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The Meanings of Silence: Wittgensteinian Contextualism and Polyphony

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Radical feminists have argued that there are normative exclusions that have silenced certain voices and have rendered certain meanings unintelligible. Some Wittgensteinians (including some Wittgensteinian feminists) have argued that these radical feminists fall into a philosophical illusion by appealing to the notions of 'intelligible nonsense' and 'inexpressible meanings', an illusion that calls for philosophical therapy. In this paper I diagnose and criticize the therapeutic dilemma that results from this interpretation of Wittgenstein's contextualism. According to this dilemma, if something is meaningful, it must be expressible from the perspective of the participant in language-games; and if it is not so expressible, it is not meaningful at all. I argue that this is a false dilemma that rests on the untenable internalist notion of a unified 'participant's perspective'. I propose an alternative contextualist view that underscores the polyphony of language-games, that is, the irreducible multiplicity of perspectives always present in discursive practices (if only implicitly and in embryo). Through a discussion of the different meanings of silence, my polyphonic contextualism tries to show that our linguistic practices always exhibit an irreducible diversity and heterogeneity of points of view that cannot be subsumed under a unified perspective.

‘Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in each case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses’. 2

I. Interpreting Silences

What is the meaning of silence? As suggested by Foucault, this question is ill-posed, for there are many silences and they can have many meanings.

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Depending on the specifics of the case, the significance of a silence may range from an obvious meaning to utter nonsensicality. Foucault urges us to think of silences as situated speech acts that can only be understood in their particularity, that is, as they function in particular socio-historical contexts and within particular discursive practices. This insight, I will argue, is elaborated in an interesting way in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. One of Wittgenstein’s life-long philosophical preoccupations was to elucidate the limits of intelligibility, to provide an account of language that could shed light on (and dissolve the mystifications around) the boundaries between what can and cannot be said. A core idea of his later philosophy (perhaps already present in the Tractatus) is that there are no absolute limits or boundaries that we can impose on language, that the domain of significance cannot be looked at sub specie aeternitatis, that there is no way to determine a priori the bounds of sense, to fix once and for all the range of all possible significant speech acts. According to Wittgenstein’s view of intelligibility, whatever limits or boundaries we may find in language are drawn locally and piecemeal by diverse and heterogeneous discursive practices, and they are never final; these limits and boundaries are contingently erected by historical practices that are frequently fluctuating and always open to change. Wittgenstein refers to these discursive practices as language-games: ‘I shall [...] call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the “language-game”’ (PI §7); ‘the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life’ (PI §23).

Wittgenstein’s notion of a language-game highlights three crucial dimensions of language use: its situatedness or contextuality, its performative, and its normativity. First, our speech acts are embedded in the situated activities that compose our ‘form of life’: their significance can only be understood in the context of a life-praxis (‘words have meaning only in the stream of life’; RPP II §687). Secondly, language and action are interwoven in such a way that we cannot separate questions about language and questions about agency: a philosophical account of language requires a philosophical elucidation of linguistic performance, of the things we do and don’t do with, through, and around language, and of the places that our linguistic performances occupy in our lives. Thirdly, language use is always subject to normative expectations: the players’ performance is governed by (typically tacit) norms or rules (no matter how vague, flexible, and fluctuating they may be); there are proper and improper ways of playing, correct and incorrect moves within the game. These central aspects of language use are crucial for the analysis of silence that I develop in what follows. Whether it is conceived as a move within a language-game or as a way of stepping outside the language-game, silence has a contextual, performative, and normative dimension. The significance of a silence can only be understood when it is
properly situated, that is, when it is placed in the context of overlapping language-games or discursive practices whose configurations and intersections shape our lives in particular ways. Being silent is doing or not doing something: it is a form of action or inaction, a way of engaging or a refusal to engage; and it is a linguistic move regulated by norms and subject to normative assessments.

On certain therapeutic readings (also called deflationary or quietist), the Wittgensteinian view just sketched has the implication of unmasking a particular kind of silence as a philosophical illusion: this is the radical silence of complete outsiders, or of those within a practice who nonetheless claim to be left out. According to the therapeutic interpretation, this radical silence and its alleged significance are illusory, impossible, delusional. The pathological delusion in question is a philosophical fiction based on metaphysical assumptions that distort our linguistic practices and our relationship to them. This is the fiction of a meaning that cannot be linguistically articulated, of an experience that cannot be put into words, of a voice that cannot speak. This fiction is produced by a vain metaphysical impulse (to which both philosophers and non-philosophers can succumb): the impulse to get outside our linguistic skins, to stand outside our language-games, to adopt a ‘view from nowhere’. We need to fight this metaphysical impulse in order to purge ourselves of the philosophical fiction of a radically elusive silence. We win this therapeutic fight when we come to the realization that an incessantly elusive silence that remains outside all language-games requires a practice-transcendent perspective that cannot be had. We cannot get outside language; there is no outside, at least not for us, linguistic beings constituted by discursive practices that permeate all the aspects of our life. As Wittgenstein puts it, ‘there is no outside; outside you cannot breathe’; ‘it is only in a language that we can mean something by something’ (PI §103 and p. 18, footnote). This realization, the therapeutic view contends, should enable us to see that the effort to speak after we abandon the familiar terrain of our language-games is hopeless, that the vain attempt to meaningfully occupy a discursive position outside language, outside all our linguistic practices, amounts to nothing more than the pathetic spectacle of emitting an inarticulate noise and claiming a significance for it that is impossible to recognize and acknowledge. There is some truth to this analysis but also an important oversight with dangerous ramifications.

