The Weight of Silence: Colonial Erasure and the Politics of Being Silenced. POLIS: Journal of Society and Culture, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2026. © Urvi Ghose

The Weight of Silence: Colonial Erasure and the Politics of Being Silenced

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Abstract

This paper explores the political dimensions of silence in Indigenous resistance and mourning, particularly among Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people in Canada. Drawing on the concept of quiet theatre (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018), anonymous care (Stevenson, 2014), refusal (Simpson, 2014), and Granek's (2014) analysis of activist grief, it examines how silence can be both a survival strategy and a symptom of systemic violence. The REDress installations and public vigils serve as an example of the ways in which silence is used to expose injustice while simultaneously reflecting the failure of institutions to listen. This paper critiques how symbolic gestures of "listening" can be assimilated by settler states as performances of empathy rather than meaningful responses, and why pain has to be performed in order to be acknowledged. Silence, whether chosen or imposed, must be

understood as political; true justice means to dismantle the conditions that demand silence in the first place.

Keywords: Silence, resistance, colonialism, mourning, refusal

Silence can be understood as the absence of action, speech, or protest, which I argue is a form of passivity in mainstream settler-colonial spaces. But, for many marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people in Canada, silence is anything but empty. Silence is both a chosen practice of resistance and an imposed form of colonial violence. It can be a strategy of survival, and sometimes, the only form of resistance left. Ethnographer Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston (2018) refers to this expression of resistance as quiet theatre: a mode of engagement where stillness and waiting can carry grief, memory, and defiance. Her work with older Romani women in Poland shows how meaning can be created through gestures and pauses when traditional activism or speech is not safe or possible. Like Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Romani communities in Europe have historically faced systemic marginalization, forced displacement, and the suppression of their cultural practices by dominant state structures, conditions that make more conventional forms of protest dangerous or inaccessible. This shared experience of structural silencing across different colonial and racial contexts is exactly what makes quiet theatre a useful framework for thinking about how Indigenous Peoples in Canada navigate grief and resistance when speech alone is insufficient or unsafe.

Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) framework of quiet theatre can help conceptualize how Indigenous communities across Canada use absence as a way to expose violence. Memorial vigils for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people (MMIWG2S) are an example of absence as resistance. While silent forms of resistance can be powerful, the necessity of such forms of resistance, reflects the structural abandonment they respond to. Honouring silence means not just hearing it but dismantling the conditions that make it necessary. To do this, I critique how symbolic gestures of "listening" are often assimilated by settler states into performances of empathy rather than structural change. I argue that silence operates both as a survival strategy and as evidence of systemic colonial violence. To explore the political dimensions of silence in these contexts, I examine four contrasting scholarly approaches, Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) quiet theatre, Stevenson's (2014) anonymous care, Simpson's (2014) refusal, and Granek's (2014) activist grief, and relate them to Indigenous-led practices such as the REDress Project and public vigils.

Positionality and Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that this work was researched and written on the unceded, ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Peoples. Simon Fraser University, where I study, is also located on the lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Unceded means that this land was never surrendered, relinquished, or handed over in any treaty, and that its occupation is ongoing and settler-colonial in nature.

As a second-generation immigrant who is not of Indigenous ancestry, I benefit from systems and structures that continue to dispossess Indigenous Peoples. Writing about silence, mourning, and resistance in Indigenous communities as a settler means being cautious not to appropriate or speak over the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples,while also being aware that these issues are not abstract, they are ones that people live through every day. It also means using my position to amplify the urgency of Indigenous-led calls for justice, land back, and systemic change.

I also recognize that land acknowledgements must go beyond words and reflect a commitment to action that challenges colonial systems in both scholarship and daily life. This work is not intended to speak for Indigenous Peoples, but to reflect critically on how settler-colonial systems produce the very conditions that make silence as a form of resistance necessary. My aim is to contribute to larger efforts of decolonization and accountability.

Silence as Indigenous Resistance, Survival, and Refusal

Quiet Theatre: Silence as Political Expression

Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) concept of quiet theatre developed from her long-term fieldwork with older Romani women, particularly one participant, Randia. Rather than using traditional interviews or observation, Kazubowski-Houston (2018) and Randia co-created improvised theatrical scenes, many of which blurred the line between reality and fiction. In these scenes, Randia often played Córka, an older woman abandoned by her family, while Kazubowski-Houston (2018)

played secondary roles like neighbours. The performances were not about extracting information but sharing space, producing meaning through silence, waiting, and gesture (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018).

