This zine is one
in a series of five.

Each contains an edited version
of a prelude to a chapter from the
book 'Experiments in Listening'
by Rajni Shah.

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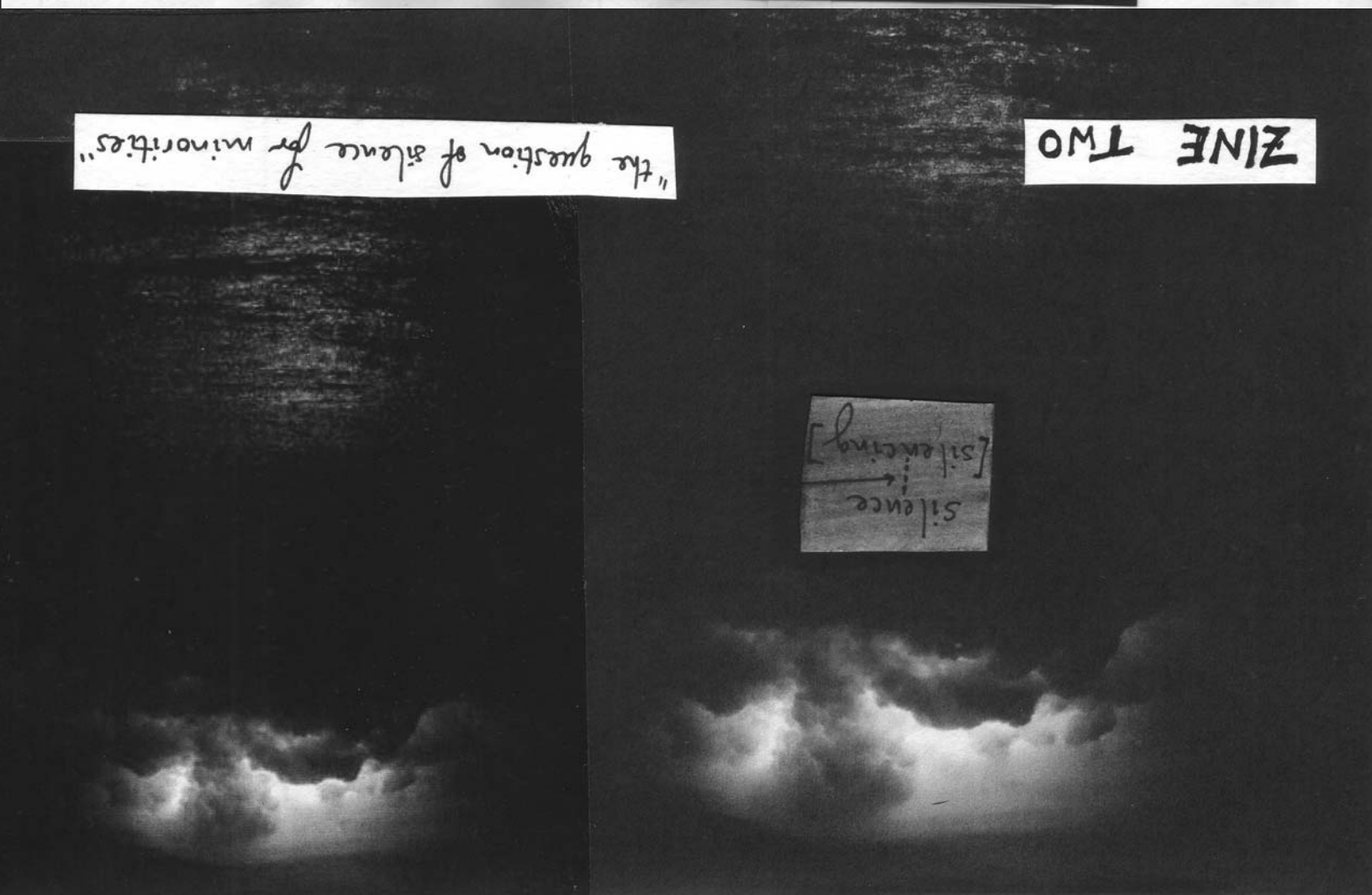

On October 4th 2014, I was in the audience at a panel discussion as part of a three-day symposium.[1] The discussion was structured in a fairly standard way, with short presentations from each of the panellists followed by a question and answer session in which the panel members were given an opportunity to respond to questions from the audience. As is often the way, the whole event was running behind schedule, so there was some time pressure on the session. Nevertheless, a productive conversation was emerging, and there was a feeling of engagement between members and panellists. And then, in a moment, something happened that completely shifted this sense of productivity.

Here's how it happened.