The truth in the therapeutic view is that there are no absolute (final, unmovable) limits to intelligibility and, therefore, there is no such thing as a symbolic space that is necessarily outside language and must remain forever elusive. In this sense, there are no absolute outsiders, that is, there are no voices that stand outside all possible language-games. But there are those who find themselves unable to speak in the discursive practices available to them, voices whose signifying powers fall outside the language-games that
are their home, even if they can become refugees in other practices or games. More importantly, it is (at least in principle) possible to find voices that are systematically excluded from all language-games developed so far and cannot receive asylum in other practices (at least not yet). There can be voices that have nowhere to go (although they can always invent a place). These radical exclusions produce the radical silences that the therapeutic view dismisses. The therapeutic view does not do justice to these silenced voices by telling them that their radical silence is illusory or pathological; for their predicament is not (at least not always) the artifact of a philosophical fiction, but the result of very real exclusions. The therapeutic view ignores the reality of these radical exclusions and insists that there is no silence when we don’t have the capacity to speak. On this view, the discursive discomfort of those who feel radically and systematically excluded requires therapy that can cure them of (and make them abandon) their extreme symbolic aspirations. The therapeutic view assumes that the only real basis that a forced silence can have consists in mundane difficulties and pedestrian obstructions in communication. Under the spell of metaphysical impulses, we are told, these prosaic obstacles and impediments are inflated into insurmountable barriers, when in fact they can be easily overcome with our communicative efforts: we have to try harder in the articulation of meanings, we have to introduce reforms in linguistic usage, internal changes in our language-games. This reformist view misses the radical discursive exclusions that are built into the normative structure of our practices and the silencing processes that are constitutive of the way in which our language-games are played. The central thesis of this paper is that radical silences can be very real and that they call for more than therapy and reform: they call for the dismantling of our language-games, for a radical critique that aims at deep structural transformations (and in some cases the abandonment) of our practices.

In the next section I will develop my Wittgensteinian approach to the hermeneutics of silence while arguing against the therapeutic view. I will then offer a contextualist analysis of the limited agency of disempowered voices which tries to identify ways in which those marginal voices that have been excluded and silenced can acquire more agency and critical power, if only obliquely, through the fissures of our language-games.

II. Situated Voices and ‘the View from Elsewhere’

Defending a therapeutic interpretation of Wittgenstein, Alice Crary (2001, 2002) has argued that certain views in feminist theory (as well as in queer theory and race theory) fall victim of a pathological metaphysical impulse and need therapy. These are the views that claim that there are meaningful experiences that cannot be linguistically articulated in our language-games,
that there are voices that have things to say and yet cannot speak in our discursive practices. These views conjure up the illusion of a nonsensical silence that is nonetheless revealing and important, that is, a silence that hides an inexpressible ‘meaning’. This illusory silence, Crary contends, involves the philosophical fiction of ‘intelligible nonsense’, an inherently contradictory notion that forces us to postulate meanings outside language. Crary criticizes this notion from an internalist perspective, arguing that meaningful silences are always internal to a discursive practice: only internal silences are interpretable, for it is only within a language-game that we can attribute a tacit meaning to a silence. As other champions of the therapeutic view, Crary insists that there is no silence (properly so-called) when there is nothing to say, when we do not even have the capacity to speak. On this analysis, those who claim that they are unable to articulate certain meanings in the language-game suffer from a delusion provoked by a particular mistake: namely, the mistake of taking the present configuration of the language-game for what the game is once and for all. Those who insist on their incapacity to speak within a discursive practice do not see that what may look to them like an impossibility is simply a difficulty created by contingent obstacles that can be removed from within the practice. Emphasizing this last point, Crary tries to turn the bad news of the therapeutic diagnosis into good news: the good news is that it is always possible for the participants in the language-game to articulate their experiences and give linguistic expression to their meanings; in principle, any voice can be heard, any discursive perspective can find a place within the practice. According to this view, our discursive practices are never perfect but they are always improvable; and, therefore, we may have good reasons to complain about them but not to despair to the point of giving up on them. Crary insists that participants can face all kinds of obstacles in their discursive lives, but they can always introduce internal changes in the game to overcome these obstacles. People may feel unable to express themselves, but their inability to give linguistic articulation to their thoughts and experiences is contingent and can always be overcome (at least in principle) within the language-games or discursive practices in which they participate.

