# ‘Our Silent Slavery, Our Silent Martyrdom’: The Janus-Facedness of Silence as a Feminist Rhetorical Art

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I investigate how silence, that is, remaining silent and choosing when to break it, is as conscious and powerful a rhetorical act as speaking. The discussion is placed in the context of the 2024 case of Tessa Luz Reyes-Sevilla, a military wife in the Philippines who spoke out against the verbal and emotional abuse she and her children received from her husband, a military officer who was supposed to be appointed to the rank of Brigadier General in the Armed Forces of the Philippines. I argue that although silence may be imposed on women like Tessa Luz Reyes- Sevilla by certain dominant institutional structures and practices such as the patriarchal order and the traditional familial system, it still proves to be a cogent source of female empowerment and agency.

***Keywords***: Silence, rhetorics, Philippines, domestic abuse, feminist rhetoric

## Introduction

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible.
> — bell hooks, *Talking Back*

In the Philippines, “17.5% of Filipino women aged 15-49 have experienced any form of physical, sexual, and emotional violence from their intimate partners” (Philippine Commission on Women, “Violence against Women”). This means that, as of the 2020 national census, roughly around 1.74 million Filipino women

have experienced some form of sexual abuse and violence (Philippine Statistics Authority, “2020 Census of Population and Housing”). According to Statista:

> Among those who experienced physical violence, their current and former husbands or intimate partners were identified as the leading perpetrators of such abuse. [. . .] [I]t remains important to note [however] that some victims may not be included in these figures as *they may not feel comfortable enough to go to the authorities*. According to the same survey [conducted by Statista in 2022], *more than a quarter of the women surveyed never sought help or never told anyone after they experienced both physical and sexual abuse*. (“Number of minor victims of sexual violence”, emphasis mine; see also Philippine Statistics Authority, “National Demographic and Health Survey”)

The significant number of violence against women (VAW) cases is therefore pressing, given that some of the victims who experienced domestic abuse and violence chose to remain silent. And most of the time, victims of VAW remain silent to ensure not only their own protection from their spouses or partners but also the protection of their children (Philippine Statistics Authority, “National Demographic and Health Survey”). It is only when this silence is broken that we are able to see and fully grasp the extent of violence and trauma that VAW victims endured while in their abusive relationship. Breaking this “silence” is therefore a powerful and symbolic act. It is, above all, deliberate and cathartic. Blair describes it as “the power women can hold—[the] violence [of which] is symbolic, encouraging not real-life murder but emotional release” (“Female Rage”). In a similar vein, Cheryl Glenn characterizes “silence” as a “specifically feminist rhetorical art, often one of resistance [. . .] despite the fact that our talkative western culture equates speech with civilization itself, gendering speaking as masculine and silence as feminine” (262). Classical rhetorical theory, in this regard, highlights the speaking subject as the wielder of conversational power through language, thereby marking the non-speaking subject as powerless and weak. In a patriarchal society then, this unequal power dynamic gets translated into the gendered ways of doing language in that the speaking subject is constructed as male, while the non-speaking subject—powerless, weak, and silent—is constructed as female. As Paolena Comouche pointed out, “[w]ith the historical silencing of

women, rhetorical theories of speech exist within a masculinized context that has been strategically designed for the benefits of men" (3). Contrary to classical rhetoric, however, I reaffirm Glenn's and Blair's position in this essay that silence, (i.e., remaining silent and choosing *when* to break it), is as conscious and powerful a rhetorical act as speaking.

To demonstrate that silence is indeed a conscious and powerful rhetorical act, I will use the recent case of Tessa Luz Reyes-Sevilla—a military wife who broke her silence and spoke up about the mental and physical abuse she and her children received from her husband, Ranulfo Sevilla, a military officer of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) who was supposed to be appointed as Brigadier General of the AFP last March 2024 (Cayabyab, "'Abused' wife blocks CA promotion of AFP general"; Ramos, "Army wife convinces lawmakers to defer general's promotion")—as my rhetorical artifact (see "'Abused' wife blocks AFP exec's confirmation at CA"). I will specifically look into her press releases and television interviews from March 2024, selections of which will be provided throughout the essay.