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[1] Janna Graham and Lorena Rivero de Beer in converesation with Rebecca Beinart, 'Politics of Participation' (paper at InDialogue, Nottingham, 2014) <https://indialogue2014.wordpress.com/2014-archive/2014-programme>.

[2] This is how I wrote the phrase in my notebook at the time.

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[3] Susan Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 154.

[4] Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference', in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, ed. by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), pp. 371–75 (p. 372).

[5] Nthabiseng Motsemme, 'The Mute Always Speak: On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Current Sociology*, 52.5 (2004), 909–32 (p. 910). With deep thanks to the organisers of the African Feminisms (Afems) Conference 2018, who introduced me to this text.

[6] Personal correspondence with the author (12 April 2017), reproduced with permission.

[7] Motsemme, p. 915.

What Lorena's email clarified for me is that it would be impossible to speak in a 'logical' way about the relationship between silence and oppression without somehow re-enacting the structural violences in that relationship. This was why she responded to the question in the way that she did. Because it was the only response she could give in that moment without undermining her own message with her words. And because she felt an urgent need to make visible the very terms on which we were having the discussion, which were contributing to a culture that passes over and disregards the many violences that remain unspeakable. The urgent and much needed work of both Lorena's silence and Motsemme's article lies in bringing to light those power structures that underly so many encounters but are so rarely acknowledged.

Someone in the audience had asked a question, and I can no longer remember what this particular question was, but I remember noting down with interest the answer that each panellist gave as they justified or problematised their position in relation to it. Then, it came to Lorena Rivero de Beer, an artist and psychotherapist who was on the panel. I am particularly interested in Lorena's work, and so I was eager to hear what she might have to say. But although it was her turn to respond, she did not say anything. We sat and waited, and she remained silent. Eventually, slightly awkwardly, and blushing, she said:

> Silence as a response (for me, right now) is not a choice.[2]

Then she sat in silence again.

Lorena's reply gave me pause for thought. I was struck by the phrase 'the function of silence for minorities' which suddenly brought a whole new level of sense to her response on that day. If I come back to Motsemme's article, she asks:

> [W]hat happens when those who have been denied the occasion to tell their stories, and whose bodies and cultures have been systematically violated and dehumanized, discover that there are things that remain unspeakable? In a society that regards articulation as primary to formulate meaning and structure interactions, what do social science theory and analysis have to say about these moments that some individuals and communities experience? Are these bodies simply forgotten in history? Or as Bakare-Yusuf (1997) asks, is the notion of the inexpressible then relegated to non-existence?[7]

After I had drafted this piece of writing, I sent what I had written to Lorena so that she could check it for factual accuracy. In her reply she said that, although she did not remember it exactly, she remembered something of the question that had been asked during that session, and why it prompted her to respond in the way that she did.

> As I remember that moment silence was a response to the overwhelming feeling I had of speakers speaking over and covering up with logical thinking the uncomfortableness springing from the impossible position of having to talk about the function of silence for minorities.[6]

The room immediately felt different. This, I began to realise, was her answer to the question. Although she did attempt to say something more, to explain her words further, her voice stumbled and she soon returned to silence again. Silence, it seemed, really was the only response she could offer; she was bound to silence, not because she was choosing it, but because it was the only answer that she felt she could give. Her silence was neither clarifying nor confident, but it was profoundly affecting. I had been watching and listening with an expectation that she would respond to the question in words, with a statement of some kind. And yet, instead of being fulfilled, her response made me acutely aware of the weight of that expectation.

I have since wondered how different this moment would have felt had Lorena said, "My silence is a choice," or had she chosen to sit silently and confidently without offering any explanation. Either of these responses would have challenged the default of speech as the mode in which knowledge was circulating in the room, and would have provocatively disrupted the flow of the discussion. But in either case, she would have contributed a kind of statement through her silence, thus aligning it with the statements that the other panellists had made. By articulating the fact that her silence was not a choice, something much more complicated began to happen. Instead of responding to the question

It feels important to remember that in the moment I have described, Lorena was in a position that meant she was already heard. She was the speaker, and therefore she was being listened to. But what she gave us as audience members was the opportunity to listen, without the usual directionality of 'to'. No longer held by the default of listening to her speak, I - as audience member - was thrown back to reflect on my own position, and my own listening, as well as my relationship to the other voices and listenings in the room.

absence in the way that those words are commonly understood. What made it both affecting and unusual was that in the work that it was doing, it seemed to take those terms and wear them differently. Instead of reaching towards articulacy in response to a question, Lorena's silence held firm those qualities that are so often set in the negative: quietness, uncertainty, and lack of conviction. And through her choice of words, Lorena pointed towards the difficulty in performing this act within a structure that so strongly favours a certain concept of the declarative and a certain definition of articulacy.

in a way that reflected back the terms of that question, remaining within the constraints of the question-and-answer format, Lorena instead seemed to inhabit a kind of paradox: she made 'visible' the inability to speak; and in doing so, she expanded the very terms within which we were all listening.