The principal mistake of this reformist and meliorist view is to assume that we are all participants in the discursive practices that shape our lives, that we all have a voice and are endowed with (sufficient degrees of) discursive agency (i.e., with the capacity to perform speech acts and to act on, react to, and contend with the speech acts of others). This is a mistake because we are not always players in the language-games in which we find ourselves. In many of these games our agency is significantly curtailed and in some cases even denied. If we examine actual practices in their specific social and historical contexts, it is not difficult to find in them speaking subjects who have been objectified in certain aspects of their lives and have to remain silent.
about them, and even voices that have been silenced completely. (Think, for instance, of the traditional exclusions of homosexuals from modern discursive practices for the expression of desire and the articulation of sexual meanings. Think also of the exclusions of racial and ethnic minorities from the mainstream political language-games in which interests, needs, ideals, and aspirations are negotiated.) We cannot understand how silences are produced and how they can be overcome if we don’t critically question what it means to be a participant and to have a voice or to be deprived of it in a language-game.

A hermeneutics of silence needs to address critical questions concerning discursive agency: how it can be curtailed and denied; how it can be acquired and exercised, and at what expense; how normative structures are sedimented and become perpetuated through the agency of speakers; how power is transmitted and distributed through speech acts, etc. I will try to show, pace the therapeutic view, that the reality of radical exclusions and radical silences does not force us to step outside language and to adopt a practice-transcendent perspective or ‘a view from nowhere’. In order to make sense of these radical exclusions and silences, my contextualism draws attention to what I call the polyphony of language-games, that is, to the fact that our discursive practices always allow for a multiplicity of voices and standpoints. This polyphonic multiplicity suggests that meanings that cannot be recognized and expressed from our situated discursive perspective could be recognizable and expressible elsewhere, that is, from a different perspective. In other words, my polyphonic account of discursive practices enables us to make sense of the possibility of radical exclusions and silences and even of the notion of ‘intelligible nonsense’: what appears as nonsensical in one practice can be intelligible in another and, therefore, it should be possible to identify and criticize the discursive limitations of a practice from the standpoint of another. According to my polyphonic contextualism, the lack of discursive agency in one practice can be countered by (and compensated with) agency in alternative practices, whether these alternative practices are actual or possible – for in some cases such alternatives may not be available and will have to be created precisely for the purpose of fighting exclusions and silences and empowering speakers.

Wittgenstein’s contextualism is misconstrued by the reformist and meliorist perspective of the therapeutic view. According to this view, all discursive contexts or symbolic spaces can be looked at as constituting a heterogeneous but nonetheless unified domain of sense. This is the common sphere of intelligibility shared by all speakers, the symbolic space inside language, the only one there is. This hegemonic realm of significance is explained and defended on the therapeutic view according to the following recipe: first, you start with the dichotomy between being inside and being outside language; then, you go on to show that there is no outside for the kind
of symbolic beings we are; and finally, you conclude that we all share the same symbolic space, ending up with a nice and exclusive field of signification for all language users. This recipe is flawed from the outset. To begin with, the problem with the inside/outside dichotomy is not simply that one side of it turns out to be empty; the problem is, rather, that the dichotomy as such involves a distortion. The problem is not simply that there is no ‘outside’ for our language-games. For, in an important sense, there is no ‘inside’ either: there is no such thing as a symbolic perspective common to all language users. The distortion implicit in this dichotomy is the assumption that there is a principled way of drawing the boundaries between what is inside and what is outside language, while in fact these boundaries are constantly being drawn and redrawn in different ways for different purposes and from the perspective of different discursive practices and different practitioners. These blurred and shifting boundaries are hopeless when used to ground and justify the inside/outside dichotomy. And yet this unwarranted dichotomy is used to force on us the misleading twofold classification of silences into internal and external, real and illusory. But how to locate silences within our language-games is a more complicated issue than it may seem, an issue that is highly oversimplified by the therapeutic view.