By and large, the objective of this paper is to investigate the notion of "silence" as a powerful rhetorical act and the attendant social, political, and gendered discourses that mark it as a deeply feminist and resistant rhetorical strategy. Specifically, this essay answers the following questions: How does Reyes-Sevilla characterize her own silence? What motivations (and situational constraints) prompted her silence and eventual "speaking out"? Does silence have to be broken for it to have power? Or can silence, on its own, carry power?

## Silence as a Rhetorical Art in Classical and Feminist Rhetoric

Silence has never figured prominently in classical rhetoric where emphasis was (and still is) given on the activity of speaking. As Glenn explains, "[t]o imagine a rhetoric of silence might seem peculiar, given the Western tendency to overvalue speech and speaking out" (263). This "Western tendency" was, after all, a product of the patriarchal cultures of the Greeks and the Romans who had developed their own rhetorical traditions suited for and only taught to the male citizens of the state (Kristeva 279-82). Cameron, in a similar vein, observed the same patriarchal underpinning in traditional societies, saying that

> In the field of public speaking and rhetoric, it is taboo and custom we are dealing with above all. [And] in traditional societies, restrictions may be formulated as rules with serious penalties attached to violation: anthropologists have reported societies, for instance, where women are forbidden to speak outside the private house, or in the presence of male relatives and superordinates, or where they must avoid certain words and expressions. (4)

Caren Kaplan even goes on to say that the societal preference for women’s silence “is connected with the patriarchal definition of ideal femininity. ‘Silence gives the proper grace to women,’ Sophocles writes in *Ajax*” (67). To be a woman, then, is to be silent, and as Mwangi said: “Silence *is* a woman”. All of these go to show that, in rhetorical study, the act of speaking and its inverse, silence, are both deeply gendered activities. Speaking has always been equated with masculinity and silence with femininity, and society at large has continuously reinforced this dichotomy by

> [. . .] accept[ing] as natural this abstract identification of *woman* = *silence* and the complementary imaging of women’s speech as whispered, subvocal, the mere escape of trapped air . . . shhhhhhhh. (Kaplan 65, emphasis mine)

Because of this, women’s voices have been suppressed, unheard, and othered throughout the course of history. Generally, women’s experiences have been silenced in part by the practices enforced by not only the dominance of male-centric thinking but also the preposterous notion that the male experience is *the* universal experience, e.g., the use of “he” as the gender-neutral pronoun (Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language*; see also Kristeva, *Language the Unknown*). Taken further, languages have even been underpinned by misogynistic tendencies by designating certain derogatory lexemes as feminine (see, for example, the case of Spanish in Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” and English in Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place*).

While this much is true, Glenn contends that some forms of silence are done by women as strategic and resistant rhetorical acts (262). Glenn even goes as far as

saying that, as a rhetorical act, silence is anything but inaction and weakness. As Glenn argues:

> Although some silences are, indeed, unproductive or passive, not all are; but whether it is a forced position or a tactical choice, it carries meaning. *Silence is not, in itself, necessarily a sign of powerlessness or emptiness;* it is not the same as absence; and silencing for that matter, is not the same as erasing. Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function. (263, emphasis mine)

Silence, in the sense Glenn points out, is therefore *not* the inverse of speaking. If anything, silence should be characterized as being on the same level of rhetorical potency and usage as speaking, if not completely *complementary* to it. As Glenn pointed out:

> Silence [. . .] reveals speech at the same time that it enacts its own sometimes complementary rhetoric. [. . .] Silence is every bit as important as speech, that the unspoken offers us an as yet underexamined rhetorical art. (*Unspoken* 3-4)

In other words, it is an equally powerful tool as speaking because by being silent, we are already stating a position—and a meaningful one at that. It just so happens that silence has been categorized as inferior to speaking because it has long been equated with femininity, the sex deemed inferior—problematic as it may be—in patriarchal societies. As Comouche opines in *Feminist Rhetorics: Theory and Practice of Strategic Silence*:

> 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. (10)

In the West, then, silence and speech socially and rhetorically index the passivity and power of one’s gender, respectively.

