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# Review of: Transcribing Silence: Culture, Relationships, and Communication by Kristine L. Muñoz, Left Coast Press, 2014

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## Review of: *Transcribing Silence: Culture, Relationships, and Communication* by Kristine L. Muñoz, Left Coast Press, 2014

### **Abstract**

In the 15th book in the series *Writing Lives, Ethnographic Narratives*, edited by Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, Kristine L. Muñoz challenges us to look to the silent moments of our ethnographic transcriptions for additional meaning. *Transcribing Silence: Culture, Relationships, and Communication* leads us through an approach to our scholarly ethnographic work by sharing her own silent academic and personal experiences, whereby the reader escapes the tyranny of the local into the specificity of the personal.

### **Disciplines**

Educational Methods | Higher Education | Instructional Media Design | Special Education and Teaching | Vocational Education

### **Comments**

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**Transcribing Silence: Culture, Relationships, and Communication**  
**Kristine L. Muñoz**  
**Left Coast Press, 2014**  
**Reviewed by Carla A. McNelly, Iowa State University**

In the fifteenth book in the series *Writing Lives, Ethnographic Narratives*, edited by Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, Kristine L. Muñoz challenges us to look to the silent moments of our ethnographic transcriptions for additional meaning. *Transcribing Silence Culture, Relationships, and Communication* leads us through an approach to our scholarly ethnographic work by sharing her own silent academic and personal experiences, whereby the reader escapes the tyranny of the local into the specificity of the personal.

*Transcribing Silence* talks about the ways we can listen, watch, ask, and interpret our academic work for silent and unsaid moments in the narratives we write ourselves or record from the voices of others. Throughout each section of the book, we may stumble into a moment of silence and drift off into our own story, idea, or connection to the written words on the page. We might wrinkle their nose, smile, laugh, gasp, or cry as the unsaid moments take us into a very personal moment deep within our hidden memories. While reading, we learn how the silent and unsaid moments within ethnographic narratives can teach us about culture, relationships, and communication. And so it's not what we learn about Muñoz, but what we learn from her that reinforces the contribution of this book to the genre of ethnographic narrative.

In the Introduction, *Silence and the Unsaid*, Muñoz lays out a framework that “silence is more than just dead air” (p. 16). Through the academic lens of communication studies, we explore the power of learning to listen for silence and for what is unsaid within our ethnographic transcriptions. Muñoz cites two branches of social science literature that specifically delve into conversation analysis, social psychology and sociology, which analyzes “turns, pauses, lapses, and lulls” (p. 17) within conversations. Through an excavation of this literature, Muñoz prepares us for the narratives that await in Parts I and II.

After reading the Introduction, we have a solid foundation in searching for silent moments and for what is unsaid, so we can begin to spot these moments within each piece throughout the next section. Part I, *Autoethnographic Narratives*, Muñoz shares eight examples of brilliantly written pieces that explore culture, relationships, and communication through narratives of death, social class, intercultural marriage, love, and discrimination. Autoethnographic stories become social constructions through our wonder found in the silent and unsaid moments embedded in each narrative. The first narrative, *Transcribing the Unsaid*, reveals some of these moments in the first three sentences:

Robert Hopper wore a navy beret stepping off the plane. We smiled across the lobby, and then he looked down, self-conscious, maybe expecting shock at this appearance. I hoped there was no sign of that, having seen his shinny bald head at a conference a few months earlier. (p. 47)

Who is Robert Hopper? Why did he come there? Why is he self-conscious? Why might the author be shocked? What does *his shinny bald head* mean? What additional unsaid moments lie within this transcription? What are you thinking about right now? Maybe a friend, a family member, or someone you work with? Muñoz's words encourage us to keep listening for the silence and the unsaid.

In Part II, *Fictional Narratives*, she again shares five pieces assembled from research, observations, and ethnographic conversations bursting with curious questions. Each narrative gives us more practice searching for silent moments and for what is unsaid. These moments allow us to witness and interpret the social world of culture, relationships, and communication through narratives of infidelity, crushes, romance, and the death of a child. The narrative, *Andiamo* (ot Let's go), is full of examples of the unsaid:

*Your relationship to Mr. Connally... The question hung in the air. What do you THINK? We are adulterers and liars who have deceived the people we're married to, and even though we love those people deeply we have loved each other, too.*  
(p. 173)

*Andiamo* is the name of a sailboat. Mr. Connally and his female lover, Elizabeth, were together when it capsized. In order to save Griffin's life, a nurse asks her for information. During a moment of silence, Elizabeth confesses her relationship to the boat owner by thinking to herself. Elizabeth flees the hospital before his wife arrives. Throughout this fictional narrative, we contemplate cultural norms of infidelity and monogamous love within the deliberate silent and unsaid moments.

In *Breaking the silence: Teaching and learning ethnographic writing*, the Conclusion's objective is teaching us how to perfect ethnographic narratives. Muñoz confesses in this section that she is a "writer of narratives, in addition to social science" (p. 254). She tells us that in order to encourage our students to explore different forms of ethnographic narrative expression, we must also "DO IT!" ourselves (p. 257). Her work frames writing as a craft and perseverance through additional narratives of personal experience as key to honoring this craft. The lesson we learn from reading her personal narrative is that we have permission to write ethnographic narrative.

Each section of *Transcribing Silence Culture, Relationships, and Communication* is a stand-alone lesson to enhance a creative writing, autoethnography, or narrative inquiry course in various academic genres. Professors in communication studies, anthropology, history, sociology, etc., might use the entire book or various segments to assist students in understanding the importance of *transcribing silences* in their own budding work as researchers. Sections include "Reflections and Extensions" exercises for us to ponder the use of silence and unsaid moments in greater detail. These sections offer practical examples such as using a "writing log" to encourage scholars to refine their narrative writing skills (p. 263). Furthermore, students and researchers alike may find reading this book prior to conducting data analysis of their ethnographic field notes helpful in determining the mode of representation for their work. Each reader will have their own unique journey while reading this book as they escape into the silence and the unsaid of their own lived narratives.

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