Gendered silences in post-conflict societies: a typology
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ABSTRACT
This article offers new theoretical insights into the relationship between silence, gender and agency. Bridging feminist research and critical peace research, the article considers the gendered practices of making and breaking silence in the aftermath of war and armed conflict. A typology is proposed along the axes of (a) disabling and enabling silences, and (b) social remembering and forgetting. Drawing on a number of illustrative cases, the typology is used to identify and categorise modes and functions of gendered silence, and show how oxymoronic fluctuations between silence and speech play out in the everyday. Silence can be employed for subordination and erasure, but can also be a strategy for coping with a precarious everyday, a form of tacit communication of ambiguity as well as a claim-making strategy. Unpacking the gendered dimensions of silence reveals power dynamics with deep implications for societies transitioning from war.

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Introduction
In the opening scene of the Bosnian film Grbavica we see a group of women sitting on the floor. The camera slowly zooms from face to face. The women are silent. Later we will understand that they participate in a psychosocial project in order to talk about their traumatic experiences during the Bosnian war 1992–1995. The facilitator tells them that ‘being reticent is the worst thing’ and chides those who only turn up on the days when the project hands out a bit of financial support. She is harshly opposed by a young woman: ‘Cut the crap, give us some money or work if there’s any’. As the film progresses the story focuses on one of the participants, Esma, and her teenage daughter Sara. Their complex relationship is one of fierce love – and silences – that unfolds as Esma navigates the economic hardships of post-war Sarajevo and struggles to protect and support her daughter. Eventually Sara learns that she is not in fact the child of a killed war hero as her mother has had her believe but born as a result of the repeated rapes Esma was subjected to in a wartime rape camp. The film revolves around the tension between speech and silence and raises a number of questions concerning the gendered agential work of silence in dealing with war experiences. It seems that silence and voice are not opposites but instead varieties of communication, productive of
power. Watching the film I see that silence can be deeply destructive, but also empowering; rich and full of complexities and ambivalences. Silence is never ‘nothing’.

In this article, I attend to the relationship between silence, gender and agency in societies transitioning from violent conflict. How do gendered negotiations in the everyday around silence and speech play out? How do they link to larger processes of social remembering and forgetting? The article brings the long tradition of writing on silence and voice within feminist research into conversation with peace and transitional justice research, and in so doing attempts to address some epistemological blind spots in both traditions concerning silence. In peace and reconciliation research, a generalised assumption has been that the knitting together of the social fabric after violent conflict that was torn apart is impossible without talking. Thus silence is linked to oppression and insecurity, whereas speech holds the possibility of drawing a line between the horrendous past and enabling a more peaceful future. In feminist thinking and activism, the gains in the struggle for gender parity has been made by foregrounding voice as a road to empowerment. Silence is by default linked to lack of agency, marginalisation and erasure of women’s experiences and contributions through history. I therefore detect a need to attend to multiple, gendered layers of silences in societies transitioning from violent conflict. A deepened understanding of silence is key to critically understand how peacebuilding efforts play out on the ground, and necessary in order to recognise socially situated knowledge in coping with conflict-related violence and its gendered dimensions.

The article studies the intersection of silence and agency on the one hand, and social mnemonic processes of remembering and forgetting on the other. A typology of silences is proposed. On one axis silences are defined in relation to agency, by their disabiling or enabling functions. Disabling silences are imposed on the agent, sometimes over the longue durée, and attempt to erase events and agents from memory and discourse, or relegate victims to constrained subject positions. Enabling silences can be articulations of experience, a strategy for resistance, and part of communication and a normalising discourse. On the other axis, the functions of silence are considered in relation to the mnemonic processes of social remembering and forgetting. It is posited that silence can be a tool used to uphold hegemonic discourses and erase dissonant aspects of the past but may also be employed as a form of resistance by guarding memories and making performative claims.

The types of silences that the proposed typology brings to light are illustrated with examples taken from a variety of sites, processes and events with a focus on women’s experiences. The empirical vignettes are brief due to space constraints, but are based on rich, qualitative research endeavours into local realities, by myself and others, as well as from one fictional account. Such research is driven by feminist methodological insights and attend to narratives and subjectivities constructed both in a volatile everyday as well as in formal theatres of transitional justice. To do this work means paying close attention to practices in extended or repeated visits to local realities. It can also entail a close discourse analysis of for example court proceedings, media and popular culture in an analysis of what is said and what is

Julie Mertus, ‘Shouting from the Bottom of the Well. The Impact of International Trials for Wartime Rape on Women’s Agency’, International Feminist Journal of Politics 6, no. 1 (2004): 110–128. For a critical account see Claire Moon, Narrating Political Reconciliation. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Plymouth, MA: Lexington Books, 2008).
not. To research silences always comes with ethical challenges as the enquiry may in fact break silences that are kept for good reasons. One method that avoids re-traumatising victims is to analyse fictionalised accounts, as the realm of aesthetic is an important site for memorywork, as fiction often can engage with sensitive topics and allow imagination to enter into processes of acknowledgement. This article combines analysis of fiction (the film Grbavica) with my own ethnographic field research in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda which builds upon participatory observation methods and open-ended interviews. I also refer to research by other scholars on South Africa, Japan and Finland, including archival research on testimonies.