Moving forward, Glenn touches on the presence of agency and power behind rhetorical silences. Taking the case of Anita Hill as an example, Glenn asserts that “women [like Anita Hill] recognized immediately how gendered power differentials continue to determine who gets to speak out, who should remain silent, who gets to decide—and when” (267). Anita Hill, it may be remembered, spoke out against then-nominee Clarence Thomas during his U.S. Supreme Court confirmation hearings in 1991, testifying that she had been sexually assaulted by him when he was just chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Gross, “Anita Hill Started A Conversation”; see also Ferrara, “Not a Sprint”). Here we can see how silence, although forced in the case of Hill, was nevertheless deployed as a strategic rhetorical act in that Hill was consciously aware that her speaking out would be to the detriment of her safety, well-being, and political career and that being silent was her way of consciously reaffirming the gendered biases and power imbalances in American politics (Glenn 283). Hill’s rhetorical silence, in this regard, was “strategically used as an empowered action,” co-opting what would have otherwise been construed as female submissiveness and passivity as “a form of control, a demonstration of resistance to domination, [and] a refusal to comply with authority” (Comouche 7).

In a similar vein, Christine Blasey Ford, a professor at Palo Alto University in the U.S., broke her silence and spoke out against then-nominee Brett Kavanaugh during his Supreme Court confirmation hearings in 2018, testifying that he “grop[ed] her and tr[ied] to take her clothes off when they were both attending suburban Maryland high schools in the early 1980s” (Anderson, “Who Is Christine Blasey Ford”; see also Brown, “California professor”). Similar to the case of Hill, Christine Blasey Ford waited for decades before breaking her silence, using the most opportune time when her assaulter, i.e., Brett Kavanaugh, was in a position to be questioned regarding his ethical and moral stances vis-à-vis American political issues (Brown, “California professor”). Hill’s and Ford’s rhetorical silences, in this case, were characterized by their subsequent “perforations” or breaking. As Glenn reminds us: “Silence relies on the *impending* perforation of speech [while] speech depends on its own renunciation” (*Unspoken* 7, emphasis mine). In other words,

the rhetorical act of silence is anything but “a lamentable essence of femininity” or essentially a “trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity or obedience” (Gleen, *Unspoken* 2). If anything, rhetorical silence is, as mentioned earlier, strategic and always in contact with systems of power, unsettling the expected relations of power between men and women in an otherwise patriarchal social context. This valuation of rhetorical silence—as a necessary antecedent to speaking out and as an “inherently rhetorical [act] as purposeful speech” (Comouche 7)—is unsurprising since it traces its roots within a broader history of queer, feminist, and racial liberation and equality movements in the latter half of the 20th century. As Patti Duncan observes in *Tell this Silence*:

> Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminist and African American, Asian and Pacific Islander American, Native American, and Latino/a and Chicano/a activist leaders have advocated to their constituencies the importance of “finding a voice,” of “speaking out” against oppression and injustice, and of moving away from the silences that may imply consent to subjugation, as well as to the maintenance of dominant power. (7)

## Employing Silence in the Philippine Context: An Example

While the notion of silence as a rhetorical act has been scrutinized pervasively and comprehensively in Western rhetorical literature, the same may not be said in the context of the Philippine rhetorical tradition. If anything, the current body of rhetoric studies in the Philippine context largely revolves around the rhetorical practices of national politicians like then-Presidents Rodrigo Duterte and the underlying ideological positions which they employ (see, for example, Navera, “War on Terror”, “Metaphorizing Martial Law”, “Belligerence as Argument”, “The President as Macho” 187-202). In Gene Navera, for example, then-President Rodrigo Duterte’s rhetoric of toxic masculinity and machismo was proven to be institutional and that his rhetoric was, in fact, anything but novel vis-à-vis the long line of Philippine presidential discourse throughout history (“The President as Macho”). Navera shows that in the Philippines, rhetoric studies has long been political in nature and has allotted significant focus on the rhetorical act of speaking as opposed to its complement: silence.

Nimrod Delante, however, addresses this gap in the literature by looking into the rhetorical practices of six Filipino domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore and argues that

> [. . .] the rights of many domestic workers to express their opinions and to reason out are almost always silenced due to their abusive employers, unscrupulous agents, the fear of losing their jobs, and other forms of exploitation. (1)

Gwen, a Filipina domestic worker and one of Delante’s six case studies, for example, employed silence when she was the subject of her employer’s anger and mistrust, saying that “[she] keep[s] quiet and [. . .] just pray[s] to God to guide [her] and give [her] more patience and strength [because she] need[s] to sacrifice for [her] family back home” (7). In a similar vein, Beth, another Filipina domestic worker in Delante’s study, revealed that on one occasion, her employer told her that she would be replaced if she “can’t keep [her] mouth shut”, reprimanding Beth to “keep silent [and] [. . .] do [her] job. No answering back” (10).

