though he had been a heavy chain smoker for most of his life, at this stage I was not aware of his lung cancer, however age and the effects of his combined illnesses had left him weak and in chronic pain. Housebound and unable to walk down a flight of stairs much less climb back up, the last couple of years of my father's life were spent confined to the family home in a state of health-inflicted house arrest. Although he was not able to go 'out' he still escaped 'outside' and spent a lot of his time in the final period of his life sitting alone on the verandah of our two storey house just looking out over the street.

When I first began writing, I knew I didn't just want to write, I *had* to. To quote Gerald Murnane, '[N]o one should write fiction unless he or she absolutely **had** to write it; unless he or she could not contemplate a life **without** the writing of fiction' ((*author's bold*) 2005, p. 184). I knew I '**had**' to write, particularly given what was happening to my father and being far from home at the time I knew I **needed** to write his story. But apart from a gut instinct urging me that I had to, I could not explain why. My father's life had always been something I'd wanted to explore and given his declining health I realised that there was not much time left to 'receive' or 'listen' to his testimony (Laub 1995, pp. 62-63) ¹. My father was a reserved man who was not one to talk. What I knew about his life was all second-hand information. This is what I knew about him: he was a first-generation immigrant; a Hungarian refugee, who as an 'unaccompanied teenager' had escaped alone across the border into Austria during the country's failed Revolution in 1956 (Kushner 1999, 253) ². Almost a decade after rebuilding his life in another country, he left Argentina and its increasing political unrest in the late 1960's accompanied by his wife (my mother), and finally settled for a quieter life in the Brisbane suburbs. When I first had the idea to write his life's story, I thought I would re-trace his 'immigrant journey' to find out about his 'departure, passage, and ... arrival' to Australia (Hron 2009, pp. 15-16). In theory, the process was easy; I would return home to Brisbane, talk with my father, ask questions, take notes and write a few short pieces as a result.

Around Easter time in 2009, when I eventually went home I found my father's health greatly deteriorated. He was experiencing breathing difficulties and had lost half his body weight since Christmas. Being in such a fragile state, he was not up to much 'talking' and so our time together became more about simply 'being' with one other; sitting in each other's company, sipping tea and just observing the everyday – like the neighbours, the heat, the birds and insects of Brisbane. Occasionally in this quiet time together, my father would recall something that had happened to him as a boy or details about people he once knew back in Hungary or Argentina which he wanted me to know. As he spoke, I would sit, observe, and make notes. The following is an anecdote he told during that time which I have rewritten.

BEES

Father –

We were only little, maybe around nine or ten years old. There were four of us boys from the village in Tolscva and together we would meet after school. Back then, there was no TV or ciné or jugetes so a lot of times we would go up to the hills behind the village and catch bees. The bees were big and yellow, you know, but you can't find those ones here. The bees would always go to these small bushes that were on the hills, and that's where we'd go catch them.

Once we climbed up the hill we had to be very quiet so we could hear the bees. Their sound was not very strong and if it was windy it would make it harder to hear. But if you heard one, then you had to walk up to the bush very slowly and quietly and wait until you saw the bee. Then, quickly you threw a rag (sometimes we used our shirts) over the bee to catch it. You had to be careful then not to make it angry because if it got you, whoa, the sting would really hurt! Then after you trapped the bee, you'd get a rock and smash its body, and then you could break the bee open and suck out the honey it carried inside.

Sometimes when we were up in the hills, we would catch grasshoppers and cserebogárs too, you know, they looked like those brown beetles you see here around the lights in summer at Christmas time. We would catch the cserebogárs, filling up our pockets with them to bring back for the chickens. The chickens really liked them and would fight each other to eat them. They weren't given any food and every day when my mother opened the pen they had to search the garden for what they could eat. They were starving, you know. Ha! Just like us.