What the therapeutic view tells us is that if we want to make sense by what we say or not say, if we want to have meaningful utterances and silences, then we have to stand over ‘here’, that is, we have to occupy the perspective of a participant. But with this (apparently innocent) reasoning the therapeutic view ushers us to a false dilemma: ‘either here or nowhere’. I call it the therapeutic dilemma. This is a false dilemma because there is always a multiplicity of symbolic spaces and discursive perspectives that resist assimilation to one of its horns. Both horns of the dilemma, the ‘here’ and the ‘nowhere,’ are highly problematic and ought to be questioned. Let’s start with the second horn of the therapeutic dilemma. What is this ‘nowhere’? It is a construct that requires a particular conceptualization of its counterpart, the ‘here,’ in order to make sense. This construct, the ‘nowhere’, is a direct result of construing the ‘here’ as a hegemonic space: without argument, the therapeutic view construes the internal perspective of practitioners, of those invested with participatory status and endowed with discursive agency, as exhausting the domain of significance. To assume that if we don’t speak ‘from here’ we must be hopelessly trying to speak ‘from nowhere’ is to assume that there is ‘nowhere else but here.’ But there is always ‘somewhere else,’ even if it needs to be invented; that is, there is always the possibility of alternative discursive contexts in which new voices and perspectives can be expressed. These alternative contexts may not always be available; they may require inventing new language-games or radically transforming existing practices until they acquire a new face. Indeed Wittgenstein often talks about the invention of new language-games (e.g., PI §492) and of the possibility of
replacing old games with new ones (e.g., PI §64). He emphasizes that language-games are constantly fluctuating and that this fluctuation allows for radical changes in which our practices can be twisted, bent, and rearranged beyond recognition. It is purely arbitrary to insist that these transformations always have to be understood as internal changes or reforms of the same practice. This insistence is just an arbitrary imposition of a priori constraints on our conceptualizations of the evolution of linguistic practices.

It is important to note that speaking from ‘somewhere else’ does not require that we abandon the situated perspective of a speaker. There is no reason why those who don’t (or even can’t) adopt the so-called ‘perspective of the participant’ in a language-game should be depicted as disappearing in a vacuum, rather than as defecting from the game or going in hiding within the game. The defectors of a game and the resistance fighters within it occupy alternative discursive contexts. These alternative contexts may be provided by already existing practices or by fragile practices under construction (games in the making), which are sometimes gestated in the repressed and forgotten interstices of the very language-game in question. For example, consider how heterosexist language-games have been systematically disrupted by the proliferation of forms of expression and cultural representations that ‘queer’ sexual meanings by twisting them in unexpected ways and applying them beyond the heterosexual semantic domain for which they were developed. These ‘queer’ ways of talking about desire and sexuality have often remained anomalous parts of mainstream practices – subtexts or double-talks (often repressed or simply ignored by the majority); but sometimes they have developed into somewhat independent alternative practices – often marginalized language-games only played by those who do not fit the heterosexual normative scheme. The ‘queering’ of sexual meanings, both from within mainstream practices and from alternative practices, has been recently studied meticulously by historians and literary critics in Queer Theory.9

Those who abandon (or are forced to abandon) the so-called ‘here’ of an established practice are not doomed to adopt a ‘view from nowhere’; rather, they are taking up the burden of developing a view from elsewhere. Speaking ‘from elsewhere’ can be negatively characterized as speaking from a not-yet recognized discursive context and with a not-yet recognizable voice. But it implicitly involves a struggle for recognition; and it can be positively characterized as contributing to the creation of new discursive contexts and opening up spaces for new voices that have not been heard yet. These eccentric speakers, these defecting and subterranean voices, are still fully situated; there is nothing other-worldly about them. Those who abandon (or are forced to abandon) the so-called insider’s standpoint in a given practice may not even be outside the practice in question, let alone outside all possible linguistic practices and outside language itself. This is why Crary’s analogy between the radical critic of our linguistic practices and the radical skeptic is
flawed. Unlike the radical skeptic, the radical critic has no need (or use) for a practice-transcendent perspective. Let me briefly comment on this analogy before I go on to criticize the other horn of the therapeutic dilemma.

Unlike the radical skeptic, radical feminist theorists, queer theorists, and critical race theorists do not target all possible linguistic practices and do not need to occupy a practice-independent standpoint. However, Crary contends that both the radical skeptic and the radical theorist argue for a ‘wholesale rejection’ of our practices and conceptual resources and, therefore, ‘they put themselves […] in a traditional philosophical position of speechlessness in the face of what they want to say, while at the same time insisting that their silence is pregnant with meaning’ (Crary, 2001, p. 387). But there is a crucial ambiguity in the expression ‘wholesale rejection of practices’. This can be construed in a weak sense as meaning the rejection of a whole practice or set of practices (even all current practices) in their entirety, or in a strong sense as meaning the rejection of all practices that are humanly possible. The radical theorist is after the former (she targets clusters of language-games); the radical skeptic after the latter (she targets all possible language-games). What Wittgenstein criticizes and deems futile is the idea of radical detachment from our practices, that is, the attempt to step outside all language-games. But he has nothing against the critique and rejection of particular language-games (or clusters of them): entire discursive practices can be questioned and repudiated when they enter into conflict with other practices or with certain aspects of our ‘form of life’, getting in the way of human flourishing. Therefore, Wittgenstein should be thought of as an enemy of radical skepticism but as a friend of radical critique.

