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## **Feminist Rhetorics: Theory and Practice of Strategic Silence**

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# Feminist Rhetorics: Theory and Practice of Strategic Silence

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2021

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May 2021

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# ABSTRACT

Feminist Rhetorics: Theory and Practice of Strategic Silence

by Paolena Comouche

Building upon the concepts discussed by Cheryl Glenn in her book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, I conduct a thorough exploration of how silence can be used rhetorically as a unique and powerful form of communication. Because traditional rhetorical theory is rooted in patriarchal bias that “embodies ‘experiences and concerns of the white male as a standard,’” traditional rhetoric is exclusive of groups outside of those that have dominated the discipline (Glenn 155). As a result, it is important to explore rhetoric beyond traditional theory with consideration of feminist and multicultural perspectives, as the exclusion of these perspectives limits the study of rhetoric to only involving traditional values that fail to recognize or consider unconventional forms of communication that harbor rhetorical power similar to that of speech. In a society that greatly values speech, silence is often considered a signification of powerlessness. Yet, when considering silence outside of the male-defined, traditional context, strategic silence can act as a refusal to comply with dominant discourses, allowing for a redistribution of conversational power and the ceasing of gender favorability. Within its refusal to partake in the masculinized exchange of language, strategic silence works to resist patriarchal practices rooted in established social hierarchies that would otherwise reject the speaker, thus exposing the problematic nature of such hierarchies and the rhetorical situations at hand. All in all, this thesis explores theories and practices involving the use of silence as a rhetorical strategy and seeks to uncover the power of strategic silence, as within the absence of sound lies unspoken communication and the capacity to gain control.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Discovering the Rhetorical Power of Silence

As a child, I was molded into the personality type that is now negatively classified as a “push-over” after being repeatedly disciplined for challenging authority or vocalizing feelings of dissatisfaction amongst adults. Unlike my brother, I was forcibly taught not to question those with authority, and when I made the mistake of doing so, I was met with punishment and the phrase “because I said so,” or “I am the mother, you are the child. It doesn’t matter what you think, it only matters what I say.” Whenever I did get into trouble, most of the time I was told it was because I “opened my mouth,” and if I had kept silent, everything would have been alright. My inability to comply with the standard of remaining silent faded at a young age. Through my transition into adulthood, I had developed a habit of concealing negative emotions with silence, as I had been socially conditioned to believe that using my voice was not only often ineffective, but also had negative consequences. Wasting my breath on verbal explanations that would likely be invalidated seemed pointless. However, through this social conditioning, I began to realize the communicative power that lies within silence. Recently, while driving to the grocery store with my significant other, I was lost in my thoughts, consumed by anger after an hour-long quarrel with my mother. Only a few minutes passed before my partner, noticing that I hadn’t turned on the radio, broke the silence with the question “What’s wrong? I can see something is bothering you.” I then realized he didn’t *see* that something was bothering me, but *heard* it, as the absence of sound implied the presence of an issue within my mind. Not only did my silence effectively communicate my feelings

of dissatisfaction, but it encouraged my partner to inquire about the source of these negative emotions in an effort to understand them.

This led me to consider silence in relation to familial estrangement—when the relationship between family members is severed by a refusal to speak to one another, by a commitment to silence. I decided I would utilize the power of silence to my advantage, hoping that a delivery of strategic silence would have the same effect on my mother that it did on my partner, and possibly compel her to reflect on why I had chosen to stop speaking to her. A few months after I had committed to remaining silent and refusing to engage in conversation with her, my mother began to understand the problematic nature of her behavior towards me. For years, she had only responded to my verbal attempts at communicating my dissatisfaction with invalidation, constantly insisting I was wrong and finding ways to victimize herself rather than listening to what I had to say. However, when I ceased these verbal attempts and instead remained silent, my mother was forced to listen and ultimately began to understand and accept the existence of a problem. For the first time in my life, she reflected on her unreceptive behavior, recognized how it had been harmful to our relationship, and agreed to work on it in an effort to break the silence. This experience allowed me to discover the rhetorical power of strategic silence. When my words proved to be ineffective, I was able to strategically utilize silence, which not only compelled my mother to listen, but to finally be persuaded that something was wrong.

## **1.2 Why Silence?**

Although the purpose of words is to communicate meaning, words are often disregarded, invalidated, or unheard, as their meaning can disintegrate in the presence of disagreement. Oftentimes, words fail us. We will speak them with passion, with purpose, with strength; yet they

will remain unheard. We will speak them with power, with rationale, with reason; yet they will still be met with invalidation, with claims that they lack objectivity, with biased assumptions that decide our words are wrong before we've even had the opportunity to part our lips. The concept of speech has its limitations, as its ability to reach others is dependent on others' willingness to be reached. More specifically, the rhetorical effectiveness of speech is entirely reliant on whether or not others are willing to listen.

When examining the rhetoric of speech through a feminist lens, it becomes clear that the patriarchal nature of society has disallowed the voices of women from being heard, as the assumed superiority of the male gender has led to the frequent invalidation of women's verbal attempts to communicate dissatisfaction with inequality and mistreatment. With the historical silencing of women, rhetorical theories of speech exist within a masculinized context that has been strategically designed for the benefits of men, as men have "always been the subject of discourse, whether in theory, morality, or politics" (Irigaray 227). As a result, the dominant form of communication that involves speech is exclusionary of female voices and often rejects the words of women with claims that such words are rooted in emotion or a lack of understanding, thus implying a lack of credibility and justifying their invalidation. To effectively combat the patriarchal rhetoric of speech when verbal communication fails in the presence of an unreceptive audience, the strategic and rhetorical use of silence can act as a powerful form of communication.

However, the utilization of strategic silence can combat the rhetoric of speech in general as well, as the inherent rhetorical power of silence can be applied to various situations, regardless of the communicators' gender. In her book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn discusses the rhetorical and gendered nature of silence, arguing that silence is too often perceived as passive subordination rather than rightfully considered an empowered action. When exploring

the use of silence as a rhetorical strategy, there are various possibilities that lie within committing to silence to disrupt oppressive noise with the absence of sound. Although silence is commonly associated with feminization and “weakness upon a normally speaking body,” Glenn argues that purposeful silence can disrupt this characterization and “function as a strategic position of strength” (2). Through the analysis of various cultural texts and theoretical perspectives, I will build upon Glenn’s ideas to demonstrate the rhetorical power of silence and argue that if it is applied appropriately, strategic silence can be used to topple social hierarchies and attain power. I will thus contribute to current rhetorical discourses by examining, comparing, and contrasting the rhetorical implications of silence and other methods of nonverbal communication, with intentions to not only promote a better understanding of the nature of rhetoric in relation to gender, but equalize the study of rhetorical theory without gender favorability.

### **1.2.1 Topics of Discussion**

To support my argument regarding the rhetorical power of silence, I will discuss silence in relation to numerous topics, beginning by defining different forms of silence to solidify the foundation of my discussion. I will begin by examining the relationship between silence and gender, and how strategic silence can be a relatively beneficial practice for women in particular. Then, I will thoroughly explore one specific form of strategic silence and how it brings upon rhetorical listening, demonstrating how utilizing strategic silence is not an exclusive technique that only benefits women, as this technique can be rhetorically effective regardless of gender. Although there are many forms of strategic silence, I will focus strictly on the silent treatment, which is defined as delivering silence in response to communication, as this is one of the more well-known and popular uses of strategic silence. Through this, I will explain how silence has the power to topple social hierarchies, which will lead me to a discussion regarding silence in relation to

political power. Here, I will expand upon how silence can be used to topple political hierarchies and act as a non-traditional type of resistance, further exemplifying the rhetorical power of silence. In this section, I will also further exhibit how the nature of verbal speech has been built against women—in this case, women in positions of political power—while favoring men. The final topic of discussion will involve an exploration of other forms of nonverbal communication and how they harbor rhetorical power similar to silence, as their rhetorical implications have the same effect as the implications of silence. I will then conclude by considering how this research can be further expanded upon and offer a basis for new topics and ideas to build upon my findings in the future.

### **1.3 Defining Forms of Silence: Enforced vs. Strategic**

#### **1.3.1 Enforced Silence**

While it is my intention to argue for the rhetorical benefits of communicating via silence, it is important to clarify that this argument is only applicable to *strategic* silence and does not apply to enforced silence. It is essential to define each form of silence and acknowledge the harmful nature of enforced silence to ensure the argument is not misconstrued as promoting or supporting enforced silence. When I utilize the term “enforced silence,” I am referring to silence that is forced upon a particular person or group as a form of oppression. Throughout history, women and “other traditionally disenfranchised groups have been systematically and consciously excluded from public speaking and active listening,” in addition to being “excluded from full participation in the production of all Western canonized cultural forms, including the production of rhetorical arts” (Glenn 24). The female gender, and various racial groups, most commonly people of color, have been systemically oppressed in many ways, one of the most prevalent being the silencing of their voices. In many circumstances, this silence was (and often still is) enforced upon them by violence

and punishment. For example, before the abolishment of slavery in the United States, people who were enslaved were commonly killed or physically beaten/abused for speaking without being addressed or for speaking out against figures of authority, thus being forced into submission via silence. This also applied during the Civil Rights Movement, when African American political leaders were attacked by white supremacist groups for speaking out regarding civil unrest. Silence has also been enforced via governmental law and political policy, as people of color and women have had their voices silenced by being excluded from voting rights and not having a say in political policy. Enforced silence can also apply to more recent displays of civil unrest, specifically the Black Lives Matter Movement protests, in which, as discussed by Gino Canella in “Racialized Surveillance, Activist Media and the Policing of Black Bodies,” police officers were frequently captured on video violently punishing peaceful protesters in an effort to silence them (379). Law enforcement specifically targeting activists that participate within such protests ultimately acts as a form of silencing, as it “criminalizes dissent and preemptively suppresses ‘radical’ movements” (Canella 379).