I would like to explain here that my father was not one to share his life or past freely. He did not converse. Rather, he told or explained things, giving out little 'pockets' of information here and there ³. This anecdote of catching bees was one he had only recently shared; one I had heard just a handful of times. It was the first time however that I had 'listened' and written it down observing what was being said. My initial notes about the bees was barely half a page long and the story itself was nothing more than a few scribbled lines told to me in a mixture of Spanish and Hungarian. Although I did not know what to do with the piece, there was something about the story and the content that had me thinking back to it. Occasionally, when I would be reading through a notebook for other things, I would chance across another version of his 'bee' story, similarly recorded but with slightly different information. This final non-fiction interpiece was developed as a result of much thinking and silent meditation – it has taken me several years of processing, drafting and transforming to arrive at this finished state. It is not that I am a slow writer but there is something Barthesian to be said about 're-searching' especially when attempting to recapture a person, their true 'essence' and life at time when they are no longer there (Barthes 1982) ⁴.

As a child, my mother would take on my father's silences and 'transform' them. Armed with 'pockets' of his memories she would tell his life her way, often changing his original stories and form and in the process transforming his words into something new (Hirsch 2008)⁵. Growing up, I was more familiar with her version of his stories – they were funny, black-humoured and creative. She had a sense of performance in her re-telling that my father in his seriousness never conveyed. What follows is a re-creation and observation of such a retold story:

HAIR

Daughter –

I grew up listening to my mother's story of how my father's hair had turned white. She would start off by saying that when she met him in Argentina, his hair was already white.

'He looked like an old man!' she'd say in Spanish and with a laugh she'd toss back her dark head of hair. 'When I first met him, I thought he was a bit strange too. You know, odd, in his manerismos and thinking. I thought he would change after we got married. But he didn't. As you can see, he's still a bit of an stranger! Ha, ha!'

Neither my mother nor anyone I knew had ever explained his 'strangeness' nor what had really happened to my father's hair. Growing up hearing her stories, as a child I would laugh along with the other adults she was talking to mainly because they were laughing and the way my mother talked about my father, it was funny.

It has taken me years to understand the story of my father's hair turning white and how my mother's version of this, her telling of it as a humorous anecdote was her own way of protecting him and us from the truth. Growing up, my father's hair was not brown like mine or pure blonde like his had been when he was a child. In contrast to my mother's black hair, his was a pale ghostly grey, shocked with white, which eventually turned pure white when he became old and ill.

His hair was what people most remembered about him; that, and the sharp widow's peaks on each side, his pronounced hairline like his thick Hungarian accent which made him look and sound like the old Hungarian film star Bela Lugosi who played Count Dracula. It was only as an adult, I realised that my father hair story was far from funny. I have since pieced the events together and learnt he had just turned sixteen when he fled the turmoil and bombing of Budapest, crossing the border into Austria on an open-top truck with a bunch of strangers. On a recent visit to Hungary, his last remaining brother told me that as a young man my father's hair had turned white overnight from the shock from what he had seen at that time. I didn't know whether he meant that my father's hair had turned white after witnessing the tanks rolling into the city or his own people being killed or soldiers of opposing sides fighting and shooting each other on the streets during the Revolution. Had it

turned white then or the year after where he spent time in a displaced person's camp waiting with other refugees, young men like him with no family or possessions, a poor country kid with nothing but the clothes he had on his back? Had it happened on the day he realised he had been completely cut off from his home (the country borders were clamped shut post-Revolution and remained that way for 30 years) and all that was familiar – his family, country and place was lost?

Maybe it turned white during the time spent waiting, first in a displaced persons camp, or maybe it happened later when he boarded the ship and was waiting to arrive somewhere, anywhere, where he could be free.

I remember the last time I combed his hair. He had been brought back from the hospital so he could die at home in his own bed.

'Péiname', he'd asked me and pointed to his old brown comb, which he always kept in his top pocket.

I remember combing his hair while mum supported him as he was too weak to sit up any more. ***I remember*** the comb getting stuck on knots he had in the back of his hair, caused by his head rubbing against the pillow and how I slowly worked the tight little tangles free.

I remember how he closed his eyes as I ran the comb gently through his hair feeling between my fingers his thin white hair, the fragile strands of lightness and air.