Radical critique is certainly after something more extreme than the internal changes proposed by reformist and meliorist approaches; and yet it does not require the rejection of all practices from a practice-transcendent perspective. When radical theorists call our attention to the impossibility to speak, they relativize this radical silence to particular practices, typically explaining their genesis in terms of radical but contingent exclusions. At least in principle, these radical exclusions can be undone and the silences they produce can be overcome. This is why there is nothing mysterious about the radical theorist’s claim that there are voices that cannot yet speak and meanings that cannot yet be expressed. For these silenced voices are in principle audible and these presently unspeakable meanings are in principle expressible. It is important that, unlike the skeptic, the radical theorist develops her view with an eye to new language-games in which new voices can be heard and new meanings expressed. This makes all the difference in the world; and Crary actually recognizes this ‘difference between the sceptic and this theorist’ (Crary, 2001, p. 387). In feminism, she remarks, the radical theorist differs from the skeptic in holding ‘that as we gradually develop a “feminist language” we will better understand what (currently nonsensical) “female thoughts” attempt to
express’ (p. 387). But Crary minimizes this difference. She contends that ‘despite this difference, there is a deep similarity between the radical skeptic and the radical theorist in that they share a position of speechlessness’ (p. 387). However, the speechlessness of the skeptic and that of the radical theorist could not be more different. The latter is not the result of adopting a practice-transcendent perspective, of placing oneself outside language. Unlike the skeptic, the radical theorist is not forced to take up an illusory standpoint outside all practices, an impossible ‘view from nowhere’. There is nothing illusory about the perspective of the radical theorist or about the radical silences and exclusions she denounces and fights against.

The real illusion, the real philosophical myth, if there is one, is that of the insider’s perspective to which the therapeutic view appeals. The apparently innocent invitation ‘Please stand over here if you want to speak’ forces us to buy into the illusion of the participant’s perspective, the ‘here’ of our practices. This is the other horn of the therapeutic dilemma. When we are told ‘either here or nowhere’ we are bullied into occupying an illusory discursive perspective, into taking up a position that doesn’t exist. This is because there is not one ‘here’, because the standpoint of our practices is always unavoidably fractured. And this is for two reasons. First, there is no such thing as the inside of language because the irreducible multiplicity of discursive practices or language-games does not amount to a unified symbolic space. Another way to put this point is to say that there is no such thing as language,12 that the very concept of a language is an empty philosophical abstraction. There are only particular discursive practices. Wittgenstein warns us against the philosophical temptation of talking about all language-games and thinking of them as constituting a totality (see esp. PI §65). There is a dangerous totalizing tendency in philosophy that entices us to adopt an impossible bird’s eye view of all our language-games. This omniscient view makes us ‘unconscious of the prodigious diversity’ of linguistic practices to which we are exposed in our daily lives (PI II, p. 224). Many of these practices overlap or intersect in multifarious ways; others do not. This complex and heterogeneous multiplicity of language-games does not amount to a closed linguistic system: ‘this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten’ (PI §23). We should be suspicious of any appeal to the perspective of the language user, the standpoint of those who are inside language; for what is typically referred to as language comprises a wild variety of discursive contexts, perspectives, and voices.

In the second place, language-games are not only multiple and diverse, but also radically heterogeneous in their internal functioning. Even if we restrict ourselves to a single language-game in all its social and historical specificity, we still do not find such thing as the participant’s perspective. For no matter
how rigidly constrained by rules it is, a language-game always admits
different ways of interpreting and applying its rules and, therefore, different
ways of playing. A language-game always allows for different voices,
inflections, stances, and perspectives. There is no unique viewpoint that we
can call ‘the participant’s perspective’. The participants in a language-game
lack a single unified perspective. And this is not just because there are
typically different participants playing the game. Even if we allow for the
possibility of a language-game with a single player, even if we narrow down
our search for the insider’s perspective to a newly invented language-game
with its creator as the only player, we still don’t have a single, wholly unified
viewpoint that excludes all differences, for the player’s perspective is
shattered in a chain of performances that redefine the game at every step and
are always open to reinterpretation. In our discursive practices, heterogeneity
and difference really do go all the way down, down to the perspective of each
individual speaker, leaving nothing unquestionably one and the same. The
individual players of a language-game adopt different perspectives and speak
in different voices as they perform different speech acts; and there is no
reason why these voices and perspectives have to be, should be, or even can
be, unified. This is something that Wittgenstein emphasizes in his critique of
the notion of a self or of a unified center of consciousness that plagues
philosophical conceptions of subjectivity. Drawing on this critique, I will
sketch a polyphonic view of speaking subjectivities that can explain the
apparently contradictory notion of ‘intelligible nonsense’ and the radical
exclusions and silences associated with it.