Furthermore, silence is often enforced upon victims of mental and physical abuse, which includes victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, etc. These victims can be manipulated into choosing to remain silent, or threatened with consequences, which classifies this practice as enforced silence as well. When an individual or group is oppressively stripped of the opportunity to use their voices; whether it be by threats, law, or general manipulation, silence is being enforced upon them, and is thus acting as a harmful and destructive method of withholding power from and inflicting submission upon others. More specifically, forcing silence upon another establishes a power dynamic that favors those able to speak, as it subordinates the latter by rendering them unheard and powerless. As a result, enforced silence can be considered the foundation for

perceptions of silence as a signification of weakness and “passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” (Glenn 2). Because silencing has been utilized by dominant groups to disempower minority groups or those they deem inferior, silence is commonly regarded as the “language of the powerless” (Glenn 25).

### **1.3.2 Strategic Silence**

However, the stigma surrounding silence as signifying weakness or powerlessness fails to recognize that silence can be strategically used as an empowered action. Strategic silence, which I define as silence that is utilized purposefully and willingly, can be “employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority,” in which case it “resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use” (Glenn 18). Because speech is the dominant form of communication, delivering purposeful silence when speech is expected conveys noncompliance and disrupts the power dynamic of the conversation or social situation at hand. Therefore, rather than acting as a display of submission or subordination, strategic silence can act as a form of control, a demonstration of resistance to domination, or a refusal to comply with authority. Furthermore, similar to verbal speech, silence is interpreted based on the social context in which it is delivered. Words can often have different meanings and can be interpreted differently when spoken in different social contexts. Thus, silence can also have different meanings when delivered in different social contexts, and in many of these contexts, can efficiently communicate thoughts or emotions and control the direction of the conversation entirely, amongst other benefits. Therefore, this form of silence is as inherently rhetorical as purposeful speech, and can be used as a means of domination or persuasion in the same ways that speech can.

Yet, I will also acknowledge that because strategic silence holds such rhetorical power, its use can be considered a moral issue, as this form of silence can be used manipulatively or abusively. Redistributing conversational power with strategic silence can sometimes serve as an equalizer in terms of established social hierarchies, but can also simply replace one tyrannical display of power with another if abused. Like speech, strategic silence has the power to manipulate others into submission or agreement. This is especially relevant when strategic silence is delivered in inappropriate situations as stonewalling or blatant ignoring, in which case those involved may be forced to accede in a desperate effort to end the silence. However, the purpose of this research is not to argue when strategic silence should and should not be used on the basis of morals; instead, this thesis argues that strategic silence, regardless of how it is used, holds a high amount of rhetorical power and can have circumstantial benefits in terms of attaining control. Therefore, although I will reference how strategic silence can be abused, I still intend to exemplify how even misuses of strategic silence still function as a powerful form of rhetoric, as the power of rhetoric is measured by its ability to persuade rather than in its compliance with basic human morals.



## 2 Silence and Gender

### 2.1 Speech, Power, and Masculinity

Because oppressive groups have enforced silence upon others, silence is often attributed to weakness and powerlessness, whereas those that speak and enforce silence upon others are commonly perceived as holding power and control. This perception partially contributes to the association of silence with femininity, and speech with masculinity, as society has internalized the idea that qualities involving power and domination are masculine, whereas qualities involving submission and passivity are feminine. Categorizing weaker, more submissive qualities as being feminine has allowed for the prevalence of perceived male superiority, as men are not only expected but socially conditioned to display qualities of domination and power over others, while women are expected to appease and nurture others. As discussed by Christine Delphy in her article “Rethinking Sex and Gender,” the foundation of gender values and gender differences was formed by perceived gender hierarchies (71). Values and characteristics pertaining to masculinity and femininity are essentially “the cultural creations of a society based on a gender hierarchy, as well as, of course, on other hierarchies,” making these values a social construction in which individuals are socially conditioned to adhere to a gender framework that maintains said social hierarchies (Delphy 72). Men are conditioned to be “dominants with characteristics that allow them to remain dominants;” thus the elements of gender maintain social hierarchies that favor male supremacy (Delphy 73). As a result, qualities that are considered less valuable and/or determined to be inherently weak are categorized as feminine, whereas qualities that are considered more valuable and/or imply the presence of power, are categorized as masculine. Therefore, silence is to feminine

as speech is to masculine. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that different types of speech are associated with different genders, and the more valued forms of discourse are commonly associated with men as well. For example, gossip is associated with women, and is essentially viewed negatively, whereas rational discourse is associated with men, and is highly valued within society. In order to uphold the gender framework of these associations, men and women are often trained to engage within their designated discourses, entailing that men are more often trained in discourse that society values, such as argumentation and debate in which they establish hierarchal positions, whereas women are often assumed to engage in discourse involving the private sphere, which is frequently devalued. As a result, regardless of whether or not a woman is trained in rationale discourse, she will frequently be associated with components of speech that tie her to negative stereotypes of what is labeled women's discourse.

## **2.2 Society Celebrating Silent Women**

However, this societal phenomenon is only partially responsible for the association of silence with femininity, as men's historical silencing of women has also contributed to the assumption that silence is inherently feminine. Throughout history, women have been socially conditioned to fulfill roles involving servitude and appeasement; thus, women are commonly expected to display qualities of submission and passivity, which often include being silent. For upper class women in the west, such qualities were frequently celebrated as the key characteristics a "proper lady" should have, (even though actual women's lived realities frequently contradicted these imperatives), ultimately defining traditional perceptions and expectations of womanhood across a range of classes, cultures, and time periods. According to western tradition, the "proper lady" assumed her role of servitude and silence willingly; she was to remain polite and well-mannered, especially in the presence of men. Although western society has been progressively moving away from this

traditional standard, there are still traces of such expectations throughout contemporary culture. The values that emphasized women silently complying to the wants and needs of others, while passively dedicating herself to pleasing others without expression of her own needs, can be exemplified through historical (and oftentimes, current) media representations of gender roles. In her article “Damsels in Distress: A Textual Analysis of Gender Roles in Disney Princess Films,” Nadine Maity discusses the common Hollywood trends in which characters embody traditional virtues and ideals that support male dominance while celebrating silent, submissive women. Because media representation is one of the many forms of social conditioning, it is through film that children often “discover and learn proper behaviors and how they should function in society” (Maity 28). In most early Disney princess films, female protagonists were idolized for their submissive behavior, their divine beauty, their dedication to servitude, and most of all, their ability to “suffer in silence” (Maity 31). The character of Cinderella silently obeys her wretched stepmother and stepsisters, suffering in silence until she is saved by her beloved prince. This also applies to Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, who literally sleeps silently until she is saved by Prince Charming, just as Snow White does in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Additionally, Princess Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* willingly surrenders her voice to win the affections of her prince – all of these women silently accept the dire nature of their situations, never displaying an ability to take action or complain and are seemingly devoted to endless compliance. Their commitment to suffering silently is ultimately rewarded when they are saved by their men and able to live happily ever after. This media trope of celebrating silent women has greatly contributed to the silencing of women through social conditioning, as it directly communicates that silent suffering and servitude make women more desirable. Idealizing women who are silent as a way to enforce silence upon women thus advances the assumption that silence is inherently feminine.

When considering this harmful form of enforced silence, it may seem obvious to assume that it is necessary to combat said enforced silence by encouraging women to use their voices. Although I will acknowledge that speaking out is essential in many cases, and that women should be empowered to speak out in spite of having been forced to remain silent for so long, the nature of speech is often unreliable, specifically for the female gender. Therefore, to avoid the unreliability of speech, it can be beneficial for women to instead utilize silence strategically as an advantage. If used in the appropriate circumstances, silence can be transformed from indicating weakness to functioning as a position of strength, thus acting as an alternative rhetorical practice that is arguably as efficient as verbal rhetoric without being exclusionary of women.

### **2.3 Male Domination of Verbal Rhetoric**

Because traditional rhetorical theory is rooted in patriarchal bias that “embodies ‘experiences and concerns of the white male as a standard,’” traditional rhetoric is exclusive of groups outside of those that have dominated the discipline (Glenn 154). As a result, the study of rhetorical theory has been limited to being “concerned solely with the traditional pursuit of verbal persuasion” that consists of a foundation created by and for men (Glenn 155). Unlike scientific or mathematical theories, traditional rhetorical theory relies on the values of its male pioneers to define what are the most valuable and effective methods of persuasion. According to Robert Scott in his article “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” traditional rhetoric is commonly considered the art of persuasion that makes “the truth effective, courting an attitude which has nearly always viewed rhetoric as the harlot of the arts because ‘truth,’ of course, can be taken in several senses” (43). Building on Scott’s claim that the truth “can be taken in several sense,” the male domination of verbal rhetoric has allowed men to decide in what ways the truth *should* be taken, as men have ultimately created the criteria for what makes the “truth effective” or what makes speech

rhetorically successful. Because men have been responsible for deciding what language and forms of verbal argumentation are plausible, effective truths are entirely dependent on male argumentative standards and values. Consequently, when women attempt to verbally express themselves in ways that do not comply with the criteria men have created, their words are frequently disregarded or classified as not containing credibility or reason.

As discussed by Dale Spender in *Man-Made Language*, the rules and uses of language, of which were shaped by men, ultimately promote a male view of the world that reinforces the myth of male superiority and thus justifies male power and female inferiority (6). Because men shaped the language and discourse that constructs our reality, they have been able to manipulate such discourse in favor of themselves and thus construct a reality that justifies male power (Spender 6). One of the most prominent rules of male-slanted language is “that of the male-as-norm...While this rule operates we are required to classify the world on the premise that the standard or normal human being is a male one and when there is but *one* standard, then those who are not of it are allocated to a category of deviation” (Spender 7). Those that do not adhere to this rule, or the other male-centered language criteria as created by the patriarchal order, are “accused of not behaving *reasonably* in the context of the patriarchal order...for when society has developed a particular pattern for meaning, those who do not abide by it are being unreasonable – in its terms” (Spender 7). Therefore, women must adhere to the male-defined criteria of reasonability and language standards if they hope to be heard. Without female voices in mind, the criteria for rhetorically effective speech thus allows for the further oppression of women by providing justification for the constant invalidation of female verbal expression when it does not align with inherently male plausibility standards. Thus, if a woman wishes for the possibility of being heard, she must adapt and deliver her speech in the language of her oppressors and embody what said oppressors define

as “eminently *reasonable* behavior” (Spender 7). In doing this, she can be “disadvantaged when it comes to articulating [her] experience and circulating [her] cultural capital,” and will find herself “adapting, mediating, and subordinating [her] own ideas and forms of expression to that of the dominant discourse and in the dominant idiom” (Glenn 28). Limiting a speaker’s expression to comply with standards independent of their own puts the speaker at an automatic disadvantage and leaves their words more susceptible to denigration.