The article proceeds as follows. It first engages with the theme of silence in feminist research and critical peace research, providing a brief review of what has been privileged in their respective, sometimes overlapping, theoretical quests. Based on these insights a typology of silences is presented and various types of silences from different contexts are discussed. A concluding reflection brings together some key theoretical insights generated from this sorting of silences and discusses how an attendance to silence opens up for a deeper understanding of gendered power and agency in the aftermath of war and violent conflict.

Understanding gendered silence in war and peace

Robin Patric Clair’s observation that ‘silence can be both expression and oppression’, makes a precise link between silence, power and agency. On a societal level and especially in the aftermath of fractual violent politics, silence is a central aspect of the narrative undertaking of nation-building, at the moment when the story of the war is to be told. As remembering the past always comes with forgetting, silence engulfs that which is cut out of the story, or discursive formations, as Foucault would have it, and is thus a means to create and sustain a particular social order. In any narrative about an event there are aspects that are glossed over, toned down in order to make sense and construct clear subject positions. Connerton calls this ‘hegemonic forgetting’.

Long-standing feminist research on war and peace has astutely demonstrated that this struggle around remembering and forgetting is deeply gendered. Feminist literature

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3E.g. Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True, Eds., Feminist Methodologies for International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill, Eds., Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process. Feminist reflections (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Tracy Morison and Catriona Macleod, ‘When veiled silences speak: reflexivity, trouble and repair as methodological tools for interpreting the unspoken in discourse-based data’, Qualitative Research 14 (2014): 694–711.

4The article builds upon insights gained during more than two decades of regular visits to Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as visits to Rwanda in 1995, 2010, 2013 and 2015. The direct quotes and observations in the text were collected during fieldwork conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina in May 2008 and 2014, and in Rwanda in 2015.

5Robin Patric Clair, Organizing Silence. A World of Possibilities (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998): 162.

6As noted in Renan’s seminal essay from 1882: Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’ reprinted in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Babha (Oxon: Routledge, 2006). See also Jay Winter, ‘Notes on the Memory Boom: War Remembrance and the Uses of the Past’, in Memory, Trauma and World Politics. Reflections on the Relationship between the Past and the Present, ed. Duncan Bell (Houndmills, Palgrave and MacMillan, 2006), and Maja Zehfuss, ‘Remembering to Forget/ Forgetting to Remember’, in ed. D. Bell, Memory, Trauma and World Politics.

7Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge (London: Routledge, 1997).

8Paul Connerton, The Spirit of Mourning. History, Memory and the Body (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 41.

9Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation (London: SAGE, 1997).
engaging with war and peace as well as critical voices in development research have produced major works on how women’s silence, absence and marginalisation in the aftermath of war often interact with (ethno)nationalist and patriarchal structures and produce gendered power relations. In transitional justice as a particular field of post-war practice, feminist research has revealed deep and pervasive gendered silences. Narratives constructed at sites of transitional justice, for example tribunals and truth commissions, have largely marginalised women’s experiences, as women are allocated empty and static subject positions that do not fully reflect the various roles and experiences of women during and after war and conflict. **Intrinsic in this process are the silences that loom large around conflict-related sexual violence.** This is doubly ironical as these silences are (re)constructed within the ‘breaking silence’ discourse of transitional justice, captured in the persuasive mantra of the seminal South African truth and reconciliation commission (TRC): ‘Revealing is Healing’.

**The agency of voice and silence**

The intellectual and practical work of breaking gendered silences has been a major theme in feminist research. From the suffragette movement and onwards to the present-day #metoo campaign, collective gains have been made by speaking out against injustice and voice has been read as a sign for power. ‘Breaking silence’ is a core theme in generations of feminist research spanning over many fields of inquiry. An early, influential work is Tillie Olsen’s 1978 book *Silence*, which challenged the literary canon of male writers and argued that women’s silences are manifold: because women are not speaking, they are not heard, their voices are not understood, and their voices are not preserved.