Quiet theatre challenges the expectation that activism must be loud or that ethnography must revolve around speech (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018). In one scene, Randia (as Córka) quietly prepares food while a clock ticks in the background, no words are spoken, but the atmosphere is full of longing and grief (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018). Eventually, Córka speaks, not to explain the silence, but to reveal that she's waiting for someone, anyone, to break her loneliness, maybe even the ghost of her daughter who died of hunger (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018, p. 411). The silence makes Randia's (and Córka's) grief and abandonment understandable on her own terms (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018).

Through these encounters, Kazubowski-Houston (2018) rethinks what counts as political engagement. Listening, witnessing, and simply sitting with another person becomes radical acts. Quiet theatre shows that silence can also make space for presence, an alternative to traditional ethnographic methods of interviewing and note-taking. Its power is necessary because marginalized people are forced to turn to silence for their survival, and the desire to seek visibility in this way reflects the failure of existing systems to hear them otherwise. While quiet theatre demonstrates how silence can hold grief and meaning within intimate ethnographic encounters (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018), Indigenous artists and communities similarly mobilize absence in public space to expose colonial violence and demand accountability.

Grief Made Visible: Indigenous-Led Performances of Absence

Indigenous artists and communities have created performances that reappropriate this absence through symbolic and spatial acts of resistance. Jaime Black's REDress Project features empty red dresses hung in public spaces, representing missing women (n.d.). The dresses do not speak or explain. They simply hang, fluttering in the wind, inviting witnesses to feel what words cannot convey. Like scenes in quiet theatre, their power comes from restraint. But, unlike Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) work, these performances are born not only from personal grief, but from systemic neglect.

Acts of mourning, such as the REDress Project and community vigils, can also be understood through Granek's (2014) concept of Mourning Sickness Type III: Activating Grief. In this model, grief becomes a political tool, mobilized to push for justice, reconciliation, and social change (Granek, 2014). Instead of remaining private, grief is made public and collective, like the red dresses fluttering in the wind, offering an alternative to state-sanctioned silence. As Granek (2014) notes, this kind of mourning turns personal and shared loss into a "powerful catalyst toward demanding and instituting positive social change" (p. 66). These Indigenous-led performances are not only responses to violence but expressions of survival, resilience, and hope; grief made active to demand visibility and justice.

Indigenous Silence as Strategic Refusal

Not all silence stems from being silenced. Audra Simpson (2014) draws an important distinction between recognition and refusal. Recognition demands visibility, testimony, and exposure to be deemed worthy of support, while refusal rejects these terms altogether (Simpson, 2014). Refusal does not seek validation from the settler state, it asserts sovereignty by disengaging from structures that

demand participation on unequal terms. In this sense, refusal can resemble silence, but it is a strategic silence. Drawing on Simpson's framework, we can understand Indigenous families who decline to participate in inquiries or commemorative events as enacting a form of refusal; their absence is critique, not disengagement. Refusal interrupts the settler-colonial narrative that reduces Indigenous life to either victimhood or reconciliation. It demands that communities be seen not for their suffering, but on their own terms.

Refusal complicates the politics of silence. It shows that silence can have meaning, not because it invites interpretation, but because it withholds it. Refusal challenges the idea that justice requires storytelling, and asks why pain has to be performed to be acknowledged (Simpson, 2014). The politics of refusal also force us to consider what counts as presence. Participation in state-led processes can be seen as evidence of engagement, while silence is seen as disengagement or apathy. This view privileges settler timelines and systems. Refusal suggests that real engagement might look like non-participation (Simpson, 2014). It asks whether it is possible to build justice without always performing grief, and whether communities can assert sovereignty by choosing absence (Simpson, 2014). This perspective challenges us to rethink how we measure responsiveness, and who benefits from being listened to. At the same time, silence as refusal is vulnerable to misinterpretation when placed in public, settler-dominated spaces. For audiences without the historical or political literacy to read refusal as critique, these gestures can be misread as aesthetic, passive, or even symbolically apathetic through a perceived lack of action. This interpretive gap shows how refusal can be powerful while still being assimilated or flattened by settler spectatorship. Rather than expecting visibility or narratives of pain as

proof, allies must learn to respect silence without demanding explanation. This includes creating space for absence, discomfort, and non-response as its own form of presence, and allows refusal to become an invitation to rethink how we view support.

Silence as Colonial Violence and Structural Erasure

State-Imposed Silence and Structural Neglect

The silence in quiet theatre echoes the silences imposed on Indigenous communities by settler-colonial institutions. *The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019a) details how families are met with silence at nearly every level of , from law enforcement and social services to media and government agencies. This is illustrated through reports of being ignored by police, left out of investigations, or forced to conduct their own searches and vigils (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019a). Here, silence is not chosen; it is enforced.