## **2.4 Verbal Rhetoric Rejecting Women**

Furthermore, female verbal expression is still commonly disregarded when it *does* align with the rhetorical standards of men, as the assumed superiority of the male gender throughout history has been known to discredit the opinions, ideas, and competency of women. As discussed by Kelly Ferguson in her book *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory*, men will often opt to disregard the complexities of the female experience rather than genuinely attempting to understand the struggles and experiences vocalized by women (2). Arguing against the hierarchal structure of patriarchal discourses, Ferguson notes that western male thinkers have “relentlessly established the male to be the norm, shrugging their shoulders at women’s incomprehensibility, their essential mystery,” illustrating the common male assumption that women are simply incomprehensible and therefore subject to invalidation (2). There has been a lack of effort amongst such thinkers to truly understand the minds of women, regardless of women’s efforts to display competency that would otherwise allow women to “claim entry into the worlds that men have reserved for themselves” (3). Considering Ferguson’s ideas in relation to rhetoric, traditional/historical western rhetoric is a discourse created by men that has been reserved for men; therefore it consistently rejects the words of women even if they do conform to male standards of communication. Without a desire to truly listen to or understand the voices of

women, men have often resorted to labeling female expression as other, as incomprehensible or unreasonable (Ferguson 2). With preconceived assumptions that men are “the norm” and women are unreasonable or too difficult to understand, women are commonly regarded as the contrary and their words often do not receive the same amount of consideration as their male counterparts’, despite a woman’s ability to apply rhetorically effective speech.

Moreover, in his book *Aristotle on Emotion: A Contribution to Philosophical Psychology, Rhetoric, Poetics, Politics, and Ethics*, William Fortenbaugh discusses Aristotle’s contribution to rhetoric in addition to Aristotle’s belittling perceptions of women that have been instrumental for female rejection within the field of verbal rhetoric. Aristotle’s views of women imply that they are incapable of implementing effective rhetorical practices and should thus be ignored in their attempts to do so. Throughout his life, Aristotle continuously made “a valid argument for natural slavery,” claiming that a “natural slave lacks a developed logical side; he or she cannot deliberate, reason, or reflect on choices. Since such a person lacks internal reason, it is appropriate that a person who does possess reason should rule his or her behavior” (Fortenbaugh 34). Aristotle believed this also applied to women, as “for Aristotle women possessed reason, but in a very weak or attenuated sense,” because women were, according to the “father of rhetoric,” less capable of cognitive reason and simply acted on emotion (Fortenbaugh 35). This assumption, although it has been debunked repeatedly, has served as a basis for the female stereotype that women are less capable of reasonable thought and are driven by their emotions, which hinders their credibility. This stereotype is so deeply rooted within societal perceptions that many women often make these assumptions about other women as well. Therefore, even when women verbally present themselves with dominance and a strong command of rationality, of which traditional male rhetors have deemed the most valuable qualities of speech, they are still often written off as being

emotional or more harshly criticized for their displays of emotion, regardless of the audience's gender. In various circumstances, women will display the same external emotion as their male counterparts and yet will receive ridicule and invalidation due to assumptions that their emotions control them and disallow the prevalence of rationale thought. In her article "Leading with Their Hearts? How Gender Stereotypes of Emotion Lead to Biased Evaluations of Female Leaders," Victoria Brescoll reviews research regarding gender stereotypes in the workplace, and how these stereotypes influence perceived credibility of female leaders in Western culture. Brescoll reveals the many barriers that women in leadership positions face as a direct result of stereotypical perceptions that women are less "rational and objective" than men (416). When examining various studies regarding workplace gender stereotypes, Brescoll found that a female leader's display of objectivity and use of objective speech "did not change the perception that she was more emotional than an equally successful male leader, and therefore not as stable or rationale as he was" (417). Additionally, Brescoll notes that when female leaders are described as making an objective decision without inclusion of information regarding her emotional state, individuals still "inferred that her decision *was* driven by emotion, but did not make the same inference for the male leaders described as making the identical decision" (417). As a result, female leaders' decisions were perceived to be "worse than her male counterparts" because it is "likely her thought process was influenced by her emotions" (Brescoll 417). Female displays of objectivity, rationale, and level-headedness are frequently deemed irrelevant against assumptions of emotional powerlessness.

This is further exemplified by Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, in which she discusses historic and contemporary stereotypes of women in the workplace. Kanter explains that the "most pervasive stereotype of women in organizations is that they are 'too emotional,' whereas men hold the monopoly on rational thought. Women represent



the antithesis of the rational manager. They were considered by some people in a *Harvard Business Review* survey to be ‘temperamentally unfit for management’...The women who were tolerated were the ones who could demonstrate the ability to ‘think like a man’” (25). Yet, these stereotypes have been contradictory in terms of the types of behaviors that are tolerated amongst men and women in the workforce. According to Kanter’s research, women are expected to be emotional, and therefore emotional expression from women is not tolerated, whereas men are *not* expected to be emotional, yet their displays of emotion are both more common and more accepted in the corporate world (Kanter 25). Despite the common occurrences of male outbursts in response to criticism or stress within corporate settings, women have still been historically generalized as personnel that “base their actions on ‘irrational’ factors,” and are thus more heavily criticized for any form of emotional expression within the workplace, even if this emotional expression is frequently displayed by her male counterparts (Kanter 25). The irrational, emotional behavior of men in the workplace is overlooked as a result of the male gender’s association with rational thought, just as the rational behavior of women in the workplace is overlooked as a result of the female gender’s association with emotionality. Therefore, because women have been historically perceived as the inferior sex, their words are more likely to be overlooked and labeled as incomprehensible or led by emotion, regardless of their ability to meet the male established criteria of rhetorical effectiveness and rational behavior.

# **3 The Silent Treatment and Rhetorical Listening: Methods and Benefits of Strategic Silence**

## **3.1 Defining the Silent Treatment**

Misconceptions of credibility (or lack thereof) brought upon by gender stereotypes of emotionality and rational thought can be combated by different methods of strategic silence, depending on the rhetorical situation at hand. There are various methods of strategic silence that can be rhetorically effective when applied in different circumstances; however, I will focus on one of the most common forms of strategic silence that many people are likely to have either utilized themselves, or have had utilized against them. This communicative technique that highlights the rhetorical power of strategic silence is what many people refer to as “the silent treatment,” which entails the communication of disapproval or dissatisfaction by replacing verbal responses with silence. Although the silent treatment can be ineffective and harmful when used in inappropriate contexts, the technique embodies the rhetorical practicality of silence through its ability to communicate the presence of an issue while prompting efforts to recognize or understand the issue at hand.

Building upon Glenn’s ideas, I will argue that when immersed within a rhetorical situation involving an audience that is unwilling to accept verbal attempts at expression, the strategic utilization of the silent treatment can act as a powerful form of rhetorical communication that combats reluctance to listen and resists patriarchal oppression in its promotion of “rhetorical

listening that leads to understanding” (Glenn 155). In the context of traditional rhetoric, the silent treatment can be used as a “resistant and creative” rhetorical practice that disbands patriarchal standards of speech by capitalizing on discourses outside of those dominated by men (Glenn 155). Furthermore, the absence of language disallows language from being challenged, leaving less opportunity for its invalidation and more opportunity to engage in rhetorical listening. Additionally, when verbal attempts at communication cease and responses are replaced with silence, individuals are likely to seek the source of the silence in an effort to understand why they are no longer being spoken to, engaging them in a form of rhetorical listening that proved inactive in the presence of speech. When applying this communicative strategy in the appropriate circumstances, the silent treatment can be an effective rhetorical practice that can derive mutual understanding in its avoidance of the invalidation that commonly accompanies speech, especially women’s speech.

### **3.2 Resisting Patriarchal Domination and Assuming Control Via the Silent Treatment**

Refusing to engage in male-dominated conversational practice by replacing verbal responses with silence can be disruptive to patriarchal standards and allow women to utilize rhetorical communication on their own terms. When women speak, they must speak in the discourses created by men, as “all language is the language of the dominant order” (Glenn 28). However, choosing *not* to speak in a rhetorical situation when a verbal response is expected disrupts the language of the dominant order and provides an opportunity to engage in alternative rhetorical practices that do not centralize men. Refusal to deliver a verbal response can “overthrow male-ordered thinking” by disengaging in the “presence of patriarchal language,” enacting a discourse that reverses the position of power and “puts women at the center” (Ferguson 3, Glenn

29). This does not imply that the silent treatment is always effective or should always be applied in the presence of disagreement, nor does this imply that women *should be* at the center, as I favor the rejection of gender hierarchies entirely. However, the silent treatment can be a beneficial rhetorical practice that combats the assumed gender hierarchies of a particular social situation by resisting this hierarchy through disengagement. Because women have been forced into expressing themselves through a dominant discourse that was never built to include them, refusing to participate in this dominant discourse and taking advantage of communicative strategies beyond the male gender's realm can dissolve the established hierarchy of the social situation at hand. Withdrawing from a conversation through silence disallows those in power from continuing to control the conversation, as the conversation ceases entirely at the commencement of disengagement. In the context of a conversational exchange that involves the consistent invalidation of one's words as well as an expectation of verbal response, the delivery of silence can act as a form of rebellion in its refusal to be complicit with patriarchal demands for speech. This not only demonstrates an ability to resist submission to expectation, but communicates disapproval of the social hierarchy being enforced within the conversation while utilizing an expressive technique that exists outside of male dominated discourses.