Ideas of ‘voice’, and ‘speaking out’ have thus been powerful discursive drivers in much of the thinking and activism in the feminist agenda during the last century; a matter of speaking truth to patriarchal power with a transformative purpose. A consequence of this work has been a certain blindness concerning whether silence also can be a site of power and agency. Historically, in feminist literature the position has more or less been that ‘silence is analogous to invisibility’ as proposed in a volume on gender and agency. Nevertheless a gendered gaze upon agency reveals that it may shift in form, expressions and strategies. Silence, it has been argued, can be a fully

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10 E.g. Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us. Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London, NY: Zed Books, 1998); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora, 1993); Cynthia Enloe, *Nemo’s war, Emma’s war. Making Feminist sense of the Iraq war* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010); Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, Eds., *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transition* (London: Zed Books, 2001); Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

11 E.g. Katherine Franke, ‘Gendered Subjects of Transitional Justice’, *Columbia Journal of Gender & Law* 15, no. 3 (2006); J. Mertus, ‘Shouting’; Chiseche Salome Mibenge, *Sex and International Tribunals: The Erasure of Gender from the War Narrative* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Elizabeth Porter, ‘Gendered Narratives: Stories and Silences in Transitional Justice, *Human Rights Review* 17, no. 1 (2016): 35–50; Fiona C. Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London, Pluto Press, 2003).

12 See Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, Eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (London, Routledge, 1993).

13 Tilly Olsen, *Silences* (New York, The Feminist Press, 2003, (1978)).

14 Jane L. Parpart, ‘Choosing Silence: Rethinking Agency, Silence and Women’s Empowerment’ in eds. R. Ryan-Flood and R. Gill, *Secrecy and Silence*.

15 Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz, Eds., *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (New York and London, Routledge, 1995), 29.

16 ‘Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Gendering Agency in Transitional Justice’, *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 2 (2015): 165–182.
agential act, and that ‘silence is part of creating and re-creating social realities as much as voice and language’. Agency is always about power relations, and to exercise agency is to bring about effect of some sort on the world. As agency has to do with the making of the world that we inhabit, it follows that silence can be an expression of agency.

In peace and transitional justice research a body of writings is emerging that shares such an understanding and investigates silence (some in relation to gender) in post-war contexts not as a void or absence, but ‘silence as possibility’, thus acknowledging cultural variations in the use, valuation and interpretation of silence as part of human interaction. Silence can be an agential strategy for coping with a precarious everyday, a form of tacit communication of ambiguity as well as a tool for making claims. Silence can hold denial or tacit forms of respect, it can be oppressive but also be a calculated strategy in order to stay alive and to protect loved ones, and silence can be an act of resistance. In many situations ‘speaking out’ may in fact be life-threatening. In the face of violent patriarchal structures, silence and secrecy are often used as alternative and potentially more effective strategies, as argued by Parpart in her criticism of how instrumentalist development discourse discourse champions women’s empowerment through ‘speaking out’.

Drawing the above insights together, it seems that to more deeply understand the role of gendered silence two perspectives are key. One concerns the societal processes of remembering and forgetting, which draws up the larger frames for what hegemonic narrative will be constructed. Also here, as Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger caution, we have to be wary not to equate remembering with voice and forgetting with silence, as ‘silence can also be used to facilitate recollection, while talk can be used to enhance amnesia’. The other perspective concerns vernacular use of silence, and the need to understand how agential subjects negotiate silence and speech through various modes in the everyday, how gendered power structures influence and are influenced by this work, and how we thereby can detect that silence can be both disabling and enabling. To explore silence as both an enabling and disabling practice opens up for an appreciation of the rich and complex way that agency manifests itself even in situations of unequal (gendered) power relations. As de Certeau suggests, those with little formal power may draw upon fluid tactics and use unexpected opportunities to express themselves, and thus often ‘make the weaker position seem the stronger’.

17 Clair, Organizing Silence.
18 Luisa M. Ahearn, ‘Language and Agency’, Annual Review of Anthropology 30 (2001): 109–137.
19 Marita Eastmond and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Silence as Possibility in Postwar Everyday Life’, The International Journal of Transitional Justice 6, no. 3 (2012): 502–524.
20 Nicole George and Lia Kent, ‘Sexual violence and hybrid peacebuilding: how does silence “speak”?’, Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal 2, no. 4, (2017): 518–537; Lia Kent, ‘Sounds of Silence: Everyday Strategies of Social repair in Timor-Leste’, Australian Feminist Law Journal 42, no. 1 (2016): 31–50; Nhabiseng Motsemme, ‘The Mute Always Speak: On Women’s Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, Current Sociology 52, no. 5 (2004): 909–932; Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-affected Societies’, Security Dialogue 45, no. 6 (2014): 548–564; Ann Nee and Peter Uvin, ‘Silence and Dialogue. Burundians’ Alternatives to Transitional Justice’ in Localizing Transitional Justice. Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence, eds. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf with Pierre Hazan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Porter, ‘Gendered Narratives’.
21 Parpart, ‘Choosing Silence’.
22 Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger, ‘Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting’, Social Forces 88, no. 3 (2010): 1108.
23 Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1984).
follows I build on these insights into silence as productive of agency, in order to bring forth a multifaceted conceptualisation that specifically engages with the gendered dimensions of silence. This can contribute to building bridges between feminist research, which has taken less interest in silence than in voice, and critical research on peacebuilding and transitional justice that has begun to explore silence as agency, but with little focus on the connections between silence, agency and gender.