Both of these case studies, however, do not necessarily mean that the silence Filipina domestic workers employed as a rhetorical practice is “a sign of powerlessness or emptiness” (Glenn 263). As a matter of fact, the rhetorical silences employed by Gwen and Beth—along with those of the four other Filipina domestic workers studied by Delante—were direct outcomes of “expressing resistance to a hegemonic force (e.g., the position of the employer as a higher entity in the domestic space” (Delante 14). Gwen’s silence, for example, was triggered when she “reason[ed] out to her employer by explaining that the budget she leaves her with is not enough to do the errands [that the employer] wants her to do while she is away” (Delante 7). Beth’s silence, on the other hand, was a response to her employer’s screaming when Beth “advised her employers to stop bringing food into their bedroom” to stop ants from “attack[ing] their bedroom” (Delante 10). By and large, these cases show how silence can be employed strategically to navigate the precarious gendered, racialized, and classed conditions of Filipina migrants (Barber 93).

Contextualized within the Japanese rhetorical tradition, Gwen's and Beth's silence in Delante's study prove unsurprising. In Japanese culture, for example, silence plays a key role in "convey[ing] defiance and estrangement" as well as establishing truthfulness where "the spoken word was discouraged" (Jones 18-20, see also Lebra 126). Silence, in this regard, carries as much weight in meaning as spoken communication, signifying the subject's defiance not only to participate in the politics of the communicative situation but also to assert one's truthfulness.

Let us now turn to how rhetorical silence is employed by another class of marginalized and oppressed group, i.e., battered wives, by looking at the case of Tessa Luz Reyes-Sevilla.

## A Mother's Silence: The Case of Tessa Luz Reyes-Sevilla

In March 2024, the case of Tessa Luz Reyes-Sevilla sparked national interest when she and her 12-year-old daughter went to the Senate to block the Commission on Appointments' nomination of her husband, Ranulfo Sevilla, to the rank of Brigadier General in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, claiming that she and her children were victims of domestic abuse and that "her husband does not deserve to be promoted [. . .] to be a general [. . .] because it was [her] belief that a general should be accountable to the people" (Abarca, "'Abused' wife blocks promotion of Army official at CA"). Aside from the issue of domestic abuse, Reyes-Sevilla also said that "her husband [. . .] gave only P2,000 in financial assistance for their two children and flaunted his extramarital affair by bringing his mistress to the AFP camp" (Cayabyab, "'Abused' wife blocks CA promotion of AFP general"). All of these domestic issues Reyes-Sevilla had to endure "for too long" and "that she has been *silent long enough*" (Abarca, "'Abused' wife blocks promotion of Army official at CA", emphasis mine).

Reyes-Sevilla's response to domestic abuse is nothing short of surprising, as "silence" has long been observed to be a telling "response to violence and terror" (Gammeltoft 428). Her silence, in this regard, is part of a broader culture of silence, particularly among Asian women and victims of domestic and sexual violence (Gammeltoft 429, Waller & Forinder 12, McAlister et al. 1157). "Among

Tamil and Sinhala victims of violence,” for example, “the lasting effect that one often witnesses is a sort of stunned repose settled upon individuals and groups” (Daniel 121). Even during the aftermath of the partition of India and Pakistan, a culture of silence reigned among the people about the cases of sexual violence that resulted from the event. As Veena Das observes:

> [. . .] a zone of silence [was present] around the event. This silence was achieved either by the use of language that was general and metaphoric but that evaded specific description of any events so as to capture the particularity of their experience, or by describing the surrounding events but leaving the actual experience of abduction and rape unstated. (84)

In her case, Reyes-Sevilla had this to say in front of the national press shortly after blocking her husband’s appointment:

> *Hindi ko na po kayang manahimik. Nagtiis na po kami nang matagal.* Ang masakit doon ay nilulunok na nga namin ‘yung walang sustento — eh nakukuha pang mambabae [*I can’t keep quiet anymore. We have endured for a long time.* What’s painful is that we have been tolerating his lack of financial support and yet he still has the gall to womanize.]. (Abarca, “‘Abused’ wife blocks promotion of Army official at CA”, emphasis and translation mine)