### **3.3 The Silent Treatment Creating Space for Rhetorical Listening**

#### **3.3.1 What is Rhetorical Listening?**

When utilized accordingly, strategic silence can inspire rhetorical listening that can often lead to understanding between communicators, depending on the rhetorical situation at hand. Before exploring the ways in which silence creates space for rhetorical listening, I will first define and discuss the concept of rhetorical listening. In her article "Rhetorical Listening: Guiguzi and

Feminists in Dialogue,” Hua Zhu discusses rhetorical listening in relation to the ideas of ancient Chinese rhetorician Guiguzi. Referring to contemporary feminist rhetoricians in comparison to Guiguzi, Zhu defines rhetorical listening as “an active communicative act that highly emphasizes understanding others” by permitting those involved to “develop a more nuanced understanding of the self and other” (3, 5). Being another non-verbal rhetorical strategy, rhetorical listening (in addition to other forms of non-verbal communication) is regarded by Guiguzi as “no less important than verbal communication” as it has the capacity to “nurture trust from the ruler” to “forge human connections,” making it extremely powerful and beneficial for “women and any other rhetoricians who are relatively less powerful” to use (Zhu 6). Demonstrating a genuine effort to listen to and consider the ideas of another instills trust within an audience-in-power, thus increasing one’s chances of being heard by the audience-in-power in return. This technique creates an opening for mutual understanding, as it requires the careful consideration of another in addition to self-reflection, which leads to a relationship of trust and genuine human connection between the speaker and audience. In addition, carefully examining the ideas of a resistant audience by listening can inspire critical thinking that allows the listener to “form associations with the resistant audience, while in the meantime, reinventing hierarchically-lower positions” (Zhu 3). In the midst of relating to another via personal connection, conceptions of hierarchal status can begin to dissipate. While engaging in rhetorical listening, the listener not only analyzes their audiences’ perceptions, but reflects upon their own in an effort to consider the existence of potential personal biases while determining the nature of their audiences’ views and discovering a basis for their own agreement or disagreement (Zhu 7). This allows for more thoroughly developed opinions and intellectual responses that have been formed as a result of legitimate contemplation rather than

assumptions of personal correctness. Therefore, rhetorical listening not only improves the odds of persuasion and understanding, but allows for the development of more well-established ideas.

### **3.4 How do you Listen to Silence?**

The silent treatment exhibits the rhetorical power of strategic silence in its ability to communicate the presence of an issue without the use of words, as people attach meaning to silence. One can listen to silence by interpreting its meaning or seeking to understand why another is resisting speech. Zhu argues that rhetorical listening is important because it requires an audience to devote themselves to physically listening so they can reflect on their own ideas while trying to understand the speaker's. However, I argue that rhetorical listening does not necessarily require one to physically listen to literal words, but only to seek genuine understanding through the careful interpretation of another's actions. If one's actions involve remaining silent, another can rhetorically listen to this silence by seeking to understand and interpret its meaning. Interpreting silence to understand why another person or persons is refusing to speak requires individual reflection in addition to the consideration of those delivering the silence, embodying the concept of rhetorical listening, but without the need for sound. Also, because silence is often associated with discomfort and awkwardness, even individuals that are purposefully trying to maintain conversational power are more likely to rhetorically listen to/interpret another's silence as a means for ending the silence. In his book *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, Adam Jaworski examines the many different interpretations of silence that allow it to operate as an efficient form of communication. Jaworski argues that silence should be recognized "as a legitimate part of the communicative system comparable with speech" as people learn to interpret the meaning of silence just as frequently as they learn to interpret the meaning of speech (3). In the case that silence is interpreted adequately, it becomes "indispensable for successful

communication” and possesses an efficiency unreachable by words, as it oftentimes communicates thoughts or emotions that people may be reluctant to say, and is interpreted rather quickly (Jaworski 4). In his assertion that silence is a powerful form communication, Jaworski provides the example of an experience he had conversing with a former neighbor that displays the communicative efficiency of delivering silence. However, I further expand upon the findings of Jaworski’s shared experience as it not only conveys the efficiency of silence, but demonstrates how one can listen to silence through the interpretation of underlying messages. During this conversation, Jaworski was asked a question that made him feel insulted, to which he responded with silence. Because Jaworski “did not verbally reply to her question,” he allowed his neighbor to “come up with the most relevant interpretation of [his] silence,” and as a result, she “knew [he] was offended by her inquiry,” understood why he felt insulted, and quickly apologized (Jaworski 4). Jaworski was able to effectively communicate his dissatisfaction and feelings of being insulted by choosing to respond with silence, while his neighbor was able to listen to this silence and interpret the source of it accordingly. Her interpretation of the silence as signifying Jaworski’s disapproval ultimately led to her understanding of why he must have disapproved of her statement, considering her quick apology. This acknowledgement of wrongdoing likely required her to reflect on her own words so as to understand his reaction to them, demonstrating her engagement in rhetorically listening to his silence. Interactions such as this provide clear examples of how one can rhetorically listen when there is no sound. Yet, this does not disqualify the possibility of misinterpretations of silence, or the possibility of individuals ignoring silence. In fact, silence is often misinterpreted, and also has the capacity to deliver the incorrect message and cause unfortunate miscommunications. Thus, when delivering silence, it is important to consider not

only the audience's social awareness and attentiveness, but all other aspects of the rhetorical situation to ensure the silence's effectiveness.

### **3.5 The Silent Treatment Creating Space for Rhetorical Listening**

According to Zhu, the limits of speech are exposed by the “high-stakes of practicing rhetoric to an audience-in-power” (6). In the silent treatment's refusal to provide words to an audience-in-power, the opportunity for such an audience to invalidate words is eliminated, creating space for rhetorical listening. It can often be impossible to guarantee that another person or persons will naturally engage themselves within rhetorical listening, as “such moments of listening are not easy to achieve” (Zhu 5). This becomes especially difficult when those involved have devoted themselves to disagreement and are so deeply enveloped within their opinions that they refrain from attempting to understand anything other than their own beliefs. When facing an obstinate audience that is determined to disregard a speaker's words, it is inevitable that these words are not being genuinely considered, heard, or understood. This one-sided form of argumentation is ineffective as it disallows equal consideration while permitting invalidation without scrutiny. Therefore, if one eventually ceases to deliver verbal responses and becomes silent, their words can no longer be invalidated and the audience must react by either accepting the silence and the conversation's end, or understanding the silence to permit the conversation's continuance. Resisting a futile conversation via silence diminishes an audience's ability to unmindfully justify their invalidation of a speaker's words while presenting the opportunity for the audience to interpret the silence and engage in rhetorical listening, as their time is no longer being spent on ceaseless attempts to express disapproval. In its rejection of the refutation that accompanies speech, the silent treatment forces individuals to decide whether they will reflect on themselves and consider why the speaker is now silent, or if they will accept permanent disengagement.



Although accepting permanent disengagement is not necessarily unlikely, the silent treatment still actively exhibits the opportunity to engage in rhetorical listening, an opportunity that would have otherwise been neglected and ignored by relentless attempts to disprove. As a result, in the silent treatment's reluctance to allow an audience to continue discrediting a speaker, it forces a choice between interpretation and reflection for the sake of continuing the conversation, or accepting silence and the conversation's end, thus exposing the audience to the option of rhetorical listening.

### **3.6 The Silent Treatment Indirectly Enforcing Rhetorical Listening**

#### **3.6.1 Avoiding “Uncomfortable” Silence**

The meanings people attach to silence are highly influenced by the way their cultures personify silence. Negative interpretations of silence are prevalent “particularly in our talkative Western culture” that values speech in its association with power (Glenn 1). In the article “The Functions of Silence: A Plea for Communication Research,” Richard Johannesen explores the functions of silence in a cross-cultural context, noting that “more often than not in Western culture silence is viewed more negatively than positively” and is “commonly regarded as an act of unfriendliness” (27). This interpretation of silence is a direct result of cultural conditioning that has influenced individuals living within Western culture to perceive silence as a technique that communicates negativity. As a result, silence can cause miscommunication when a person pauses for a long time to create a certain effect, or when a person is carefully considering what is being said and thus taking longer to respond, as their silence can likely be interpreted as disinterest or rudeness. Although this negative interpretation does cause misunderstandings, this further proves that silence is, more often than not, regarded as negative. In the example of interpersonal communication, the utilization of the silent treatment communicates an individuals' negative

emotions, or disapproval of their partner's actions or words. This also applies to contexts involving family or friends, where estrangement consists of committing to silence as a result of conflict. In consideration of Johanneson's claims that Western culture most commonly attaches negative meaning to silence, I would add that this negative association causes individuals within Western culture to feel uncomfortable in the presence of silence. People will tend to avoid silence and feel anxious when it is delivered as a response to speech because they assume silence implies another's disapproval, disagreement, or difference that obstructs the comfortable flow of conversation. In Western culture, long periods of silence are frequently referred to as "awkward," "uncomfortable," or evidence of incompatibility. Through his research of silence in relation to Western culture, Johannesen found that the majority of people prefer verbal confrontation over the delivery of silence and consider "remaining silent to be worse than saying something negative" (31). I regard this preference as an indication that people would rather experience the certainty of negative words than the feelings of unease that are associated with a lack of communication. This deep-seating aversion to discomfort brought upon by silence is demonstrated in Kipling Williams' *Ostracism: The Power of Silence*, which analyzes the psychological effects of the silent treatment in relation to the uncomfortable atmosphere created by silence. Williams explains that discomfort caused by silence "signals no end" when compared to a verbal conversation, causing those who encounter long episodes of silence to be "worn down by its ceaseless and all-encompassing nature" (25). As a result, people will often choose to withstand negative verbal expression over the silent treatment to avoid the uncomfortable environment produced by silence (Williams 28).

### **3.7 Engaging in Rhetorical Listening to Escape the Discomforts of Silence**

Because silence causes discomfort, the silent treatment not only creates an opportunity for rhetorical listening, but can *enforce* it. When met with silence, people often seek to understand

what provoked said silence in a desperate effort to regain the privilege of being spoken to. Losing this privilege “leads people to speculate endlessly” on what went wrong, causing individuals to unknowingly engage within a form of rhetorical listening in an attempt to escape the uncomfortable atmosphere created by silence (Williams 6). In the event that verbal expression is rejected by an audience that refuses to listen to or validate a speaker’s words, the silent treatment can successfully combat a reluctance to listen by communicating the existence of an issue and inflicting feelings of unease that can compel the audience search for the source of the silence in an attempt to avoid its continuance. Because rhetorical listening requires reflection to develop understanding, seeking to understand silence with the intention of “regaining or reestablishing the communicative needs that were threatened” is the first step of rhetorical listening, as it forces the audience to recognize the existence of a problem (Williams 22). This recognition, which was initiated by rhetorical listening, was consistently avoided in the presence of speech. An individual may not actively seek to understand speech as much as they would silence because speech is regarded as “the norm” and silence causes nervousness. With hopes to reignite speech and evade the discomforts of silence, individuals may strive to understand the silence that was provoked by their refusal to listen. As a result, those who have been reluctant to listen may be persuaded to consider another’s words before attempting to invalidate them, and may voluntarily (and unknowingly) engage in rhetorical listening to avoid prolonged silence. The silent treatment can thus be a powerful rhetorical strategy that enforces rhetorical listening by creating discomfort amongst a resistant audience, compelling them to seek understanding in an effort restore verbal conversation.

