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Dreaming of Silence: An Autoethnography of Space, Place, Time and Trauma

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Bio: Donna F. Henson is an Associate Professor of Communication in the Faculty of Society & Design at Bond University. Her research interests currently center on meaning-making post-trauma, rumination and narrative, autoethnography and relational communication.

Abstract

Situated in the interplay between and among the creative and critical, the lyrical and liminal, the communicative and performative, this fractured, layered essay explores the hopeless/hopeful flight of tales of trauma in this time of the Crisis Ordinary. In the safe-space, safe-place afforded by autoethnography, I reflect on the luxury of silence and dream of world-peace.

Keywords: autoethnography, trauma, silence, performative writing, writing as a method of inquiry.

Dreaming of Silence: An Autoethnography of Space, Place, Time and Trauma

I am drawn by distance, colored in the lines between us—the lives between us. You're here, and I'm there. Near and far. I stand on the edges (always on the edge). Blurred. Relieved. My reality once removed, twice removed. Moved and removed by the politics of privilege.

And miles and miles of ocean.

“I come from a land down under” (Hay & Strykert, 1981). Further. The little country that could. Just left of center and right when it matters. Mostly. Home.

I live in a land down under. That one. The “lucky one.” Just right of center and left when it matters. Mostly. Home.

But I've been made and remade in countless images, endless places. In space and time, here, there and elsewhere. In worlds and oysters and Arizona blue skies and red-rock canyons, heartlands and hinterlands and sojourns and memories.

Home.

The world is my oyster... but I'm allergic to shellfish.

The pearls of my privilege rest in a toxic bed of trauma, of hellbent humanity. Some complex twisting of apathy and ignorance, oppression and atrocity. Tragedy and memory.

I'm stained by the blues, whites, and reds of familiar flags, where the colors are determined but the design depends on the day. Four stars? Five? Or more? My histories collided, allegiance divided. Some jacked up union of time and place and territory. I'm a citizen of the world and I wish for World Peace.

And isn't that convenient.

At once moved and removed. Present and absent. Distant, detached, and absolved of all responsibility.

I'm good at distance. I am.

I've had lots of practice.

Just wishin' and hopin'.

My wish for world peace falls on deaf ears. And numb hearts. And dead souls. My gaze falls on the worst of the world, and falters. I've always been squeamish. I can't handle horror. I don't like reality... I look away.

I look away?

I'm good at distance.

I'm a citizen of the world and I want to get off.

I wonder sometimes at the futility of it all. All these words. These words that pile up, word on word, on word, in babbling towers of anger, frustration and oppression. These letters, like atoms, floating particles of matter, that matter. The same letters arranged and rearranged, in chambered echoes of ass-onance and dissonance.

Just rearrange the letters, I want to say. I want to see. I indulge in some vain fantasy – imagining all the words in the world, uplifting, uprising, floating and forming—reforming—a cloud of sense and consequence. A murmur of meaning; alternative arrangements of vowels and consonants that turn violence to silence.

And, I'm reminded, the space between the notes is music too.

These days I dream of silence. The space between insult and outrage—atrocity and apathy. The kind of silence that stills you in the face of devastating beauty and danger. The edge of a wind-torn cliff, or a white-tipped breaking wave. Silence that resonates, reverberates. The Southern Cross in an ink-night sky. The last words on the last page of a heart-breaking book. A blue-deep horizon. And water.

Silence in the in-between; the heart beating between two breaths, a cresting pinkish dawn. A ceasefire. And hope.

I think it no coincidence that silent is an anagram of listen...

I think we've forgotten how to hear, how to heal, how to listen, how to feel.

My silence speaks volumes—of complicity/responsibility. Of the “educated, liberal subject.” But look at you, she says. You can say that. Silence. Ha. You in your safe place. Safe space. Your ‘lucky’ country. You tall, blonde, straight, skinny, white, white, white snowflake. Your privilege etched in the bone, the height of your heels and the highlights/lowlights of your hair and life. What’s the worst that’s happened to you? What do you know of Trumpian trauma and poverty. Racism and radicalism, precarity and tragedy? I’m sorry—did you break a nail? (My silence can be kind of a bitch). You, she says, you with your 37-year-old, female, unmarried new-mother, “no one marched when I was elected” Prime Minister and your center-left democratic/socialist/greens coalition government. You and your good job, guilty feminism and luxury of silence.