Towards a typology of gendered silence

I propose a typology constructed around the axes of (a) disabling and enabling silences, and (b) social remembering and forgetting. These two axes will help to untangle the complex role of silence as an agential practice that, I posit, is key to understanding the challenges of building a gender-just peace in societies transitioning from war and violent conflict. It builds upon and develops categorisation work such as Connerton’s seminal discussion on ‘seven types of forgetting’ which is mostly concerned with historical processes,\(^{24}\) as well as categorisations within linguistic micro-practices such as Kurzon’s.\(^{25}\) An important contribution more directly concerned with conflictual societies is Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger’s analysis of Israeli memory practices through a typology that suggests that silence may operate ‘as a vehicle of either memory or of forgetting’ and may be overt or covert.\(^{26}\)

A word of caution is pertinent. By defining types one runs the risk of creating static categories that may seem to defy the search for ambivalent and multi-layered practices of silence. But in line with qualitative methodologists who emphasise that typologies may go beyond descriptive categorisation,\(^{27}\) the proposed typology is meant to be theory-generating and provide an analytical lens that can help us detect these fragile processes. The examples below are not so much an attempt to box them in but to make them emerge, to help us see them, and thus also to notice their inherent instability. The typology helps us see functions of silences that may be unexpected, and furthermore facilitates a search for temporal changes; how silence may move from disabling to enabling; from remembering and forgetting or the other way around.\(^{28}\) To detect such functions and changes may access something profound in transitions from war to peace. In the next section, I will illustrate and discuss four broad categories of silence through the examples entered into the diagram (Figure 1).

Disabling silences: forgetting

The first category is concerned with disabling silences connected to forgetting. My first example here concerns silence as erasure in relation to the war crime of sexual violence, which is probably the most easily recognised silence and by now fairly well researched.

\(^{24}\)P. Connerton, The Spirit of Mourning.  
\(^{25}\)Dennis Kurzon, ‘Towards a typology of silence’, *Journal of Pragmatics* 39, no. 10 (2007): 1673–1688.  
\(^{26}\)V. Vinitzky-Seroussi and C. Teeger, ‘Unpacking the Unspoken’.  
\(^{27}\)Colin Elman, ‘Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics’, *International Organization* 59, no. 2 (2005): 293–326.  
\(^{28}\)Marita Eastmond. ‘Shifting Sites: Memories of War and Exile across Time and Place’. In Monika Palmberger and Jelena Tosić, J. Eds., *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 19–46.
Historically rape and other acts of sexual violence have not been recognised as a crime, and until the beginning of the 1990s and the ground-breaking judgments in the ad hoc tribunals of ICTY and ICTR, conflict-related sexual violence has been shrouded in silence. In narratives of the colonial wars and of World War I and II these crimes are largely absent, and in even earlier wars the knowledge is lost forever of these aspects of warfare. Regarding the wars of the 20th century there are still people who are here to tell the story, and in light of the present-day knowledge and moral re-evaluation of rape as a weapon of war, the process of forgetting has at least partially been interrupted. For example, when the ‘comfort women’ who were subject to systematic rape by the Japanese military during WW2 came forward, they managed to break social forgetting and a hegemonic silence on these crimes that had been upheld for half a century. The fact that there is now international legislation in place obviously does not mean that conflict-related sexual violence stops or that it is easily talked about, but at least in formal bodies and processes, these disabling silences have permanently been broken.

Another example of disabling silence linked to forgetting through erasure concerns the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. The TRC with its aim of ‘revealing is healing’ in fact cemented new silences. These silences were largely gendered, as the proceedings constructed large voids around women’s experiences of apartheid. When Fiona Ross analysed the TRC transcripts she found that when women testified, their stories mainly concerned the suffering of their husbands and sons – their own experiences were muted. Through the privileging of the TRC of specific crimes against human rights, women’s stories of the ‘mundane’ everyday

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29Maki Kimura, ‘Narrative as a Site of Subject Construction. The “Comfort Women” debate’, Feminist Theory 9, no. 1 (2008): 5–24.
struggle of making ends meet, living with ongoing discrimination and insecurity and conducting the intimate work of care have been largely forgotten in the TRC documentation, a void that travels into other discursive realms.\(^\text{30}\)

A more active form of silence connected to forgetting is *silence as denial*: My example here concerns the local silence upheld around a rape camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina where hundreds of Bosniak women were raped by Serb paramilitaries during the war.\(^\text{31}\) The camp was set up at the spa hotel Vilina Vlas in the small town of Višegrad and the place is once again a popular tourist resort. The atrocious events of the past are overwritten by practices that seamlessly continue after the war rupture. The young generation growing up here, or tourists coming from neighbouring Hungary or Serbia, have no knowledge of the atrocities committed in the bar where they enjoy drinks and in the hotel rooms where they sleep. Thus it may seem as if the atrocious events are obliterated – ‘as if it never happened’.\(^\text{32}\) Yet many have detailed knowledge of what happened – including perpetrators and bystanders. Their silence is a highly agential act and is in fact intimately connected to remembering. As Connerton reflects, ‘to attempt to forget something consciously, by not referring to it, requires that one thinks of the thing, and to think of the thing is the opposite of forgetting it’.\(^\text{33}\)