### 3.8 Utilizing Strategic Silence Morally

Although the silent treatment is inherently rhetorical in all contexts, it should only be used after attempting verbal explanation and should not be applied to situations that do not consist of obstinate audiences who refuse to listen. Regardless of the circumstances in which it is applied, the silent treatment always functions rhetorically, as contemporary human communication theory assumes that “a person cannot *not* communicate. Silence communicates because listeners and observers will attach meaning to silence whether the sender wishes so or not” (Johannesen 29). Therefore, responding to speech with silence inevitably permits interpretations of silence that are dependent on the context of the rhetorical situation. Whether these interpretations are correct or adequate is irrelevant, as they will occur regardless of accuracy and will thus contribute to the rhetorical implications of silence. However, utilizing the silent treatment inappropriately by refusing to communicate in circumstances in which verbal communication is important, can lead to an unethical application of rhetoric that functions to persuade via manipulation, or can act as a psychologically harmful form of stonewalling. This innately corrupt form of rhetorical communication is often used to mentally abuse others into submission by persuading them to believe they are unworthy of words, or not permitted to vocalize differing opinions, or wrong for enacting resistance in any way, amongst many other manipulative intentions. Therefore, using strategic silence to purposefully ostracize another individual into agreement by repeatedly inflicting psychological discomfort is not a morally acceptable use of silence as rhetorical communication. Yet, silence’s ability to manipulate and control another’s behavior via such discomfort ultimately demonstrates its rhetorical power.

Furthermore, depending on the context of a situation, offering a verbal explanation before committing to silence can be crucial to discovering whether or not the silent treatment is needed,

as first providing the audience with the opportunity to display receptiveness is required when determining if the speaker's words are not being heard. In the event that an audience is willing to listen and engage in a fair, open-minded discussion, the speaker should refrain from using the silent treatment to avoid miscommunication, unintended displays of contempt, or purposeful psychological abuse. In consideration of this, however, it is important to acknowledge that gender plays a large role in whether or not an audience is receptive to a particular communicator, and thus plays a role in whether or not it is ethical to apply the silent treatment before attempting verbal communication. In consideration of the historical devaluing of women's speech, it is often common for women to automatically assume that their audience will be unreceptive and thus will resort to silence immediately rather than first attempting to deliver speech. Historically, women have faced many obstacles when delivering verbal explanations in the presence of men, especially considering the patriarchal nature of speech/verbal rhetoric. Because women are more frequently interrupted, ignored, or invalidated, many have "learned to remain silent rather than initiate fruitless conversation" (Glenn 32). Therefore, given the many difficulties women experience when attempting to deliver speech, assessing the rhetorical context of a situation to establish an assumption about the audiences' genuine intent to listen, or lack thereof, is both common and essential. Additionally, in some cases, a communicator's intentions behind resorting to silence influences its moral or immoral classification, as remaining silent to avoid invalidation and belittling rather than to purposefully manipulate an audience as a form of abuse, is not necessarily an immoral misuse of silence. For example, a woman surrounded by men in the workplace may refrain from attempting to deliver a verbal explanation, as she may assess the social context of her situation and determine that her words will likely be invalidated, ignored, interrupted, or simply belittled. Therefore, rather than first speaking to give her audience an opportunity to display

receptiveness, she may resort to remaining silent in an effort to avoid what she has determined will be inevitable backlash. As a result, factors such as gender, intentions, or even race, influence the moral or immoral status of an individual's application of the silent treatment.

Overall, the inherent rhetorical power of strategic silence, as well as its ability to cause discomfort or anxiety, can allow it to function as a dangerous form of manipulation that forces others into submission, much like enforced silence. However, this only reinforces the idea that strategic silence possesses a high amount of rhetorical power that influences targeted audiences or communicators, regardless of its adherence to basic morals. Consequently, it is important to carefully consider when the silent treatment can act as an appropriate and effective rhetorical tool, and I acknowledge that although it is often necessary to first attempt a verbal explanation, this is not always applicable, as those who have had silence enforced upon them oftentimes justifiably assume particular audiences will be unreceptive.

# 4 Silence and Political Power

## 4.1 Utilizing Silence to Influence Political Power

### 4.1.1 Audiences Delivering Collective Silence

Not only does silence have the rhetorical power to topple social hierarchies in small-scale conversations, but it also has the capacity to topple hierarchies in large-scale public settings as well. When engaging with the public, political leaders often rely on verbal support from their audience to showcase and maintain their power, both in physical, in-person situations, as well as on social media platforms and television. This applies to many other public figures, including musicians, who rely on verbal support from their audiences during live shows, or comedians, who rely on laughter from their audiences to determine their success. A lack of response from the audience during events such as these implies a lack of approval, or a lack of support, from the audience. This lack of approval or support strips the speaker/performer of their power, as it is the audience's response that controls the success or failure of the event at hand, rather than the performance itself. Furthermore, those that address crowds often feed off of crowd responses, therefore, the way an audience responds to a speaker/performer influences the direction of the performance entirely, and can even stop a performance from continuing. Thus, an audience delivering silence as a response can shift the power dynamic between speaker and audience by showcasing a withdraw of the audience's support and demonstrating that the real power lies in the hands of the audience. Without the audience's reinforcement, the speaker may potentially feel

uncomfortable in the presence of silence and must face the lack of control they have over the audience (and the entire situation at hand), and thus their lack of power.

However, this brings into question why utilizing silence would be more beneficial than verbal criticism, as expressing disapproval verbally also communicates a lack of support or approval from an audience. Yet, expressing disapproval verbally does not always alter the power dynamic as efficiently as delivering collective silence can, as verbal criticism from the audience communicates to the speaker/performer that they still hold power over the audience and can control the audiences' responses, even if these responses are negative. Disengaging with the speaker/performer by refusing to respond disallows the speaker from holding power or influence over the audience entirely. Furthermore, some individuals purposefully seek negative reactions from others, and thrive off of such negative energy for the sake publicity and building power. However, if the audience collectively delivers silence, it is the audience that controls the direction of the situation and maintains power over the speaker/performer. As a result, without verbal reinforcement or reactions from an audience, public figures are faced with powerlessness.

#### **4.1.2 Silence Influencing Political Power: Donald Trump**

Therefore, although political activism that involves verbal protesting or verbal support is extremely important and often effective, the rhetorical power of silence can be used as a creative and nontraditional basis for political and social activism that influences perceptions of political power. To demonstrate how silence can be used as a form of political activism that strips a speaker of their power, I will utilize examples involving former President Donald J. Trump. During his initial presidential campaign in 2016, Trump gathered a high amount of support from performing as an aggressively opinionated, "tell-it-like-it-is" candidate at his political rallies, in which his



supporters verbally expressed their approval and support of his persona and ideals. These rallies became a routine display of power for Trump not only throughout his election campaign, but throughout his presidency, as he demonstrated a frequent need to prove that he held the support of the public, and thus held power. During these rallies, Trump relied on verbal responses from his audience, thriving on the roar of their approval and utilizing their responsive energy to display his power. However, if political leaders such as Trump were met with silence during these public events, the power dynamic would inevitably be shifted.

Without a responsive audience to fuel speech and behavior, rallies such as this would crumble, along with the power of the political leader who would no longer be aided by positive reinforcement. I believe this phenomenon contributed to the fear and anger that was expressed by the Trump administration when teenagers on social media banded together to purchase tickets for a Trump rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in an effort to strip President Trump of his ability to engage with a verbally supportive audience. Without the positive reinforcement and acknowledgement of an audience, there can be no display of power, which posed an issue for the Trump administration during his 2020 election campaign. This also applies to Trump's use Twitter, a social media platform that previously allowed him to address the public at any time. After years of posting inappropriate Tweets, President Trump was banned from Twitter, which caused an uproar not only within his administration, but within his supporters as well. American attorney, political activist, and former Republican George Conway was quoted by CNN journalist Zachary Wolf in the article "Twitter Takes Trump's Special Power Away as His Isolation Grows," noting that Trump's removal from the social media platform "has real importance in curbing his power," and that "taking him down by removing him from these platforms shows that he is powerless and diminishes his appeal" (1).

Audience responses on social media also acted as reinforcement of Trump's political power, further demonstrating that engagement from public audiences contributes to building and sustaining such power. Trump's reaction to being banned from Twitter further demonstrates how much interacting with an audience influences his perception of political power. In the article "Trump Went 'Ballistic' After Being Tossed off Twitter," Gabby Orr et al report on the statements of a White House senior administration official who was allegedly present when Trump was banned from Twitter, stating that Trump "went ballistic" and "scrambled to figure out what his options were" (1). Given that Trump had "credited Twitter in particular for powering his political ascent" at the beginning of his presidency, he was thrown into a state of panic when his ability to interact with a responsive audience on this platform was eliminated. When an audience is silent and disengaged, the speaker addressing them lacks control and power, and must face the reality that their success or failure is determined by the interactions of an audience. If there is no audience, or if the audience remains silent rather than interacting, there is no power to be shown. As a result, refusing to engage with a political leader by delivering collective silence can redistribute the power from the leader to the people.