The Inquiry's report emphasizes that the silence Indigenous families experience is not accidental; it is the product of institutions that are structured to dismiss them (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019a). Policing, health care, and child welfare systems all operate through embedded racism and sexism. They do not just fail to act, they actively produce silence by discrediting complaints, withholding information, and denying access to justice (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019b). The result is a silence that harms.

The experience of imposed silence is also an exhausting one. The cycle of explaining, testifying, and proving their pain to an unresponsive system becomes its own kind of violence. Silence is not only what institutions impose; it is also what communities must retreat to in order to preserve themselves. When each vigil, protest, or inquiry fails to deliver justice, the burden of advocacy increases. Silence is not only the language of loss but that of repeated erasure.

Anonymous Care: Performative Listening and Managed Grief

Lisa Stevenson (2014) introduces the concept of anonymous care to describe how the Canadian state governs through affect. In her work with Inuit communities, Stevenson (2014) shows how bureaucracies perform care through paperwork, wellness checks, and gestures of support, while leaving structural violence intact. This logic of care replaces justice with documentation (Stevenson, 2014).

This dynamic is visible in how Indigenous families are treated in the aftermath of violence. Institutions may offer condolences or host commemorative events, but these often become performances of concern rather than commitments to change (Stevenson, 2014). As Stevenson (2014) notes, care can be a way of managing grief without addressing its cause. Silence becomes institutionalized, not through absence, but through the performance of empathy to avoid accountability (Stevenson, 2014).

Like quiet theatre, this performance of empathy relies on restraint, where quiet theatre resists erasure, bureaucratic silence protects power (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018; Stevenson, 2014). The state

appears to listen, but it listens selectively, absorbing grief into inquiry reports, public statements, and reconciliation frameworks that ultimately leave core systems untouched (Stevenson, 2014).

Witnessing and the Limits of Symbolism

Recently, silence has become something to witness, display, and commemorate. From art installations to moments of silence at public events, there is growing attention to symbolic listening. But as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) caution, such gestures can become "moves to innocence" actions that make settlers feel involved without confronting power. The risk is that silence could become aestheticized and lose its power and intention as a form of institutional critique (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Hunt (2014) warns that Indigenous presence can be reduced to a 'triviality' or 'trinket' within settler institutions, highlighting how representational engagement can displace the material responsibilities that decolonial action requires. When red handprints or empty red dresses are circulated widely, their meanings can be diluted and diminished, inducing sympathy, not action. This is not to dismiss the importance of art or protest, but to question how easily they can be taken up by systems that focus more on emotions and affective politics than real change. Another risk is that as silent protest becomes more common in media and public institutions, it risks being stripped of urgency. Silence can lose its edge when it is no longer followed by demands for change. Repetition can dull meaning, especially when those in power treat witnessing as an endpoint rather than a beginning. Without a clear path from recognition to action, symbolic gestures risk becoming rituals of forgetting rather than remembrance (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This is not an argument against symbolic protest, but

a reminder that symbolism without transformation can ironically reinforce the systems it aims to challenge (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

This concern aligns with Granek's (2014) critique of how grief can be depoliticized when absorbed into symbolic or aesthetic gestures. What she describes as the pathological uses of grief, such as nationalizing or individualizing collective mourning, risks turning the gaze away from social injustices and toward narratives of healing that leave structural violence unaddressed (Granek, 2014). When state-led responses absorb mourning into performances of empathy without changing the systems that produced the loss, grief can be neutralized instead of activated (Granek, 2014).

Even symbolic silence can become a trap, requiring marginalized communities to perform grief repeatedly, and penalizing those who choose not to (Granek, 2014). It echoes the same burden Kazubowski-Houston (2018) documents in her work; the pressure to be heard and to offer pain as proof. True justice should not require silence or performance at all.

The Future of Silence

Silence is never empty. It can be survival, resistance, defiance, or evidence of structural violence. In quiet theatre, it is reclaimed as a radical form of witnessing (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018). In Indigenous communities, it is often imposed by the systems meant to protect them. Whether performed, protested, or refused, silence is political. Across these analyses, quiet theatre, anonymous care, refusal, and activist grief, I have shown how multiple theoretical frameworks help explain the layered political work silence performs in Indigenous resistance and mourning (Kazubowski-Houston,

2018; Stevenson, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Granek, 2014). Refusal further reminds us that justice cannot depend on constant visibility or performance, and that silence may itself assert sovereignty.

It is important to remember that celebrating silence as resilience without questioning the structures that make it necessary in the first place, ends up making abandonment seem acceptable. The challenge is not just to listen, but to ask why silence is the only way to be heard. As long as silence is the only option left to the grieving, the marginalized, and the dispossessed, our responsibility is not just to see and hear it, but to end the conditions that demand it.

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