Reyes-Sevilla’s silence here is resoundingly multifaceted and complex. It may be observed that the silence she is referring to only comes from her own person as opposed to, say, her children or close relatives, hence the emphasis on the self or *(a)ko* in the act of *katahimikan* (silence). Annie Leclerc, reflecting on the silence of women and men’s role in it, characterizes its internal nature as metaphorically martyrizing:

> It is our silence and the triumphant sound of your voice that authorized the theft of our labor, the rape of our bodies, and all *our silent slavery, our silent martyrdom*. How can it be that we are now coming out of our coma, and that our tongues, though still sticky with respect for your values, are loosening up, slowly? You had proclaimed

> the universality of your language. Very good for asserting your power, but not so good for keeping it. (76, emphasis mine)

Reyes-Sevilla then, by choosing to remain silent, taps into its rhetorical potency as an alternative response to speaking out in the least opportune moment. As Trinh T. Minh-ha opines in *Woman, Native, Other,* "Silence [. . .] provide[s] us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right" (83).

However, while Reyes-Sevilla's silence is deeply intrapersonal, the emotional and physical pain perpetuated by her husband is endured (*pagtitiis* or *nagtiis*) not by Reyes-Sevilla *alone*. In this case, Reyes-Sevilla's emphasis on *kami* (us) implies that although she alone was silent about the whole ordeal, the pains of domestic abuse were felt and endured by her *and* her children. The silence was personal, but the physical and emotional pains were familial.

Nevertheless, it may also be argued that Reyes-Sevilla's silence was forced upon her by not only the rigid and deeply patriarchal structure of the family in the Philippines but also the very institutions which her husband was (and is) a part of—the Armed Forces of the Philippines. On the one hand, her silence was operationalized and policed by a deeply patriarchal social system, owing largely to "the standpoint of male privilege" and the "silencing of the 'Other'" as characteristic "hallmark[s] of patriarchy" (Cronin 14, 25). Reyes-Sevilla's silence is, by this logic, concomitant to a "natural gender order" (Kemp 1998) that operates on "the use of violence against women" *and* their subsequent silence on male-perpetuated violence "as a means of achieving and maintaining male power" (Cronin 26, see also Johnson 284).

Institutional structures, on the other hand, also had a profound impact on Reyes-Sevilla's silence, suggesting the oftentimes covert complicity of social institutions in the perpetuation of cultures of silence among VAW victims. On one occasion, for instance, Reyes-Sevilla

> [. . .] sought the assistance of the AFP to compel her husband to provide them with enough financial support [. . .] [and] filed complaints at the Office of the Ethical Standards and Public Accountability in the

> Army headquarters in Fort Bonifacio, where she found out that at least 10 women go to the OESPA everyday to report their abusive spouses, only to be told “to just file cases in court.” (Philippine Daily Inquirer*,* “Enough!”)

Reyes-Sevilla’s silence was therefore enforced “in the shape of institutional structure” as Glenn (264) points out (also refer to the cases of Hill and Guinier in the previous sections). However, while this facet of Reyes-Sevilla’s experience may be described as a case of enforced rhetorical silence, the seemingly negligent and apathetic attitude of the institutional structure to the plight of battered military wives like Reyes-Sevilla and their desire to finally speak out on their own terms complicates the understanding of enforced rhetorical silence. Rather than being read as simply acts of being “manipulated into choosing to remain silent, or [being] threatened with consequences,” such a position may be more rightfully interpreted as a result of being products of the social and institutional apathy towards the lived experiences of women, particularly issues that concern violence against them (Comouche 6). This does not mean, however, that enforced silences do not offer an avenue for resisting authority and gaining control, since the act of staying silent alone is, to repeat Comouche’s words, “as inherently rhetorical as purposeful speech,” and that breaking one’s silence redirects attention to the now-speaking subject, thereby “enforc[ing] rhetorical listening upon them” (Comouche 6, 53). Essentially, while Reyes-Sevilla’s silence was indeed a product of the conditions of patriarchy, its very situatedness within the patriarchal system also provided her the potency to disrupt the logics of patriarchy from within by breaking her silence at her own volition. Put differently, by exercising control over the rhetorical conditions under which she breaks her silence—that is, its timing, site, and involved interlocutors—Reyes-Sevilla reclaims agency within the patriarchal system. The stringent nature of the patriarchal system and the gendered conditions it sets out for the rhetoric of silence to exist therefore becomes an avenue for its own undoing.