#### **4.1.3 Using Silence to Combat the Control of Public Attention: Kaitlin Bennet**

In some cases, expressing disapproval verbally is not as effective as delivering strategic silence, especially in circumstances in which any form of attention, including negative attention, allows for the maintenance of power. There are strategies for gaining power that involve causing a public stir, as doing so creates the opportunity to control the attention of the public. To demonstrate how silence can be used as activism that combats those who purposefully seek negative responses from public audiences, I will utilize the example of radical right-wing political activist/public figure, Kaitlin Bennet. Kaitlin Bennet, otherwise known as "Gun-Girl" on social

media, built an extensive following by aggressively broadcasting offensive political statements across the Internet. Bennet's condescending, performative behavior is more criticized by the social media community than it is supported, yet this criticism acts as a strong form of publicity that ultimately maintains her ability to influence others. As the public engages with her content, Bennet strategically utilizes negative responses from her audience as publicity to remain relevant, posting videos of herself antagonizing students on college campuses with obtrusive questions about their political views. These videos then receive a high number of negative responses on social media, which further fuels Bennet's popularity and allows her to continue influencing others. Therefore, the ability to antagonize her audience into responding demonstrates that she holds power over said audience, as their negative reactions allow her to maintain influence and control over where audience invests their attention. Disengaging with her attempts to antagonize would remove her from this position of power, as she relies on audience engagement and would become powerless if she was met with silence. If students refused to answer her obtrusive questions, and instead delivered silence, her content could no longer be used to hold public attention. Additionally, if social media users committed to silence and ceased responding to her content, her power to antagonize and control their reactions would be eliminated, rendering her not only powerless, but irrelevant. Consequently, the strategic delivery of silence can also be applied in political contexts to impact the level of power held by political leaders and public figures.

## **4.2 Social and Political Movements that Have Utilized Strategic Silence**

Not only can silence be used as a response to political leaders and public figures in order to redistribute power, but it can also be used as a strategy in social movements. Applying silence in social movements can be extremely powerful, as silence can act as a form of rebellion that represents civil unrest. Committing to silence in support of a social movement can also rapidly

spread awareness about a particular subject by replacing expectations of speech and creating an atmosphere that brings attention to the silence, and thus attention to the meaning behind said silence. An example of this being applied in real-time is the social movement known as the Day of Silence.

The Day of Silence is an annual student-led demonstration that began in the mid 1990s, and has expanded so much that hundreds of thousands of students participate in the political activist movement each year. The day is dedicated to spreading awareness about the bullying and harassment of LGBTQ students, in which all participants commit to a vow of silence for 24 hours, symbolically representing the silencing of the LGBTQ community. To further emphasize their vow to silence, participants will often put tape over their mouths, drawing additional attention to the action of remaining silent and enhancing its rhetorical effect by doing so. In this context, the rhetorical power of silence lies within its symbolic representation of human suffering, which can be both emotionally impactful and informative. Additionally, those that encounter silent participants on this day are likely to seek the reasoning behind the silence, thus allowing the efficient spread of awareness and fulfilling the movements' ultimate goal, exemplifying the rhetorical effectiveness of strategic silence that is utilized in social movements.

However, many argue that using silence this way is ineffective and potentially harmful, including Susan Wooley in her article “‘The Silence Itself is Enough of a Statement’ The Day of Silence and LGBTQ Awareness Raising,” who argues that rather than addressing harassment or inspiring true action, “silence makes students more defenseless in the face of verbal harassment” (13). Wooley asserts that simply committing to silence does not inspire true action, and only makes individuals more vulnerable to verbal assault, as they also vow not to defend themselves by committing to silence. Although this may be accurate in some circumstances, a large portion of

this argument is flawed, as it fails to recognize that acknowledgement of and responses to verbal assault often fuel those delivering hateful speech, and also allow those delivering such speech to hold power over their audience by influencing their audiences' reactions and maintaining control over these reactions. As previously discussed through the example of Kaitlin Bennet and Donald Trump, refusing to engage with or respond to individuals seeking to antagonize and hold power over others through the ability to antagonize can ultimately strip the speaker of that power entirely. I acknowledge that it is often essential to combat verbal assault with speech, yet I cannot ignore that the action of refusing to acknowledge this assault and ignoring it by remaining silent can communicate the lack of control the speaker has over the individual that delivers silence. Wooley's argument also harbors misplaced faith in the power of rational discourse, as she assumes that delivering speech in response to verbal attacks will always suffice as an effective defense. Yet, as discussed earlier, engaging in rational discourse is not always awarded, especially for the oppressed, as applying perceived rational forms of speech is still often met by discrediting and invalidation, despite potential logistic delivery. Furthermore, by drawing attention to silence for the purpose of spreading awareness about bullying and harassment of the LGBTQ community, participants are taking true action by creating possibilities for others to have a voice. Symbolically utilizing silence gives a voice to those in the LGBTQ community simply by representing LGBTQ issues and bringing attention to the struggles that occur within that community. Those that suffer from issues that are not often acknowledged or are commonly overlooked can be considered voiceless and ignored; therefore, bringing awareness and attention to the struggles of these individuals via silence creates an opportunity for the LGBTQ community to have a voice. Providing a voice to the unheard can thus be considered a kind of true action.

# 5 Conclusion: Silence and Beyond

## 5.1 Rhetorical Power of Other Forms of Nonverbal Communication

### 5.1.1 Laughter

There are multiple other forms of nonverbal communication that harbor rhetorical power similar to that of silence, including laughter, body language, and eye contact. Like silence, the contexts of which these types of communication are delivered influences their interpretation and thus their rhetorical effects. I will begin by analyzing the rhetorical functions of laughter, which can create feelings of ease in addition to feelings of discomfort, depending on the context of which it is applied. As discussed by Phillip Glenn in his book *Laughter in Interaction*, laughter is a social and physiological phenomenon that, like silence, can be used strategically when integrated with other communicative behaviors (13). For instance, laughter can be utilized as a form of reassurance in a conversation, as laughing at another person's joke can indicate approval by communicating the audience's enjoyment or pleasure. This can ease tension between individuals that may be meeting for the first time, or even ease tension between individuals discussing a sensitive subject. Additionally, laughing during a casual conversation often acts as an indication of comfort or chemistry between those involved, thus supporting the successful, free flow of conversation. However, if laughter is delivered in a context in which it is unexpected, it can be interpreted differently and cause discomfort, potentially deriving more negative interactions brought upon by feelings of embarrassment or defensiveness. Laughing at a comment that wasn't intended to be funny can communicate an audience's disapproval by implying that the comment was ridiculous or absurd, creating an atmosphere of discomfort or rejection for the speaker. This can cause

awkwardness between communicators, or can even contribute to the formation of social hierarchies within a conversation, as laughing inappropriately at another's words or actions can function as a display of dominance and power via denigration. Utilizing strategic laughter to assert dominance can establish a sense of inferiority amongst others by enforcing social embarrassment upon them, as Glenn notes that "people often laugh when comparing themselves to others and finding themselves stronger, more successful, or at some advantage...laughter can carry a hostile or competitive element to it that implies the laugher's superiority over who they are laughing at" (19). As a result, laughter can be used rhetorically to relieve tension, imply approval/disapproval, and asserts one's dominance over others.

Similarly to silence, laughter can impact the power dynamic between communicators by controlling the direction of a conversation. For example, delivering unsolicited laughter during an earnest discussion can lead people to question or seek the reasoning behind the laughter just as they do in the presence of silence. If laughter is not solicited, it can cause anger or unease, or be interpreted as an attack, leading others to search for the source of the laughter in an effort to understand it or defend themselves against it. To demonstrate this concept, suppose that a couple is arguing, and one person begins to laugh condescendingly. The other person may question what brought upon laughter at such an inappropriate time, thus influencing the power dynamic of the argument by not only causing confusion and likely anger within the other person, but by altering the course of the discussion to now be focused on the delivery of, and response to, unsolicited laughter.

Moreover, laughter can also control the direction of a conversation by encouraging a communicator to continue in a particular direction if they are being reinforced or propelled by the laughter of their audience. If a person is intending to engage in light-hearted discussion or make

their audience laugh, and this audience laughs in response to a certain topic, this provides the speaker with validation and can encourage them to remain on this topic to continue pleasing the audience. This is also similar to strategic silence, as receiving silence from an audience can make a speaker frantically alter the topic of discussion in hopes of gaining a response. Through this, the audience's laughter provides them with power over the speaker by directly influencing what the speaker decides to discuss. This also displays enforcement of rhetorical listening upon the speaker, who interprets the laughter and reflects on their actions in an effort to discover how they can receive (or continue receiving) their desired response from their audience. All in all, the inherently rhetorical nature of laughter is demonstrated by its many functions and communicative implications, as well as its ability to steer the focus of a conversation.

### **5.1.2 Body Language**

A vast amount of human communication occurs through body language. However, unlike laughter, body language is less reliant on the social context of a situation because interpretations of body language are more concerned with universal social and emotional cues, whereas the social and emotional indications of laughter vary by situational context. Although verbal rhetoric is often reliable, nonverbal communication such as body language heavily influences the effectiveness and overall meaning of verbal rhetoric, as human beings interpret and consider body language when processing the meaning of speech. If one's body language does not coincide with their words, people will often consider the messages delivered by body language over those delivered by speech, assuming that body language is a more credible form of communication. This favoring of nonverbal communication occurs because it is usually a more direct representation of human emotion, given that it is commonly subconscious and thus more difficult to control than speech. For instance, if an individual verbally claims that they are not upset, yet has their hands clenched into



fists and an unsettling look on their face with tense shoulders, it is usually safe to assume their body language is more credible in communicating their true feelings than their words.

Additionally, body language plays a large role in human interaction in terms of representing the self and how we perceive others. Our general emotions or opinions are frequently communicated through our body language, whether it be through facial expressions, hand gestures, placement of limbs, etc. While observing others, humans will read body language as social cues that can be indicative of personality traits/types, and will thus formulate opinions about others based on their body language. For example, one may assume that an individual with great posture, who holds their head high, smiles often, and uses prominent hand gestures while speaking, may be a confident extrovert that is suited for leadership, whereas an individual who slouches their shoulders with their arms crossed and head turned to the floor, may be unsure of themselves, nervous, or introverted. People are more likely to listen to or trust a person exuding confidence and dominance than they are to someone whose body language implies they are apprehensive and submissive. Body language can thus benefit or damage the rhetorical appeal of speech, as the body language that accompanies speech can improve or hinder ones' credibility depending on how these cues represent them.

