A Dialogue About Racism and Silence
Personal and Political Perspectives

by Nikki Gerrard and Nayyar Javed

Les auteures, deux psychologues féministes, discutent des questions de racisme et de silence dans leur correspondance. L'une des auteures est blanche et l'autre est immigrante pakistanaise. Leur discussion est basée sur un rapport de recherche concernant l'expérience que les immigrantes et les femmes réfugiées ont avec le système de la santé. Le silence des participantes ainsi que celui des deux auteures est un trait déterminant de cette recherche. Leur correspondance illustre la façon dont chaque femme a vécu et conceptualisé son expérience ainsi que comment elles ont expliqué les raisons de leur silence.

Some things could not be reported because the women refugees were afraid.

December 30, 1993

Dear Nayyar,

You asked me to write something for this issue on racism and gender. I have decided to recount a conversation I had with you, in which we discussed the project you were involved in, my observations, our subsequent comments on "silence," and how it renders our realities "invisible."

We have so many good discussions that academic discourse doesn't capture and that I hope this letter will. The moments of insights, and of "de-invisibilizing" the "invisibilized" are when we really fly.

Nayyar, as president of the Immigrant Women of Saskatchewan, you began very important research that has been published as a paper entitled "Towards a Wellness Model for Immigrant and Racialized Women." In this report are accounts of 23 non-English speaking immigrants or refugees who spoke to interpreters about their experiences in our health care system.

As I read each account, I was struck by the women's gratitude and graciousness about the health care system in Canada. When I reached the conclusion, I was surprised to read that "The health care system as a whole is not sensitive or responsive to the needs of immigrant women" (Immigrant Women of Saskatchewan 31). I told you that, although I personally agree with this conclusion (because of outside knowledge not connected to this report), the stories in the paper did not justify that conclusion. The stories of insensitivity or unresponsiveness were simply not there. You said you knew that but that so much of the women's stories were lost in the translation, reporting, and analysis. You added that some things couldn't be reported because the women who were refugees were afraid of criticizing the health care system.

One of the uses of a paper like yours is to convince decision-makers that problems exist as well as to make recommendations for the remediation of these problems. If the stories in this paper don't justify the conclusion, then they will not be seen as "legitimate" by the decision-makers. I had experienced this in my own research when I was told that the stories of racialized women and their experience of racism and sexism in mental health systems would be many and explicit. That wasn't the case. But, I also "knew" that those experiences existed. Therefore, an analysis and explanation of the apparent discrepancy have to be given (in order to "legitimize" the apparently inappropriate conclusion) or the decision-makers will dismiss the issue.

This reminded me of a discussion I once had about "how to describe [in research] participants' experience in a way that is legitimate." When Amy Rossiter said these words she was addressing the dilemma of silence from the women she was interviewing for her research about mothers. Realizing that motherhood is socially constructed and that discourse (all the "known" and "unknown" beliefs, practices, and language) frames that construction, she said "discourse frames our experience and sometimes things only happen in discourse; but sometimes in silence things happen too, but silence interrupts discourse" (7).

I think this is the essence of what happened in your project, Nayyar. Immigrant and refugee women are socially constructed and that construction includes all that has been said about sexism, racism, and classism, etc. In your report it is briefly mentioned that "society's injunction [is] that immigrants should be grateful for all we get here that we could not in our home countries" (32). The connection between immigrant and refugee women who are constructed as grateful in the health care system needs to be connected with the discourse of racialized women.

You and I discussed how the silence in these women's stories didn't come across in the report, and the importance of their silence. Although Amy doesn't resolve the issue of silence interrupting discourse, she points out that the result [of there being no place for silence in discourse] is that "realities in concrete don't add up to what the structures of reality are." And so you said when you emphasized that the women *did* indicate insensitivity and unresponsiveness in the health care system, but those experiences were not conveyed in their stories. That led us to talk about how the realities of our lives are rendered invisible.

You said that the realities of these women's stories were invisible because the realities were embedded in silence. I was struck by your awareness, your ability to conceptualize

and articulate this fact. Through fear, or language interpretation problems, or reporter's own selection (or who knows what?), the realities that you "knew" to exist were invisible. You asked me "How often are our own realities rendered invisible?" and for the same reasons? We became passionate in our discussion to get a handle on these "invisible realities" for others and for ourselves.

But this work is not linear or clear or simple. I am reminded of an article in *Fireweed* entitled "We Appear Silent to People Who Are Deaf to What We Say." Does it not follow that we can also be invisible to those who refuse to see? Where does the invisibility come? In the speaker's words or the one who hears? Is the object not seen by the one who looks? In the lives of racialized women, the women who were interviewed for this project, where does the invisibility lie and what meaning can be made of it for the purposes of your project? In our own lives, Nayyar, does the invisibility come from within ourselves or from those outside ourselves?