### Disabling silences: remembering

Disabling silence can also be connected to remembering. Maybe the most poignant example of such a silence is the social ostracisation of victims of sexual violence. It may be taboo to mention the crime – in private relations, in the community and in official remembrance, but the silence that surrounds them is not meant to lead to forgetting but to remembering. This is *silence as shame*. The fact that the victim is never allowed to move on, means that this silence does not lead to forgetting. The events remain with the victim and can even be carried as a social stigma through generations. Franke calls this phenomenon ‘the stickiness of shame’.\(^\text{34}\) Women who have testified in tribunals have experienced that a silence engulfs them in their own intimate and social web of relations, leading to loneliness and isolation.\(^\text{35}\) Another example concerns women who were labelled as traitors for engaging with soldiers of occupying forces during World War II, such as the women in Finland that Tarja Väyrynen has written about.\(^\text{36}\) They have never been able to speak about their relationships with Nazi soldiers and the stigma of being ‘Hitler’s brides’ has never been lifted, kept in place by oppressive silence.

Closely related to the silences of shame are the ‘silences and voids that inhere within speech’ that Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger have identified.\(^\text{37}\)

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30F. C. Ross, *Bearing Witness*.
31E.g. Balkan Insight. ‘Witness recalls rapes in Vilina Vlas’ (Justice Report, BIRN, 21 August, 2012).
32Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Feeling Silences in a Place of Pain’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 3 (2017): 383–385; Olivera Simic and Zala Volcic, ‘In the land of Wartime Rape: Bosnia, Cinema, and Reparations’, *Griffith Journal of Law & Human Dignity* 2, no. 2 (2014): 377–401.
33P. Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning*, 72.
34K. Franke, ‘Gendered Subjects’.
35Ibid.
36Tarja Väyrynen, ‘Muted National Memories. When the Hitler’s Brides Speak the Truth’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16, no. 2 (2014): 218–235.
37V. Vinitzky-Seroussi and C. Teeger, ‘Unpacking the Unspoken’, 1108.
speech I turn to the discourse in Rwanda on rape during the genocide. The history of the genocide is an integral part of Rwandan identity-making and the increasingly authoritarian state imposes a top-down narrative of ‘reconciliation and unity’. Gender equality is part of this narrative of political identity and genocidal rape has been acknowledged in the general discourse and is used as a key point of reference in stories about the genocide. Official discourse is replete with oft-repeated phrases such as ‘women are the greatest sufferers’, because ‘the woman was raped and her children killed’. However, within all this loud speech there are some poignant silences. There is an absence of personal testimonies that refer to these experiences in museums, memorials and open archives. These silences and voids inherent in speech are apparent in the work of the Genocide Archives which have been entrusted with creating a digital archive of documents and recorded testimonies. Although some of the women do talk about rape in some of the testimonies, staff interviewed at the museum and at the archives expressed discomfort with this and suggested that rape and sexual violence was not a subject ‘fit’ to make public at the website. A senior archivist alluded to the decision not to include a testimony about rape by a woman who had been a witness at the ICTR:

In 2011 we collected one testimony from the South. The woman had even been to testify in the ICTR. But it is much too tough. She speaks in detail about things that happened to her, we are not familiar with hearing these things. Calling it with proper names.

The senior archivist took on the role of censoring this woman’s testimony and in effect not making it available at the website. ‘She does not care, but we decided no one should listen to that …. We limit access because it will make the audience feel uncomfortable’. In this case, the Genocide Archives seem to provide a distorted acknowledgement that does not permit any personal stories of rape but instead privileges the construction of iconic woman victimhood. That rape was committed during the genocide is thus accepted as a generic idea, but it is an empty narrative in so far as it cannot contain any personal, messy stories of sexual violence. The example of the witness who was censored from the memorial’s website is supported by Kaitesi, who argues that the Rwanda rape victims’ experiences have been … ‘socially labeled … as unbearable and unspeakable’. The symbolic rape victim may function as an object for social and collective mourning and is activated in support of a nationalist agenda, yet the real rape victims in Rwanda are marginalised, live precariously and are shrouded in silence in the midst of loud speech concerning gender equality and the suffering of women.

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38Personal interviews, Rwanda, (January 2015). For a more extended discussion on gendered commemoration in Rwanda, please see Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Gender, Narrative, Affect: Top-down politics of commemoration in post-genocide Rwanda’, *Memory Studies* [http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1750698017730869](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1750698017730869) (first published September 29, 2017); see also Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 2012).