I learnt a lot about writing in my time spent sitting quietly observing my dying father. As a writer I learnt to be patient and to be comfortable with silence. I learnt how to read a person and note what they *did not do* or *say*; that when a person chooses not speak, that their silence carries meaning. For my father, silence was a stance, as a young survivor of trauma his decision of 'not telling' and 'burying one's truth' was perhaps his only way of dealing with the events he 'witnessed' (Laub1995, pp. 63-64). It has become clearer now that all throughout his life, my father 'carr[ie]d an impossible history within' (Caruth 1995, p. 5) and by keeping his stories to himself (with my mother an exception), he 'forged a protective shield around his trauma' which enabled him to move forward (Hirsch p.125). For my mother too, being able to transform his stories she filtered the trauma to those listening allowing them to cope with the 'truth' in order to understand a narrative 'that *could not be articulated* to be *told*, to be *transmitted*, to be *heard*' (Laub1995, p. 69).

The playwright Harold Pinter would often push his audiences into silences of discomfort so they could experience what 'true silence' meant. Of this he articulated:

When true silence falls we are still left with echo ... I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility. (Pinter, cited in Gale 2003, p. 66)

Similarly, silence, especially in fiction, is often negatively perceived. In writing workshops I have attended, the general feedback given about communicating through silence is: 'Readers will get bored if they are given too much description. They want action! They want dialogue!' It seems that there is nothing more unsettling to be in the presence of a character who is not speaking or acting or doing. That said, as a writer I realised that *those* are the precise moments which allow for some respite; where a character can rest and say nothing but are present in their silence – that they are being, thinking, watching, observing, remembering, flashbacking, plotting, planning, breathing, living, imagining, dreaming or forgetting.

In this excerpt by second-generation immigrant writer John Hughes when explaining his mothers' 'unspoken' past he describes trying to 'break' her silence, to get her to speak and 'tell' him about her life and her story but without success:

I've asked her often enough. We all did. But about herself my mother will not speak. There is the eloquence of her actions, of course, and we will smile and nod knowingly as we watch her at work: the way she will not be distracted no matter the task, dusting the roses with her white-gloved hands ... the meticulous rolling and shaping of the **varenyky** dough, and all the food that speaks of a place she will not. Because about her life before us there is only silence. Whenever my grandfather used to talk about the past my mother would leave the room. (Hughes 2004, p. 65)

For the son / second-generation, there is a frustration in wanting to know what she 'will not speak' of, and this is done through observation. As a reader and writer trying to understand a mother's silence is what makes her or any person, man, woman, a character of a young boy (as in the case of the main character in my novel) and their story more complex. As scholar Yu-ting Huang states about memory work: 'I would argue that silence has always been inseparable from narrative memory and history, and that it is always meaningful, no matter whether the memory-bearers mean to conceal it' (2010, p. 74). Silence is the key that challenges the writer in me to ask – what is not being said? What is being silenced? What is being withheld? Murnane wrote, 'I have for long believed that a person reveals at least as much when he reports what he cannot do ... as when he reports what he has done or wants to do' (Murnane 2005, p. 158). As a creative writer, what interests me is the ambivalence between the said and the unsaid, the observed and the retold, of what one says cannot be done and the act of doing. What matters to me is the resulting cross-pollination so to speak of taking what is there and bringing it to another space, transforming silence in order to

not only hear it but “see” it differently on the page, and in turn create something new as a result.

In 2010, my father died before I began writing the novel based on the ‘pockets’ of stories he had shared about his life. At that time, I thought I could not continue writing *his story* without *him*. Speaking with a university lecturer about my dilemma, he simply replied, ‘But don’t you see? You don’t need the person to write about them. In fact it’s probably better that he’s dead – now you are free to write whatever you like.’ Naturally, I was upset by his response. I was still mourning and did not understand what he had meant then. It wasn’t until I opened my notebooks and started reading all I had written that I was finally able to ‘see’ the significance behind his words. My notes were not simply about what my father had said but included other thoughts that had occurred while I was with him, including my observations about him, reflections, as well as a number of ideas for fiction.