Like silence, the rhetorical power of body language is also demonstrated through its ability to control power dynamics and regulate social hierarchies within verbal discourse. Yet, silence has the ability to topple social hierarchies and redistribute power, whereas body language contributes to the creation these social hierarchies and helps to initially determine where the power lies. According to Fatik Baran Mandal in "Nonverbal Communication in Humans," human use of body language "helps regulate the system, cueing hierarchy and priority among communicators, signaling the flow of interaction, and providing meta-communication and feedback" (417). As a

result, body language is arguably the most important phenomena “in the structuring and occurrence of communication and the movement-to-movement regulation of interaction” (Mandal 420). Accordingly, when used consciously and strategically, body language can establish an individuals’ hierarchal status in a conversation, placing them in a position of power while asserting their credibility.

By integrating powerful and dominant body language within communicative behavior, a communicator can establish their position within the hierarchal system as being the one who holds priority and directs the social interaction, therefore holding control over not only the conversation, but over the attention of those involved. Through this, body language aids in the creation of the “alpha group in every social situation that determines (and tries to control) the speech, speaking patterns, and silences for the women and men in the beta, gamma, (and lower) groups in every social situation” (Glenn 30). The alpha, or “alpha group” within this situation therefore holds the most rhetorical power over an audience, as they can dictate the topics of discussion while commanding the flow of conversation to align with their intentions. Because the “classic conception of power is the ability of one actor in a social relationship to impose his or her will on another,” the rhetorical functions of body language thus contribute to the exertion of power in verbal discourse (Glenn 32).

### **5.1.3 Eye Contact**

Eye contact is another type of nonverbal communication that not only sustains a high amount of rhetorical power, but is comparable to silence in its capacity to create space for rhetorical listening, or more specifically, its capacity to create space for interpretation and reflection. As previously discussed, I assert that rhetorical listening does not require physical

listening to ones' words, but only seeking genuine understanding through the careful interpretation of another's actions. Therefore, because one cannot physically "listen" to eye contact, they engage with it by seeking to understand the intentions behind its delivery. Furthermore, interpreting eye contact to understand its meaning requires a person to both consider the individual administering the eye contact, and to reflect on the social situation in the process of doing so, which embodies Zhu's conceptualization of rhetorical listening. Depending on the context of a situation, maintaining eye contact can be a rhetorical technique that acts as an assertion of dominance, an indication of fear, an imposition of a threat, or a method of communicating attraction, amongst numerous other meanings. I argue that the rhetorical power of eye contact lies within its communicative ability to inspire emotion or action within others, particularly emotions or actions that align with the communicator's own intentions or motives.

Therefore, in the event that one is attempting to assert their dominance or superiority over another by maintaining eye contact, rhetorical power is exhibited if this eye contact leads to intimidation that causes the other person to avert their eyes or somehow imply their acceptance into the role of submission. As for indicating fear, the rhetorical power of eye contact can be showcased when it successfully communicates ones' feelings of fear and evokes a response as a result; for example, if a woman in a public setting makes extended eye contact with her friend to express discomfort when receiving unwanted attention from a man, and her friend takes action by removing her from the situation, the outcome of the eye contact aligns with the communicator's intentions and can thus the nonverbal communication can be considered rhetorically powerful. This also applies to a situation involving mutual attraction, where rhetorical power is displayed when implications of attraction via eye contact inspire one individual to approach another, or make a romantic gesture towards them. However, the rhetorical power of eye contact is not only

measured by its ability to inspire action, but also by its ability to simply evoke emotions within an audience. For example, if an individual poses a physical threat, and communicates their violent intentions through intense eye contact, evoking fear within their target via this eye contact entails that it harbors rhetorical power, as the eye contact is directly influencing the reactions and emotions of its audience, and doing so in alignment with the communicator's intentions.

Moreover, because people often attach meaning to eye contact—just as they do to silence, laughter, and body language—it always harbors rhetorical implications, regardless of whether or not these implications are misconstrued in the process of interpretation. Yet, these implications only demonstrate the rhetorical *nature* of eye contact, rather than its rhetorical *power*. More specifically, rhetorical nature is defined by communicative implications that inevitably influence the audience in general, whereas rhetorical power is more so defined by how successful communication is in deriving reactions from the audience that specifically adhere to the will of the communicator. To elaborate, interpretations of eye contact ultimately dictate how someone responds to said eye contact; therefore, people can purposefully emanate different intentions through their eye contact in order to influence how their audience interprets and thus responds to it. Failing to communicate the intended message via eye contact, but still influencing the audience as a result, demonstrates that eye contact is inherently rhetorical and harbors inevitable rhetorical implications, regardless of the accuracy of its interpretation.

However, successfully communicating the intended message via eye contact, and inspiring the desired reaction from an audience as a result, demonstrates eye contact's capacity for rhetorical power. For instance, delivering eye contact that unintentionally communicates fear, when it was intended to communicate enjoyment, may cause an audience to worry and frantically search for the existence of an issue. Although it was unintentional, and this was not the desired outcome, this

specific delivery of eye contact harbors rhetorical implications that still assume control over the reactions of the audience, demonstrating its inherently rhetorical nature. However, adjusting the delivery of eye contact to intentionally communicate enjoyment may cause an audience to feel at ease and share in this enjoyment, thus acting as a display of eye contact's rhetorical power, as its implications were translated accurately and resulted in a scenario that embodies the communicator's desired outcome. Therefore, although the communicative implications of eye contact imply that it is rhetorical in all contexts regardless of accurate interpretation, I still assert that the overall rhetorical power of eye contact is measured by its ability to inspire action and emotion that aligns with the communicator's intentions.

## **5.2 Gender Social Conditioning and Nonverbal Communication**

Comparatively to silence and speech, nonverbal communication such as laughter, body language, and eye contact are all influenced by the concept of gender in terms of how they are used and interpreted between the same and opposite gender. Because of the differences in societal perceptions of gender roles and enforced gender performance, men and women tend to develop different ways of interpreting and applying nonverbal communication. In the article "Gender Differences in Nonverbal Communication of Emotion," authors Judith A. Hall et al. discuss the potential reasoning behind why men and women have developed different forms of nonverbal communication skills. Often, women are socially conditioned to be more emotionally expressive as children, as parents or guardians are more likely to "talk about emotions and display more varied facial expressions around daughters than they are around sons" (Hall et al. 99). However, women are commonly criticized for expressing their emotions, as these emotions are often written off as "irrational" or "hormonal," thus leading to their consistent invalidation (Hall et al. 93). As a result, women are socially conditioned to express their emotions, while simultaneously expecting these

emotions to be disregarded if expressed verbally, thus contributing to “more opportunities for nonverbal skill development in females,” especially when communicating amongst one another (Hall et al. 99). As a result, women tend to be more efficient in communicating nonverbally amongst one another, especially considering that women often share common experiences with the patriarchal oppression that accompanies speech. This creates a space for relatability and mutual understanding, which improves the possibility of accurate interpretations of nonverbal communication amongst women.

Therefore, studying the rhetorical implications of laughter, body language, and eye contact, is especially relevant to the field of feminist rhetorics, as the development of these nonverbal strategies is directly related to gender social conditioning, and thus society’s internalized patriarchal practices. Like silence, if applied appropriately in opportune contexts, these alternatives to speech can also function as a resistance to patriarchal oppression by capitalizing on forms of communication that resist the exclusion of women. In addition, women’s experience with nonverbal communication places the female gender at an advantage when communicating this way, increasing the possibility for success in utilizing nonverbal communication as a technique that combats such oppression. All in all, laughter, body language, and eye contact each act as significant rhetorical techniques that are especially beneficial for women. Their rhetorical power lies within their capacity to successfully communicate an individuals’ stance about a particular subject/person, to regulate social hierarchies within verbal discourse through the redistribution of power and directing of the interactional flow of conversation, and to create opportunities for rhetorical listening, all without the need of speech.

## **5.3 Applications of Nonverbal Communication in Relation to Gender: *A Question of Silence***

### **5.3.1 A Question of Silence: Overview**

In Marleen Gorris's 1982 film *A Question of Silence*, Gorris emphasizes the powerful nature of nonverbal communication by depicting various communicative interactions that do not involve speech. By highlighting female characters engaging in different forms of nonverbal communication, Gorris demonstrates how alternatives to speech can function rhetorically and act as a resistance to patriarchal oppression. In the film, three ordinary women named Christine, Andrea, and Annie, all of whom are strangers to one another, violently murder a store clerk after Christine is caught attempting to shoplift. Before and after the murder takes place, the film focuses on each of the three women's separate lives, highlighting their general day-to-day activities and experiences. Although the women are all very different from one another, with different personality types and professions, they are connected by their experiences as oppressed women living in a patriarchal world. They all endure the misogynistic behavior of men in their lives that look down upon them and treat them as inferior, lesser human beings. The misogyny the women face is consistent throughout both the public and private spheres, demonstrating the patriarchal order that surrounds them is inescapable and puts them at a constant disadvantage. By showing the oppressive behavior of men within these women's day-to-day lives, the film implies that such oppression is part of a standard routine of which the women have endured for the majority (if not all) of their existence. Therefore, the film takes place at a climactic point in the women's lives, in which they are no longer able to withstand their oppression and thus violently lash out at the closest representative of the patriarchy, the store clerk. After the store clerk condescendingly removes a sweater from Christine's bag, the three women exchange glances rooted in mutual anger for their

shared oppression, and release this built-up anger towards the patriarchy upon the store clerk. A female criminal psychologist, Janine, is then tasked with discovering whether or not these women are sane to determine their sentence in the court of law.