39Caroline Williamson, ‘Breaking the silence: Rwandan Women Survivors Give Testimony and Find a Voice’ (E-IR, 27 April, 2014). [http://www.e-ir.info/2014/04/27/breaking-the-silence-rwandan-women-survivors-give-testimony-and-find-a-voice/](http://www.e-ir.info/2014/04/27/breaking-the-silence-rwandan-women-survivors-give-testimony-and-find-a-voice/).

40Personal interview, Rwanda, (January 2015).

41Usta Kaitesi, *Genocidal Gender and Sexual Violence: The legacy of ICTR, Rwanda’s ordinary courts and gacaca courts* (Cambridge, Antwerp and Portland: OR Insertia, 2014): 239.
Enabling silences: forgetting

Moving on from disabling silences, I now turn to enabling silences that people engage with in order to generate social forgetting; employed as strategies for coping with insecurity in the aftermath of war, navigating a difficult everyday and engaging in interactions with ‘the other side’. I call this silence as coping strategy and while coping may not hold a lot of promise of transformation, such strategies may still have leverage for people in highly precarious situations, in terms of survival and dignity, as well as rebuilding a sense of ‘normality’.

The film Grbavica that I presented in the beginning of this article provides some rich grounds for reflection on these issues. The disdainful way that the women in the psychosocial therapy group reacted to the ‘talking cure’ suggested by the facilitator indicate that talk about the past was not what they needed in order to take care of themselves and their dependants. It seemed that it was more helpful to ‘forget’ the past, in for example their social interactions with former ‘enemies’. Such tactics are reminiscent of the way several women I have interviewed in Rwanda described their daily decisions what to talk about or not. One woman had as a young girl lost her parents and siblings in the genocide and now lived in a so-called ‘reconciliation village’ meaning that perpetrators and victims had been resettled next to each other as part of top-down resettlement (and reconciliation) plans. She had constructed her house together with a convicted perpetrator who had participated in attacks on her village and had decided not to talk to him about the past. As he had asked for forgiveness, she had decided, despite her loss, to only talk about the present and the future with him and the other villagers. To engage in silence as a means for socially forgetting such atrocities seems excruciatingly difficult, yet it was a strategy that had helped her obtain a house and some income from the village production of baskets.

Another reason why agents may choose silence with the aim to forget is its protective function. Silences as protection include strategies to keep pain from others and make relationships possible. Esma, the mother in the film Grbavica, did not reveal that her daughter Sara was born from rape. Towards the end of the film Esma describes her feelings at the time of the birth of Sara. She did not want to look at her, just take her away, she told the midwife, but then, listening to the baby crying in another room, she decided to feed her, just once. When Esma looked down at her daughter, she saw something beautiful, and she ‘had not seen anything beautiful in a long time’. Over the years as her daughter was growing up, silence seems to have protected this beauty and kept her fierce love for Sara separate from the violence of the camp. It is a silence in which love grew, and a silence that protected Sara from ostracisation. Eventually it is Sara who emerges as an agent of change – and forces her mother to break the silence. The time has come to remember and to speak. Thus Žbanić’s film poignantly captures how the meaning and function of silence can change and that silence and forgetting can in fact be replaced by speech and remembering.

42 Mac Ginty provides examples of several types of social practices that people engage with in the everyday of conflict-affected societies, many of them which more or less implicitly involve silence. R. Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday Peace’, 556.
43 E.g. Marita Eastmond, ‘Introduction: Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Everyday Life in War-Torn Societies’, Focaal 57 (2010): 3–16.
44 Personal interview, Rwanda (January 2015). See also J.E. Burnet, Genocide Lives in Us.
Enabling silence: remembering

There are also enabling silences which are used in order to induce remembering. Such silences are employed as a way of making claims in various ways and exercise individual authority in the face of power. To illustrate silence as resistance I turn to the writings by Alejandro Castillejo Cuellar on the memory practices around the so-called Gugulethu Seven, a group of young activists murdered in the township of Gugulethu outside Cape Town by the apartheid regime.\(^{45}\) He notes a flurry of memory activities around this event; two commissions of enquiry, TRC hearings, a memorial stone, museum exhibitions, tourist tours. As such the event is firmly ingrained in local and national collective memory – and yet the consequences of the act of violence are veiled in silence. The mothers of the killed have gained little from sharing their memories of their sons. They continue to struggle, on their own, with the socioeconomic consequences of the apartheid days. There is a conundrum here: ‘So many signposts directed at the Gugulethu Seven in Cape Town’s subtle cartography of memory, and yet, ironically, there they were, almost forgotten, and the corner, almost invisible’.\(^{46}\) So far this example reads as belonging to the category of disabling silences that are constructed through speech and remembering. Yet a new element enters as it emerges that the mothers have pointedly refused to further engage with the steady stream of researchers, documentary filmmakers, trauma experts that demand to hear their testimonies. Their refusal demonstrates silence as an agential act of resistance, and a vehicle for taking back control over their own memories. It is true that testimonies, once told publically, become a ‘commodity’\(^{47}\) in the memory industry in which the narrator holds little control over the audience and the settings in which her narrative is used and retold. The women’s refusal to speak is in fact a loud protest that makes an uneasy disturbance in the smooth narrative of ‘the rainbow nation’. Castillejo-Cuéllar’s otherwise astute analysis fails to make any mention of the gendered dimension of this refusal. Reading it in conjunction with Ross’ and Motsemme’s critique of the TRC and the gendered gaps in the narratives produced there, it is clear that the silence of these mothers does have a gendered dimension.\(^{48}\) The women’s protest makes visible the selective remembering of the violent deaths of the young seven; a spectacular act of violence, and the simultaneous forgetting of the everyday oppression and mundane struggle against apartheid that mostly women fought.