I add to the pile of words. Do not mistake my silence for consent—I say. For agreement. For collusion. Do not mistake my quiet for apathy. For cowardice. For ignorance.

My silence is strong and brave. Intimate and vulnerable. My silence dreams of possibility and peace and storms for equity and justice. My silence is loud and demands to be heard. My silence sees you. Hears you. Feels you. My silence knows you and measures the distance between us in stories that have yet to be told.

She knows. There are silences still to be heard.

There's this funny thing about trauma. It travels. Across miles and memories and oceans and more. In these times of "crisis ordinariness," trauma defies the logic of time and space and place, and we're reminded through tales and testimony (and words, more words) of the individual and collective consequences of structural violence (Berlant, 2011, p. 10 as cited in Coddington & Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017, p. 52). In these times of global precarity and constant vulnerability, trauma is inevitable and unexceptional (Coddington & Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017). And in this monstrous world where some lives matter more than others, trauma matters.

Trauma lives in liminality, between here and there, then and now. Trauma travels "in and through bodies...across places, spaces and times" (Coddington & Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017, p. 52). Trauma draws us to the dark, attacks us in the shadows, as place and space are un-bound and erased through seismic repetitions from the center of our disaster. We hear the voice of trauma and open the door to our personal Pandora. We touch the bruise, story the scar. Scars. (Some more than others). Trauma lingers in memory, dwells in the disruption. We're unhinged, unraveled, undone. A sinister intruder, it creeps in undercover and pokes, and prods, and stabs us in the heart, the mind, the soul. As if to say, "I'll not be forgotten."

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“The ability not to dwell on things. Is of a difficult dimension” (Kassabova, 1998, “Striving for lightness”). And therein lies much of the difficulty. Easier said than done. In making meaning of trauma, in telling stories, we seek to recover from the unseen, the insidious intangible. For trauma lies not in an event itself, it resides in the remembrance, the repetition. It lingers in the memory, it lives in story—a difficult dimension indeed. “The incomprehensibility, and inability to make meaning out of traumatic experiences [for example] means that the traumatized experience their suffering in ways that are both timeless and literally difficult to place” (Coddington & Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017, p. 52).

So some stories are hard to tell. Out of space, out of time. And then there are those that are hard to hear. For those of us inclined to look away. Those of us who can't handle horror. Who are squeamish (and selfish). Those of us, who by virtue of our privilege, have the luxury of disengagement and distance. I'm afraid for such stories—the very stuff of souls and devastation, tragedy and tedium. Stories still silenced. Stories not told.

The crisis-ordinary. Stories sent out into the ether in hopeful/hopeless flight. Tales of suffering and anger and imagining that embody our dialectical/diametrical dreams of wishin' and hopin', conviction and resistance. Words on words on words that soar in the liminality, looking for a safe place to land.

Too often tales of trauma crash land on the rocks of indifference. Or these stories of pain and suffering circle in holding patterns of faith and frustration, where the more things change, the more they stay the same. And yet, we send our words into the ether, into space, into the silences—where words and worlds collide and hit the body in acts of ineffable optimism; where the possibility of connection is the only explanation for the traumatic repetition of telling, of testimony.

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Where words hit the body and stay. Where words connect and construct in heartfelt resonance, and color in the lines between us. Where those who care to listen, listen to care, fulfilling some tacit contract for connection, communication. Communication that bears witness, with-ness, and commits to the collective storying of shared humanity.

I'm a citizen of the world, and I wish for world peace.

My silence speaks volumes. Of fear and devastation. Distance and disengagement. But so too, hope and possibility. My silence is a safe space, safe place. A space in-between—between words and worlds, and you and me. Left of center, and right where it matters. A safe place to land. My silence sees you. Hears you. Feels you. My silence knows you and measures the distance between us in stories that have yet to be told.

She knows. There are silences still to be heard.

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