Christine, the female character that was caught attempting to shoplift, is a mother of three children. She does not speak, and is shown to be undervalued and generally ignored by her husband. Her life consists of taking care of children that also do not value her, and her husband ordering her around and treating her like a servant rather than a partner. However, she silently accepts this treatment, and assumes the role of sacrificing her own happiness to care for a family that does not care for her. Andrea, the second woman that is involved in the murder of the store clerk, is a secretary in an office run by men. Although she is portrayed as exceedingly competent and intelligent, the men in her office frequently belittle her, take credit for her work, and treat her as inferior with snide, insulting comments. Annie, the third and final woman that participates in the murder, is a divorced waitress at a café, where she constantly endures harassment and sexist comments from male customers. When Janine questions them about the crime, none of the women directly express their motives for their actions, and mostly avoid explaining themselves. After Janine spends a significant amount of time with the three women, however, she begins to identify with them, realizing that they are simply unfulfilled and unhappy because they are women living in a patriarchal world. Through the interactions she has with the women, Janine begins to understand and sympathize with their motives as she realizes the similar oppression she faces in her own life, and she decides the women are in fact, completely sane. However, verbally expressing that their dissatisfaction with the patriarchy is what led them to violently murder a stranger would never be understood by men. Therefore, attempting to explain themselves verbally would lead to the women being labeled as mentally insane, thus justifying their decision not to



explain themselves at all while showcasing the shortcomings of speech. In court, Janine attempts to rationally explain why she believes the women are sane, but is met with invalidation and a lack of understanding from the surrounding men. This ultimately conveys that despite displays of credibility, aptitude for rationale thought, or argumentative skill, women will always be subject to invalidation from men who fail to recognize the effects or existence of patriarchal oppression. All in all, mutual understanding amongst women is exhibited through their nonverbal communication throughout the film, and their use of nonverbal communication, although misunderstood by men, acts as a form of resistance to the men's inevitable invalidation that would follow any potential verbal attempts at explaining their crime.

### **5.3.2 *A Question of Silence*: Showcasing the Rhetorical Power of Eye Contact and Laughter**

Although the women have never met, Christine, Andrea, and Annie effectively communicate with one another via eye contact before committing the murder. Not only do these three women communicate this way, but the other four women that are present in the store during the time of the murder also communicate through eye contact. Furthermore, female characters utilize laughter as an alternative to speech on numerous occasions throughout the film. This nonverbal form of communication works as a significant rhetorical technique that successfully demonstrates the communicator's stance on a particular subject in an exceedingly expressive and powerful way. Through these interactions, Gorris exemplifies how non-verbal communication can be used as a rhetorical strategy that disrupts the supposed dominant form of communication involving speech, of which has been strategically designed for men.

*A Question of Silence* highlights eye contact as being an extremely powerful form of communication between women, as the film demonstrates that mere eye contact between women

can permit mutual understanding of thoughts and emotions without the need of speech. By showing female characters communicating this way, Gorris exemplifies how the female characters are unified through their mutual experiences with patriarchal oppression and can communicate their dissatisfaction towards such oppression through silent eye contact. The women's ability relate to one another through this oppression causes them to remain silent yet calm as three women murder a man while another four women stand idly by and watch.

This scene acts as a symbolic representation of the female desire to dismantle the patriarchy, a desire that is communicated through the silent stares of the women present in the store. When the store clerk initially catches Christine shoplifting, he offers a condescending facial expression that demonstrates his assumed superiority over Christine, ultimately representing the patriarchal view that men hold superiority over women. Before Christine, Andrea, and Annie begin beating the male store clerk, they exchange stares between one another, and in between this eye contact, they look back towards the man, or the "patriarchy." The remaining four women that are bystanders during the crime silently watch as the murder occurs. The rhetorical power of eye contact is thus demonstrated in this scene, as it efficiently communicates the women's thoughts/emotions, is interpreted correctly by the other women, and leads to the initial communicators' desired outcome. Upon leaving the store, the four female bystanders exchange glances amongst one another, and through these glances, confirm their mutual agreement that they will remain silent about the crime. Their refusal to intervene during the murder in addition to their mutual commitment to silence effectively communicates their shared oppression and mutual anger towards the patriarchy. The women never exchange words, as words are never needed to communicate amongst each other. They all understand what happened, and why it happened, while simultaneously understanding that if they attempted to explain the nature of the crime to anyone

else, their reasoning would be invalidated and disregarded. Therefore, the women refuse to subject themselves to patriarchal expectations that verbal language and rationality is required to justify the crime, and instead remain committed to nonverbal communication that is mutually understood by the other women. The women decide that it is not their responsibility to explain themselves in a way that is understandable to men, as even if they did so, they would not be understood or validated. This is confirmed when Janine *does* attempt to explain the crime to the male prosecutors verbally, and it is revealed that the men are incapable of understanding, nor do they attempt to understand, and instead respond by disregarding and overlooking her explanation entirely. Janine's ability to communicate rationally, her credible background in psychology, and her adept skill for logical argumentation, are essentially useless in the presence of men who view themselves as superior and are thus incapable of even attempting to understand the female experience. Thus, the female characters' choice to communicate nonverbally disallows the men from invalidating their words and redistributes power by allowing the women to control and avoid conversational domination.

Furthermore, the nonverbal response of laughter that the female characters utilize in *A Question of Silence* can be considered a rhetorical technique that permits "rhetorical listening that leads to understanding" (Glenn 155). When Janine questions Annie about her divorce, she asks "Didn't you ever want to remarry?" to which Annie responds with explosive laughter. Although Annie does not directly answer the question and explain her feelings towards the subject of remarrying, her laughter communicates her stance on the subject quickly and effectively. This response not only communicates that Annie *never* wants to remarry, but it also communicates the extent of which she would *never* want to remarry, as her laughter demonstrates that she feels the question itself is ridiculous enough to evoke humor. Through Annie's laughter, Janine is able to

understand Annie's strong feelings against wanting to remarry, without Annie using speech to explain or rationalize her opinion.

In addition, at the end of the film, all of the women that were present during the crime as well as the Janine, break out into laughter in response to the male prosecutor's comment that the crime would still have happened if the shop owner was a woman, as this comment demonstrates the men's blatant obliviousness and inability to comprehend Janine's attempt to explain female oppression. Because the men are incapable of accepting or understanding the verbal explanation offered by Janine, the women resort to communicating via laughter. The laughter that fills the room deeply confuses the men, yet effectively communicates that the prosecutor's comment must have seemed ridiculous in some way, as it evoked a similar reaction of humor within every woman present. Had Janine attempted to explain how invalid the prosecutor's comment was, she likely would have been interrupted and disregarded. However, although the men were confused by the women's laughter, the women were able to communicate the absurdity of the prosecutor's comment as well as their disagreement with the comment through their laughter. To a certain extent, the men likely understood that the women did not agree with this comment, and had some form of mutual understanding amongst each other, as the women were the only people engaged within the uproar of laughter. As a result, the laughter, unlike the dominant form of communication (speech), encouraged "rhetorical listening" that lead to at least some level of "understanding" as to the women's thoughts or feelings towards such an absurd comment (155). Through these depictions of female characters applying various forms of nonverbal communication, this film both highlights the relationship between gender and nonverbal communication, in addition to the rhetorical power and significance of communicative strategies that do not involve speech.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

### **5.4.1 Overview**

Contributing to rhetorical discourse by examining the rhetorical power, implications, and significance of silence can uncover the intersections of gender, speech, and unconventional forms of nonverbal communication. The exploration of silence can thus improve our understanding and expand our knowledge of nontraditional rhetorical theory that does not place men as the sole subject of discourse. Additionally, opening discussion of rhetorical theory to include nonverbal components such as silence creates space for the discovery of theories and methods that may be more inclusive of minority groups, more representative of the oppressed, and even lead to more generally effective applications of rhetoric within communication. Although silence is commonly perceived as the language of the weak, a thorough examination of its rhetorical power suggests that it can function as a signification of strength, in addition to placing its user in a position of power. Strategically utilizing silence, amongst other methods of nonverbal communication, often effectively communicates an individuals' thoughts/emotions, and has the capacity to influence the actions and reactions of an audience by inflicting feelings of discomfort or ease through indications of approval, disapproval, validation, or invalidation. Because people attach generally negative meaning to silence, it commonly causes feelings of discomfort that stimulate "the subordinate party to explore options for breaking the silence," thus potentially altering their conversational behavior in an effort to end the silence (Glenn 32). Through this, subjecting an individual into accepting the burden of silence not only encourages, but enforces rhetorical listening upon them, as escaping the silence often becomes a priority that consists of seeking to understand the silence through careful consideration and reflection. Silence can also distribute or redistribute power to those utilizing it by altering established social hierarchies from favoring the initial speaking "alpha

group,” to favoring those who have committed to silence. This, in addition to silence’s ability to control the direction of conversation, entails that silence can resultingly be used as “a means for exerting control and managing the situation” (Glenn 32). By providing an opportunity to control a social situation and obstructing established conversational hierarchies, silence can ultimately act as a nontraditional, unexpected form of communication that combats patriarchal speech. In conclusion, the rhetorical power of silence matches, and often exceeds that of speech, and when utilized accordingly, it can combat the oppressive indications of patriarchal speech by enacting an unconventional communicative technique that avoids invalidation, exerts power over the reactions of an audience, and does not permit gender favorability.

#### **5.4.2 Opportunities for Expanding this Research**

Through my exploration of silence, I have developed a desire to expand my research to include an analysis of the rhetorical implications of vocal aspects of speech, which do not include aspects of verbal rhetoric as defined by words or language, but *vocal* rhetoric as defined by paralinguage. Studying the various rhetorical implications/components of paralinguage, including variations in intonation, tone, pitch, speed, and notations of hesitation within speech, can also lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of rhetoric in relation to human communication in general, rather than the traditional focus on the rhetoric of language alone. *How* we deliver language through these varying components of paralinguage I assume not only affects interpretations of our language, but its level of rhetorical power and effectiveness. In the future, I intend to explore the rhetoric of paralinguage in relation to silence, in addition to the intersections of paralinguage and gender, and potentially how efforts to teach elocution have demeaned certain expressive styles. This research can also be expanded through the cross-examination of silence and sexuality, race, and socioeconomic status. The relationship between silence and gender has

become apparent, yet the relationship between silence and sexuality, race, and socioeconomic status can also contribute to not equalizing the study of rhetorical theory, and expanding the inclusivity of rhetorical theory by assessing aspects of rhetoric that do not revolve around the experiences and discoveries of heterosexual white men. Do the rhetorical implications or functions of silence and paralanguage change depending on sexuality, race, and socioeconomic status? How does enforced and strategic silence relate to or embody the experiences of LGBTQ communities, or minority racial groups, or groups of low socioeconomic status? How can these groups utilize silence to their advantage? How can silence be damaging to these groups? I hope to expand my research through the exploration of questions such as these.

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