My last illustration concerns silence as making claims. This is a strategy I noticed was often practised in the small town of Foća in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this deeply fractured town which saw some of the worst crimes during the war, about half of the population was forced to flee; they were ‘ethnically cleansed’. At the time of my fieldwork there, only a small minority had returned although many lived close by and former neighbours and friends shared the same geographical space. Perpetrators, by-standers and victims shared knowledge about the atrocities committed in the town, including several rape camps, but the war was seldom spoken about. There were many reasons for this silence. Some told of the need to protect the young generation, thus another example of protective silence. Others felt that in a hostile environment in which speaking about the past events might unleash aggression

\(^{45}\) Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, ‘Unraveling Silence: Violence, Memory and the Limits of Anthropology’s Craft’, Dialectical Anthropology 29 (2005): 159–180.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 162.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) F. C. Ross, and N. Motsemme, ‘The Mute always Speak’. 
and further insecurity, silences could be a way of communicating claims and remind perpetrators and bystanders of the deeds of the past. Many of the returnee informants expressed in various ways how ‘being back’ was in itself a powerful statement that was made without uttering a word about the events of the war. Through the act of return, the returnees made moral claims; they had a right to be back, and by being back they – at least to a small extent – reversed the violence of the ethnic cleansing, thereby also making visible the void left by those dead and missing who would never return. The returnees thus challenged the dominant narrative not through verbal articulations but through the act of ‘just’ being there. How this could play out in everyday social interactions is described by a woman in her fifties who had not actually returned to the town but lived a few kilometres away in the (Bosniak-dominated) Federation part of the country. Still, she made a point of keeping in touch with her old friends and being seen in the town cafés, which form a very important space for Bosnian social relations: ‘Very often I go to town. I have friends there, school friends.’ When I asked whether they ever talk about the war, she shook her head:

No. No, no … . We drink coffee, talk about our jobs, just nothing important, women’s talk, like clothes, shopping and so on. My friends respect me but I make them feel guilty. They do not want to greet me but they must, because they are ashamed.49

**Gender, silence and agency: concluding reflections**

While some theorists of resistance are sceptical of typologies, arguing that they are inherently biased,50 others insist that a typology is a means of codifying power relations and bringing theoretical order to what would otherwise be no more than an aimless and ‘infinite reiteration of case studies’.51 I hope that the typology I have here proposed does not hinder but help thinking through the relationship between silence, gender and agency in post-conflict societies in order to develop a structured insight into gendered silences in transitions from war to peace. The grid of the typology has been used to identify and categorise modes and functions of silence, thereby unveiling how gendered, oxymoronic fluctuations between silence and speech play out in the everyday and how hegemonic discourses and institutionalised silences are resisted not only by speech and voice, but by and through silence. As Clair notes, these are simultaneous processes of ‘how expression is silenced and how silence is turned into expression’.52

Drawing together the key observations in the short vignettes above, it seems that new theoretical insights have been produced by reading different silences through the analytical grid. Disabling silences that involves forgetting are examples of how hegemonic discourses construct silence that erase agents and events from history simply by not referring to them. Sometimes such disabling silences involve a more active forgetting, e.g. denials as part of ongoing contestations. There are also disabling silences that are constructed not as voids or denial but reside within speech and discourse. By upholding ‘shame’ discourses and disciplining how certain subjects are talked about

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49 Personal interview, Foča (July 2008). I have written elsewhere about the everyday dynamics in Foča, see Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Remembering and Forgetting after War. Narratives of Truth and Justice in a Bosnian town’, *Political Psychology* 36, no. 2 (2015): 231–242; and, M. Eastmond and J. Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Silence as Possibility.

50 E.g. Foucault, 1973: 70.

51 Clegg cited in R. P. Clair, *Organizing Silence*, 159.

52 Ibid., 154.
and referred to, such silences become part of social remembering and relegate victims to constrained subject positions. Concerning enabling silences, I have noted that such silences in relation to forgetting can be a powerful tool in order to rebuild (gendered) lives and livelihoods after devastating violence, and a necessary skill to navigate post-conflict realities. Such silences enable and protect close relationships and can offer dignity and spaces for respect and love to grow. Enabling silences that engage with processes of remembering, can just as speech be performed as an act of resistance, in order to make sure that events of violence and abuse do not slip into the voids of disabling forgetting. Silence as an act of making claims upholds dignity and can be used in situations when speech may be too divisive (and threaten fragile systems of coexistence). When the social fabric has been ripped apart, relationships fragmentised by violence, and insecurity enfolded into the everyday, the work of constructing a lifeworld cannot always be done through words.  