III. Making Sense of Radical Silences and
Exclusions: A Polyphonic Perspective

Wittgenstein’s critique of the subject has been further elaborated by
contemporary feminists such as Wendy Lee-Lampshire (1992), Naomi
Scheman (1993), and Janet F. Smith (2002). What this critique denounces
is that the philosophical notion of a unitary self or a transcendental ego brings
with it an implicit attempt to explain the unity of all our experiences and
actions by appealing to an internal proprietary subject. On this proprietary
model of subjectivity, experiences and actions are thought of as objects that
can be claimed as one’s property and are thus unified by being owned by the
same subject, that is, by belonging to the same estate. As Smith (2002) puts it,
this metaphorical concept of proprietorship is the ‘philosopher’s myth that
leads us into positing an abstract center of consciousness – a self, subject, or
soul as owner’ (p. 350). Smith and other Wittgensteinian feminists have
shown that the proprietary model of subjectivity has a fundamental socio-
political dimension in that it facilitates and justifies the internalization of
relations of domination. The problem with this model is not simply that it
promulgates an illusory unity, but that this illusory unity makes certain forms
of subordination inescapable, building reification and subjugation into the
very structure of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{17} Wittgenstein’s critique of the proprietary
subject calls into question the assumption that a speaker must have a unified
perspective from which to speak and to which everything must be
subordinated. On Wittgenstein’s view, the speaker’s perspective typically is
(and, at any rate, always can be) divided or fractured. For, in our speech
performance, as we navigate our way through discursive contexts, we are
constantly given the opportunity to take up different perspectives; and the
different perspectives that we in fact adopt may or may not be harmonized
and fused together (we may find ourselves incapable of, or uninterested in,
this unification). In a similar vein (but drawing on a different hermeneutical
tradition), Marı́a Lugones (1989, 1991)\textsuperscript{18} has argued for a pluralistic
conception of speaking subjects which appreciates the inevitable hetero-
genreity of their voices and enables them to recognize that they are not one but
many.\textsuperscript{19} For Wittgenstein too, the normal predicament of the speaking subject
is to be divided or fractured, or (at the very least) on the verge of being
divided or fractured.

Borrowing Bakhtin’s term, I will subsume these points about the
unavoidable multiplicity and heterogeneity of symbolic perspectives that
our discursive practices exhibit under the heading of the uncontrollable
polyphony of language-games. A language-game is a polyphonic activity,\textsuperscript{20} a
dialogue of multiple voices. In a language-game new voices can always crop
up, even if the voices that are allowed to speak are heavily constrained by the
normative structure of the game. Sometimes these unexpected voices can
arise from unlikely and obscure places within the game; sometimes new
voices can come from other discursive practices and surprise us by
unpredictably ‘intruding’ in ‘our’ practice. And it is important to note that
these different voices and the discursive perspectives they embody and
performatively express can enter into radical conflicts. There can be a clash of
perspectives that brings the dialogue to a halt. This clash sheds light on
the oxymoronic notion of ‘intelligible nonsense’ or “meaning” in spite of
senselessness’ that Crary and others criticize from a therapeutic perspective.
We can make sense of these paradoxical expressions as descriptions of a clash
between divergent perspectives on intelligibility: one that deems an utterance
or silence nonsensical and another one that deems it intelligible. It is
important to note that these conflicting perspectives rarely compete as equals
in our actual practices. And given the likely inequalities between them, it is
crucial that we raise questions about the distribution of power among
discursive perspectives in conflict. We have to be wary of those perspectives
that present themselves as ‘mainstream’ and marginalize all others, and even
more watchful of those perspectives that claim exclusivity and deny all
others; for the imbalance of power can be such that it gives hegemonic status to a single perspective at the expense of all possible alternatives.

When we consider the perspectival nature of our assessments of intelligibility in the light of the intrinsic polyphonic nature of language-games, we can understand those cases in which speakers claim to envision meanings that are unintelligible in the contexts and practices available to them. Given the indomitable and unpredictable polyphony of language-games and the multiple ways of assessing the intelligibility of speech acts, there is nothing mysterious or illusory about these cases; and there is no reason why we must always try to undo the contradiction involved in a claim of ‘meaning’ in spite of senselessness. A case of ‘intelligible nonsense’ can involve a recalcitrant contradiction that cannot be dissolved. Why should these cases be dismissed offhand? It is simply not true that either the alleged intelligibility or the alleged nonsensicality of an utterance or a silence has to be rejected as illusory, for they can both be fully real if the discursive contexts and practices from which these judgments of intelligibility are made prove to be rich enough. In this sense, ‘either intelligible or nonsensical’, like ‘either inside or outside language’, is a false dichotomy that is forced on us in a vain attempt to tame – to discipline and constrain – the constitutive polyphony of our discursive practices. But the indomitable polyphony of language-games makes ‘intelligible nonsense’ a ubiquitous possibility. There is nothing self-defeating about claiming meaning for my experiences, thoughts, and actions, even if there are no (at least not yet) established discursive contexts and fully developed practices that can render them intelligible. I can meaningfully assert the intelligibility of my attempts to speak even if my inchoate utterances do not contain linguistic articulations that can enjoy the recognition of a consolidated community of speakers. To deny this is to overlook two central features of meaning claims: our assessments of intelligibility have a crucial normative and projective dimension; that is, they involve an ‘ought’ and they are future-oriented.