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I suggested that we think of this in terms of mirrors. When there is an object and a mirror, the object is three dimensional; the mirror is two dimensional. The object is *not* the reflection; the reflection is *not* the object. They are separate but they are *connected.* The mirror needs the object in order to reflect it. The object needs the mirror in order to be reflected. It is the object, the reflection, *and* the invisible space between them that is all one. And all this is, in fact, reality.

And so, Nayyar, we have to think of these women's stories as the realities that existed, that you "knew" to be there, the printed stories (the reflections) and the invisible link between them. In efforts such as your project, we must find a language that encompasses all of this in order to convey a more whole reality.

I think we covered some important and interesting ground in our discussion, Nayyar, and I've added some things in this letter to you. Looking forward to our next discussion I remain, your friend, Nikki.

December 31, 1993

Dear Nikki,

Your letter made me think about the omissions in our analysis of the stories of the 25 women from various cultural backgrounds who participated in our research project.

We have ignored the fact that silence is seen as a narrative of women's lives in many cultures. Silence contains women's reality and therefore, silence talks. To understand what silence says requires many things including transcendence of our Eurocentric context and its assumptions about other cultures and silence. We are embedded in those assumptions while exploring a reality that itself is embedded in silence. We did not ask why and how our research participants rendered their reality invisible to themselves by remaining silent about it. We did not go beyond words, thus ignoring their cultural practices.

Reading your letter and talking to you are nurturing experiences for me. You inspire me to think of many things including my own voice that I had to disown after moving to Canada. I then renewed my resolve to reclaim it. In this letter I am going to talk about silence in my own voice. This means taking risks on two accounts. I am resisting embracing the Eurocentric view of silence because what I say will echo "Sufism" (Islamic mysticism). I am also rejecting the subdued and subverted voice imposed on me by racism.

I have learned to respect silence from Sufism. Sufism values silence as a way for self reflection to achieve inner harmony. Sufies use silence as a teaching method thus enabling their students to develop an ability for understanding the narratives told by the silence of people in anguish and despair. Contrary to this view of silence, the Eurocentric view conceives silence as weakness and also uses it for oppressing people.

Representations of Islam in the west have not been favourable, even though it has many progressive elements and its adherents, especially Sufies, have contributed significantly to science, mathematics, and philosophy. Rooting my voice in Sufism may weaken its credibility because of how Islam is viewed in the western word. As well, talking in my own voice may lead the readers to dismiss what I would say, because when we, the racialized people, dare reclaim our voice we are labeled "reactionaries," "extremists," and at times, "terrorists." Nevertheless, I need to take this risk because that is the only way to liberate silence from the way it is represented and used in western imperialism.

Silence has an enormous salience in my life for two reasons. I have learned to value it because of the orientation to sufism and also because I turn to silence in my struggle to cope with racism and sexism. I have observed many of my racialized sisters drawing strength from silence in facing oppression.

Let me present a glimpse of the way sufism values silence, Nikki. Human beings, according to this philosophy, have an enormous capacity to live a fulfilled life. Fulfillment, however, comes from self-expression and communion with a "Divine Power." This communion is achieved by developing our individuality. There is a great deal of emphasis on silence because it offers a space for an individual to engage in inner dialogues with various selves whose harmony is essential for self evolution that leads to communion with the Divine Power. (In-

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terestingly, this Divine Power is often referred to as a woman in Sufies' poetry).

My work with many survivors of torture in war and with other oppressed people has revealed to me the enormous capacity of the human mind to cope with horror and pain. Silence is a vital aspect of this capacity. Many courageous individuals have used it to show resistance, even in the torture cells. I view this resistance as a struggle for self-expression and feel a sense of awe for silence. I think of the slaves in the United States who have used their silence to keep their spirits alive, and wonder about the impact of the tales their silence narrated. I have also told the story of my oppression as a racialized woman by talking through silence.

Despite our eagerness to belong to Canada, we are always treated as the "other."

I have always seen myself as an activist and when I do not stand up for my rights, I feel hypocritical. Up until very recently, I have felt awful about my silence because I saw it as an act of complicity. But now I see my silence as a statement. This statement is seldom attended or understood but I know I am making it. Let me share with you a very significant event of my life.