To see this, we need to embrace a state of suspension as silence is used as part of the ‘agentic work of the imagination’ that is needed to rebuild lifeworlds. The idea of closure and justice through the act of speaking out thus becomes muddled when we pay attention to these localised strategies in the everyday. While many vernacular post-war challenges can never be addressed through formal mechanisms for peacebuilding and transitional justice, we can, through the study of silence, detect a wealth of expertise among people that involves the reconstruction of relationships, social as well as economic, in which silence is a valuable strategy.

The typology has brought forth that silence is constructed in temporal and spatial moments of relationality, as the subject may choose/be able to speak in one context, and to be silent in another in an ongoing oscillation of power. Investigating the temporality of silence that interplays with changing spaces for agency of the subject means tracing how silence may move between enabling to disabling and how societal process may shift between remembering and forgetting. What is ‘unspeakable’ at one point may at another time produce voice and agency, and silence may transform into speech. Marita Eastmond has demonstrated in her longitudinal research among Bosnian refugees how silences of painful loss can take on new meanings in new contexts and across generations, as memories of violence are reworked and recharged. The types of silence I have here brought forth are thus not closed categories but rather in constant dialogue with each other and there is an inherent possibility in each expression of silence for change and transformation over time. Connerton notes that ‘forgetting is not always a failure’ and points to the role in forgetting for emancipation, ‘the subjective transformation of individual life chances … increasingly released from fixed social status and role hierarchies.’ While Connerton’s text is devoid of any references to feminist literature or indeed to how such hierarchies tend to be deeply gendered, his thinking certainly resonates with a long tradition of feminist literature on agency. The types of silence identified

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53Veena Das. Life and Words. Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
54N. Motsemme, ‘The Mute Always Speak’, 910.
55M. Eastmond, Shifting Sites.
56P. Connerton, The Spirit of Mourning, 34.
57Ibid., 38.
above show how gendered discourses and practices rely on silence to oppress and
control, yet silence may provide new paths towards challenging and transforming
power relations. That said, acknowledging that silence holds transformative poten-
tial is not intended to neglect structural constraints. All the examples that I have
discussed here of women’s use of silence are undertaken within structures of power,
including unequal gender relations as well as socioeconomic and other hierarchies,
and thus agential choices about where, when and whether to engage in silence or
speech must always be understood in relation to such dynamics. To focus on
silences means that we can begin to chart how power structures are experienced,
negotiated and challenged at the level of subjects and community. By attending to
the nexus of micropractices of silence and societal processes of remembering and
forgetting, this article is a starting point for further studies of how practices of
silences at the micro level are entangled in larger processes at the level of hegemonic
discourses and institutional narratives. It continues the discussion by Jelena
Obradovic-Wochnik and others on how top-down transitional justice institutions
and practices may in fact create ‘silent subjects’ that are discouraged from speaking
about experiences that may not fit dominant narratives.58

One of the points I want to make in this article is that to more fully understand
times and spaces of direct and indirect violence, we need to engage in a much more
finely tuned search for the everyday work of agential subjects to find points of
possible transformation in the midst of marginalising power structures. In this
sense, the article adds to the rich and longstanding feminist literature that looks
at everyday occurrences and phenomena in order to disclose and understand how
private and intimate social relations are connected to international relations.59
Applying a gender lens on silence reveals micro-macro power dynamics with deep
implications for discourses and practices concerned with societal transitions from
war and conflict, such as peacebuilding and transitional justice. The gender per-
spective is central for the understanding of how agency and silence are intertwined
and by paying attention to the complexity of silence, the role of gender in post-war
transitions becomes clearer.

Feminist theories and methodologies have already advanced insights into the nexus
of gender and agency. By focusing on subjectivities and power relations, feminist
research as well as critical peace research have opened for a multifaceted discussion
on both silence and speech. To also include silence and not only voice in the study of
agency will certainly bring epistemological gains for literature on both peacebuilding
and feminist research and maybe even build some bridges. By moving away from a
binary understanding of silence as sequestered from speech, it becomes possible to
capture the multi-layered, oxymoronic modes and functions of disabling and enabling
silences in conflict-affected societies.

58 Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, ‘The “Silent Dilemma” of Transitional Justice: Silencing and Coming to Terms with the Past
in Serbia’, International Journal of Transitional Justice 7 no. 2 (2013): 328–347.
59 E.g. C. Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases; C. Enloe, Nemo’s war, Emma’s war;
C. Sylvester, War as Experience; Ann Tickner, Gender in International Relations. Feminist Perspectives on Achieving
Global Security (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
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