When we claim that something has meaning, we are not simply describing linguistic behavior; we are judging how things should be done in our linguistic interactions, that is, how people should respond to one another when certain things are said or when certain silences are maintained. A meaning claim is not just a factual statement about linguistic usage; it is never purely descriptive (not even in so-called ‘descriptive linguistics’). For it involves a judgment about the things that are and aren’t allowed in our discursive practices, which always projects usage into the future and sanctions discursive norms in a particular way. In these claims and assessments the appearance of neutrality hides a complacent attitude towards accepted norms that helps maintain the status quo. Although they may appear to be factual and retrospective judgments, meaning claims are normative statements that look into the future.21
What kind of speech act is a meaning claim such as ‘This makes sense’? The illocutionary force of a meaning claim is more akin to that of a command than it is to that of a report or description. Asserting that something is intelligible or unintelligible is prescribing a direction for linguistic performance. It is not reporting on a pre-existing reality. Therefore, why should it be warranted for speakers to claim that their utterances and silences have meaning only after the conditions have been met for such meaning to be recognized in a language-game? To contend (or simply to assume, as it is typically done) that meaning claims have to be post facto judgments is tantamount to an arbitrary decree that we won’t accept radical departures from current discursive norms or radical additions to current discursive practices. But it is simply unreasonable to exclude from our negotiations of meaning claims those judgments that assert intelligibility where no one yet sees it. Why can’t a speaker claim that her silences are pregnant with meaning even when this alleged meaning cannot be linguistically articulated in the language-games available to her? Since meaning claims are prescriptive and forward-looking, there is nothing illicit about asserting the existence of a meaning whose intelligibility cannot be recognized in our discursive practices. In fact, these radical meaning claims are not only legitimate but the most interesting and productive ones: they constitute a form of critical intervention in our practices. These perplexing and even paradoxical assessments of intelligibility call for the restructuring of our practices in order to make room for new voices; and they are, in this sense, a source of linguistic creativity and change. But it is important to note, though, that meaning claims do not have magical powers: they do not have any intrinsic transformative potential. Saying ‘This or that has meaning’, by itself, will change nothing. The proclamation alone does not revolutionize existing practices or inaugurate a brand new practice. When Wittgenstein talks about radical innovations in our language-games he emphasizes that they involve deep social changes. These deep changes involve practical and structural transformations, which include changes in the material conditions of life and in what Wittgenstein calls our ‘consensus of action’ (our shared ways of doing things, with and without linguistic aids), in short, changes in our ‘forms of life’ (Lebensformen). But with this proviso, disruptive meaning claims that run contrary to available perspectives on intelligibility can be understood as calls for mobilization and concerted action towards deep social changes.

IV. Conclusion: Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of Silence

It makes sense to claim that in the linguistic practices currently available to us there are things that cannot be said and voices that cannot be heard. We can intelligibly and legitimately make this claim in two very different ways. In
some cases we may find that, as Crary insists, it is simply the present configuration of our practices that produces those exclusions and silences, and the internal transformation of the available practices suffices to change the situation: it may happen that other possible configurations of the same practices will make new voices heard and will allow for the articulation of new meanings. But there is no reason why we should assume this will always be the case. In other cases we may find that for the silenced voices to be heard and for the repressed meanings to become recognizable and communicable we have to move to different practices, better and more inclusive language-games, whose development requires the dismantling and eventual abandonment of current practices. With my polyphonic view of language-games, I hope to have shown that radical claims about silenced voices and repressed meanings (such as those of radical feminists, race theorists, and queer theorists) are perfectly intelligible, legitimate, and even fruitful if and when they are properly contextualized. Those radical critiques of our linguistic practices that are motivated by radical exclusions and silences do not fall into incoherence and metaphysical delusion. They operate in a concretely situated way as calls for linguistic transformations that require substantial social and political changes – that is, they require a significant restructuring of our practices. These critical claims are not only intelligible and legitimate but also potentially fruitful, for they alert us to the presence of deep social problems afflicting our discursive practices and show that in order to address these problems successfully we need more than mere linguistic reform: we need radical political action, that is, critical and subversive agency directed at radical transformations of the material and normative conditions underlying our practices.

Philosophical issues concerning the complex relations between intelligibility, power, and oppression have been taken up by an emerging school of thought that reads Wittgenstein’s philosophy alongside queer, feminist, and race theory. This sort of reading can be found in the pioneer work of Scheman (1996, 1997) and more recently in papers by Hoagland, Krajewski, Lee, and O’Connor contained in Scheman and O’Connor (2002). My argument in this paper is in line with this emerging school of thought. The polyphonic contextualism that I derive from Wittgenstein has a marked critical dimension: it calls upon our ethical and political responsibility as speakers and agents for resisting and fighting (or otherwise complying with) the silencing of certain voices and the marginalization and oppression of certain groups and individuals.