After completing my course work for my Masters Degree in Psychology, I needed an internship to complete the degree requirements. The agency where I wished to do the internship refused to take me. There was no reason given. I was suspicious and concerned. Part of me knew that the reasons for this rejection were situated in my name, skin colour, accent, and my cultural background. But there was also self-doubt—all the labels my oppressors have used and I have internalized were talking back to me. In my turmoil. I turned for help to the head of the department in which I was studying. He seemed sympathetic but affirmed my suspicions by telling me that I was refused the internship because of "prejudice." I asked him what prejudice was used. He seemed hesitant to say it was racism and chose not to respond. His silence said a lot, yet, I asked him if he had done anything to help me. He said that he had done everything that he could. I was curious about what he had done and asked him. He replied, "I told them that you were not like other Pakistanis and Indians." A sense of disbelief and shock froze my ears. I remember I swallowed something and later on realized that I was swallowing the scream inside me that said to walk away from the situation. Nikki, I did not say a word. I did not ask him what made him think that I was not like my people nor what did he think my people were like. I did not confront him even though I heard thousands of screams inside me wanting to expose him as a racist.

I knew I could do a few things to seek justice, but I chose not to do anything and found myself "invisibilizing" my reality in the same manner as the head of the department did. Both of us pretended that racism did not happen. I felt awful for complying. I do not know if he felt any remorse for the way he constructed my people yet I hope that he realized his mistake. He plays a vital role in training the counselors. Some of the counselors will be seeing the racialized clients. I wonder if they will ever realize what racism does to people.

As for understanding why I complied, I need to explore the meaning of an identity constructed and imposed on the racialized populations in the western world. So I invite you, Nikki, to take a look at colonization because understanding colonization is necessary for grasping the meaning of this identity.

In recent years, post-colonial scholars like Bhabha, Fanon, Bannerji, Miles, and Said have written extensively on the role of representations and language in the colonizing process. This representation, while covering up the acts of piracy and identity onslaughts, has served to legitimize the oppression. The representation of the colonized as the "others" of the Europeans has been imported to Canada. The "otherness" imposed on us is deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of our society. Despite our eagerness to belong to Canada and be taken as Canadians, we are always treated as the "other" of the "real" Canadians. Our "otherness" is used to usurp our right to equality.

In recent years we have started to protest and have made a few gains even though they are not very significant. But these gains have invoked a very strong reaction demonstrated by the popularity of the Reform Party in the last federal elections. Ironically, our "visibility" is used to render us invisible. We are under microscopic observation which Fanon has conceptualized as a gaze and which I have always described as a penetrating stare that feels like a rape. This gaze is the same one that controlled the slaves in the United States. Enduring the feeling engendered by this gaze is an enormous task. We try to protect ourselves by making ourselves invisible. Yet we seldom succeed. Nikki, when I walked away from the situation I referred to earlier, I was trying to protect myself from this gaze.

As a therapist having a familiarity with Sufism, I know that seeking visibility is important in self-development. Chernin believes that visibility of the self is necessary for achieving growth. However, I also know that the social location assigned to us gives little access to the space needed to achieve visibility. So, the knowledge that our visibility is not acceptable invokes fear and represses our desire to achieve visibility. Thus, we live in a turmoil which is caused by the desire and fear of turmoil. This affects our psychology. We experience a sense of loss and also develop self-loathing. Living in Canada does not provide us with the space to express these feelings. Like the participants in our research, we are taught to be grateful to be living in this land of milk and honey.

A few days ago, I was talking to a politician friend, who is also a feminist, about the deterioration of women's situation in Saskatchewan. She

silenced me by asking if these women are any worse than the women in my village in Pakistan. I replied that of course they are not, but they aren't any better, either. I was gently reminded by her of the superiority of Canada and the blessings it offers me. Incidents like this are life experiences we face everyday. Reminders of our "inferiority" engender inner tensions splitting us from within. We find ourselves tempted to believe that blessings do exist in Canada, yet our reality contradicts it. This leads us to believe in our own "inadequacies." So, our attention is directed away from our oppression to self-blame.

Some of us are able to find strength from within. We are able to listen to, what Sufies call the "whisper within," and regain the sense of adequacy. Silence helps us make this inner journey and gain strength to face the gaze.

Nikki, I think the participants in our research were engaged in a struggle to resolve their turmoil. Their silence provided them with the strength to accomplish this task.

Thank you for listening. We, the racialized women do talk if we are assured of safety and openness.

I value your friendship very much. Yours in sisterhood, Nayyar.

Nikki Gerrard, is a community psychologist who works at the Saskatoon Mental Health Clinic. She is an immigrant from the United States. She has spent recent years in feminist psychology and did her doctoral research on racism and sexism in mental health systems.

Nayyar Javed is a psychologist at the Saskatoon Mental Health Clinic. Recently, she has devoted her life to feminism and anti-racism work including writing, doing workshops, counseling immigrants and refugees, and social activism. Her own experience as an immigrant from Pakistan has served as her grounding for her work.

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