Studying those notes closely I began to make connections – like my father’s mannerisms with that of a particular character, or a name; often a scene would emerge, or an idea for a new chapter. On occasion I would read something more personal and like Proust’s narrator biting into that madeleine, I would be transported back to the verandah of my family home and I’d be sitting next to my father again, observing (Proust 1981, pp. 898- 900). That was when I would ‘see’ my father telling me his life through *his* stories, not my mother’s version, but *his*. He had told me as best he could through the association of the things around him or in what he **had** remembered – like how to pick grapes (he came from the wine making Tokaji region in north-Eastern Hungary), while motioning the actions of tending the vines. He had told me about being so hungry that one time as a boy he climbed a neighbour’s tree to steal their unripe fruit and had eaten green plums (while pointing to our Jacaranda); he told me how once he had snuck out at night to go ice skating in his shoes and wore holes in them (while pointing at my old shoes) – these snippets and anecdotes of his past I have since transformed into themes and entire chapters in my novel ⁶. I realised that although my father could no longer tell me about his past, he was still there within the pages and in my postmemories and that in his absence I had the freedom to re-create and re-write *our* story.

Endnotes:

1. Dr Dori Laub (Laub, 1995 p.64) is a child survivor of the Holocaust, a psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst. In his study of Holocaust survivors he details the process and importance of testimony and recall and explains that survivors of trauma are equally affected in their ability to tell or not tell about the traumatic events experienced. For those who choose not to speak ‘their silent retention’ becomes ‘more and more distorted’ so much so it ‘invades’, ‘contaminates’ their daily lives.
2. For a detailed account about the situation of the Hungarian refugees refer to Chapter 8 in Tony Kushner’s work ‘Refugees from Hungary: Anti-Communist Fervour Takes Hold’ (1999, pp. 241- 261).
3. The term ‘Pockets’ is in reference to the title and prelude to the current novel I am writing. A version of this has been published (Hermanoczki 2009).

4. In *Camera Lucida* (1982), Roland Barthes refers to, 're-searching' his mother not long after her death and finding her in 'The Winter Garden Photograph'. Even though Henriette Binger, Barthes' mother had died in her eighties, the photo is of her as a young girl. Barthes explains that despite finding other images this particular image had captured her 'essence' of the person she really was.
5. Marianne Hirsch (2008) explains that through intergenerational 'acts of transference', family memories can be communicated. In my father's case, stories of his 'East European communist terror' have been passed on by both my father and mother through a form of 'communicative memory'.
6. 'Shoes' inspired by my father's memories has been published online (Hermanoczki 2011).

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Research Statement

Research Background:

Situated in the genre of creative non-fiction 'Of things not said' incorporates elements of memoir, research, essay, journal, and creative literary techniques. In a personal self-reflective essay with creative non-fiction interpieces, the author discusses her relationship with her immigrant father and his silence and her own writing practices which are themes associated with her doctoral research into second-generation immigrant postmemory and the familial traumascapes.

Research Contribution:

'Of things unsaid' adds to the literature on creative non-fiction genres by speaking to the essays of Mireille Juchau, the memoirs of Alice Pung and Maria Tumarkin's work, *Traumascapes*. Like these writers, 'Of things unsaid' addresses the impact of trauma and place in the search for identity. Just as these contemporary immigrant-Australian writers incorporate their research and writing about trauma and the silenced past in order to know 'one's real truth' (Laub 1995), the work complements this discussion by reflecting and re-interpreting silence in the creative practice of writing fiction and non-fiction on these themes.

Research Significance:

Silence as a result of trauma can greatly impact first-generation immigrants and refugees. Re-telling their stories often means confronting the untold for many second-generation immigrant writers. While investigating my own immigrant father's silence, I suggest ways for other second-generation writers to express their silenced past. The research's significance is that it continues to generate fiction and non-fiction that explicitly deals with the historic impact of trauma on immigrant and refugee life-narratives. It is also a personal contribution to knowledge, since this research informs the subject of my Ph.D. in contemporary Australian multi-cultural literature.

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