In order to fight against the marginalization and silencing of voices, we have to constantly bring to light the diversity of symbolic perspectives inherent in discursive practices; we have to recognize and empower marginal voices that have become disadvantaged. We can achieve this goal by creating discursive spaces (i.e., public venues and forums) in which all voices can be
expressed in a positive way and can gain recognition and social acceptance. We must do everything we can to provide every speaker with the opportunity and the power to participate fully in cultural practices and to critically intervene in them and call into question their normative structure. In short, we need to fight discursive disempowerment with discursive empowerment, silence with speech. This is precisely what radical theorists (in feminist theory, queer theory, and race theory) have tried to do with their paradoxic claims about ‘intelligible nonsense’ and “meaning” in spite of senselessness’. Scheman, for example, talks about ‘the intelligibility of the normatively unintelligible’ (Scheman, 1997, p. 132). This paradoxical formulation contains an important insight: it expresses a crucial critical attitude – an attitude that places ethical and political demands on us. Such critical insight and attitude are conveyed by reminding us of the following: that certain possibilities, experiences, and actions are rendered unintelligible by the discursive norms of our linguistic practices, but that nevertheless it is conceivable and in principle possible that we will be able to find or create new discursive contexts or new practices in which those possibilities, experiences, and actions become intelligible.25 We have to take responsibility for these critical and transformative possibilities. As Scheman explains, ‘placement at the intelligible center is always a matter of history, of the playing out of privilege and power, and is always contestable’ (Scheman, 1997, p. 132).

On my polyphonic analysis, claims about the radical exclusion and silencing of certain voices and the inability to articulate certain meanings should be read in the following way: they demand that practices be dismantled and restructured so as to allow for voices that now cannot express themselves and for meanings that now cannot be articulated. When there are radical exclusions and silences, linguistic reform is not enough: the piecemeal transformation and improvement of language-games will not do; deeper changes are needed: we need a profound transformation of our forms of life, which requires sustained social and political changes that can alter the material conditions and normative structures of our practices.

NOTES

1 I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of two anonymous reviewers at Inquiry. I also want to acknowledge my debt to Naomi Scheman’s work on Wittgenstein, which has been the source of inspiration for this paper.
This famous phrase comes from Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).


I borrow this term from M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). In the next section I will clarify this Bakhtinian notion further and I will explain how it applies to Wittgensteinian language-games on my interpretation.


Let’s not forget that one of Wittgenstein’s main objections against skepticism is that it leads to *inaction*, which is something that does not apply to radical feminist theorists, queer theorists, and critical race theorists. See L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), esp. §§409–11.

This is, of course, the provocative claim made famous by D. Davidson’s ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’, in R. E. Grandy and R. Warner (eds), *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 157–74. It has also been made in a very different way by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Bourdieu argues that what circulates in the ‘linguistic market’ are the ‘stylistically marked’ discourses or speeches of speaking subjects and groups, but not French, English, Italian, etc., which are ideological abstractions (see esp. pp. 38–9 and 44–9).

This possibility may seem to be in conflict with Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument, but it isn’t, for Wittgenstein certainly allowed for solitary players and for language-games which, contingently, happen to have only one player (see PI §243). These uses of language do not qualify as *radically private* because their intelligibility depends on the possibility of being shared as well as on the existence of other language-games that are actually shared.


J. F. Smith, ‘‘No Master, Outside or In’’: Wittgenstein’s Critique of the Proprietary Subject’, in Scheman and O’Connor (2002), pp. 344–64.

As Scheman (1993) puts it, ‘the unity of the self is an illusion of privilege’ (p. 98).


Lugones calls our attention to the fact that it is everywhere demanded of us that we be *one*, that all the different aspects of our personality be integrated in a unified center. This general anxiety about being one induces in us the fear of duplicity or plurality, which are depicted as a loss of self or as fractures of the self. Lugones proposes ambiguity as ‘a creative strategy of resistance’ against this unified picture of the self (1991, p. 43).

Wittgenstein’s language-games can be considered as performative counterparts of the polyphonic dialogues that Bakhtin’s semiotics analyzes (see Bakhtin 1981, 1984).

22 ‘The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual.’ (RFM II.23) From L. Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).


25 As many feminist, queer, and race theorists have emphasized, it is often the case that what the normative structure of our practices renders unintelligible is not simply particular experiences and actions, but entire identities and lives. Scheman (1997), for example, shows how the identity and life of the transsexual are rendered unintelligible by heteronormativity, and how the identity and life of the secular Jew are rendered unintelligible by Christian normativity. As a result, she contends, transsexuals and secular Jews are forced to ‘live as impossible beings’ (p. 152).

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