In the moment after Lorena spoke, I myself felt disoriented and vulnerable.

My heart was beating faster.

I felt as if the room had been turned upside down.

Of course, I cannot know exactly what Lorena meant when she spoke those words and inhabited that silence. And in many ways, to try and pin down her exact meaning feels both reductive and somewhat contrary to the spirit in which I am interpreting the experience. What I do know, from later discussions with others who were in the audience that day, is that I was not the only one who felt that it had been both a significant and disorienting moment. By not only interrupting but throwing into question the usual format of a panel discussion, Lorena invited a change in the relationships between those of us who were in the room.

Motsemme's article is even more explicit than Trinh's in its description of the interpretation of silence in relation to colonial and patriarchal hierarchies of interpretation. Her analysis provides an insightful examination of the structures that determine how listening happens. The title of her essay alone, with its reminder that the mute always speak, is a provocation to examine the categorisation of listening and its relationship to power.

Lorena Rivero de Beer's silence happened in a different context to the silences that Motsemme describes, of course. And yet the weight of assumption feels the same. Lorena's silence was not a silence of lack or

In her more recent article, Nthabiseng Motsemme examines silence in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, with a specific focus on the role of silence in female testimonies. Whilst this article describes a specific context, it also provides an incisive commentary on the pervasive framework of colonial and patriarchal value systems, in which speech is assumed to be the only valid mode of testimony.

> [I]ntroducing more nuanced interpretations of silence adds to growing attempts to elaborate on notions of South African women's subjectivities and forms of agency with living in urban ghettos during the height of apartheid. [...] [W]hen we reject dominant western oppositional hierarchies of silence and speech, and instead adopt frameworks where words, silence, dreams, gestures, tears all exist interdependently and within the same interpretive field, we find that the mute always speak.[5]

After she had spoken, we continued to sit in silence for what I can only guess was several minutes. But our silence was no longer one of waiting for someone to speak. Instead, it was one in which we acknowledged - however awkwardly or unsettlingly - that there were no clarifying words available.

What does it mean to reply with silence when speaking is expected?

I am, perhaps unsurprisingly, most interested in Trinh's final sentence. Silence, although inevitably conceived in some kind of relationship with speech or noise, can occupy many positions, often simultaneously. I might, for example, describe Lorena's silence as occupying all of Trinh's suggested modes: as a will to unsay what we already expected her to say; as a will to not say anything unless she had something to say; and - perhaps most importantly - as a language of its own that was not already determined by speech. These modes, as Trinh notes, have been described as the feminine side of a feminine-masculine divide, but might rather be described as modes that resist interpretation within a logocentric (and therefore colonial) structure.

Trinh approaches the question of silence specifically in relation to the sign 'woman', addressing the overly simple binary that has often been used to describe the relationship between silence and speech, as if one were always passive and one always active, one always more 'feminine' and the other always more 'masculine'.

> Within the context of women's speech silence has many faces. [...] On the one hand, we face the danger of inscribing femininity as absence, as lack and blank in rejecting the importance of the act of enunciation. On the other hand, we understand the necessity to place women on the side of negativity and to work in undertones, for example, in our attempts at undermining patriarchal systems of values. Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored.[4]

In her 1996 book 'The Dissonance of Democracy' Susan Bickford writes:

> Silence properly understood is not merely a lack of sound, nor is it an absence. It is connected to sound as part of meaning, as rests in music or pauses in speech. That is, it is given form by the occurrence of sound – silence only has presence as silence because it points to something beyond itself which throws the silence into relief.[3]

Here, Bickford (drawing on Ihde and Sontag) uses silence to demonstrate that speech and listening are always connected. This is the main argument of her book, which makes the case for listening - in its relationship with speaking - as a complex and embodied practice of democratic citizenship. Her analysis is an important reminder

that silence is always in relationship with something else – that sound and silence, like speaking and listening, are constructed activities that actively define each other. But in light of the silence I described earlier, Bickford's description still feels inadequate. By declaring her silence 'not a choice' Lorena did more than create a silence that existed in relationship to speech. Her silence both acknowledged and changed the way that attention was circulating in the room.

In order to move towards a more nuanced understanding of the work that was happening in the silence following Lorena's response, and the work of silence more generally, I will turn briefly to extracts from two pieces of writing that address the binarisation and gendering of the relationship between speech and silence: Trin T. Minh-ha's 1990 essay, 'Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference'; and Nthabiseng Motsemme's 2004 article, 'The Mute Always Speak: On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission'.