And so, to surface her husband as the perpetrator of domestic abuse in their family, Reyes-Sevilla had to “speak out” just when her husband was at the cusp of spreading his influence and power in an already patriarchal institution, that is, the military, in a deliberate and conscious manner. In other words, she *chose*

when, where, and how to expose her husband's acts, similar to how Hill and Christine Blasey Ford waited for the most opportune time to expose their sexual assaulters on national television. Discussing Hill's public testimony, for example, Glenn comments that

> Very quickly, Hill—and all her listening and watching audience—would see that her silence [. . .] would not protect her. But until that moment, her silence had worked to protect her from becoming a public spectacle. She had not been afraid to speak; silence had not been imposed upon her: Anita Hill chose silence. Years later, she chose to speak. (*Unspoken* 14)

Similar to Hill, Reyes-Sevilla's deliberate intent in choosing when to tap into the powers of speech is evocative of the rhetorical power of her silence and her breaking it (see Bell, "What does silence signify?"). She had, by way of her silence, the agency and power to expose and publicly shame her husband's violent acts, effectively dismantling the unequal marital and gendered dynamics between them that was in place but never made explicit (until she spoke up). As Kaplan remarks:

> Women speak on sufferance in the patriarchal order. Yet although the culture may prefer them to be silent, they must have the faculty of speech in order that they may be recognized as human. (67)

So, while her silence may have protected her initially from further—perhaps even more violent—acts from her husband, her speaking out cemented and ensured that such acts would be placed under public scrutiny at the expense of her husband's military service and reputation (see Anita Hill's case above). That is, Reyes-Sevilla's silence operates as a temporally situated rhetorical resource, one that affords protection for her and her children all the while preserving the conditions for a later, more consequential act of disclosure. Silence, in this sense, works as a calculated deferral that amplifies the force of eventual speech, as opposed to the mere absence of it (Glenn 3-4, Leclerc 76). In this particular case, then, rhetorical silence "contains everything in itself. It is not waiting for anything; it is always wholly present in itself and it completely fills out the space in which it appears" (Picard 17).

Reyes-Sevilla's silence therefore proves cathartic in that the act of breaking it finally releases the emotional stress, pain, and turmoil of having to experience domestic abuse from one's husband and witnessing the same violent act be done on one's children (see Blair, "Female Rage"). As Reyes-Sevilla remarked in the same interview: "I can no longer stay silent. No amount of sorry or money will make me back down. *We deserve to be vindicated*" (Cayabyab, "'Abused' wife blocks CA promotion of AFP general", emphasis mine). By and large, it is this acknowledgement of one's limits and the desire to be vindicated that make Reyes-Sevilla's silence symbolically violent (Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World*; Blair, "Female Rage"). Women are "shut up in their bodies, in their silence and their 'home'", but when they *do* break their silence, it disrupts the patriarchal order and puts into public spectacle the injustices of the dominant social system (Irigaray 94). Here, "spectacle" should be understood as a kind of forced public confrontation in which what is typically privatized in the patriarchal system—domestic abuse, coercion, and gendered subjugation—is rendered legible and contestable within institutional and social arenas such as the Commission on Appointments hearing. Such a disruption, however, is neither total nor permanent; instead, it is episodic and contingent, one that exposes fractures in the patriarchal order without fully dismantling its structures. "Escaping the silence," Comouche points out, therefore "becomes a priority that consists of seeking to understand the silence through careful consideration and reflection" (53).

## Moving Forward: Conclusions

In this essay, I have highlighted how silence, that is, remaining silent and choosing *when* to break it, is as conscious and powerful a rhetorical act as speaking, resonating "loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use" (Glenn, *Unspoken* 14). Although silence may be imposed on women by certain dominant institutional structures and practices such as the patriarchal order and the traditional familial system, it still proves to be a cogent source of female empowerment and agency because it allows women to regain agency by controlling the rhetorical conditions under which the silence can be broken. Women like Reyes-Sevilla, for example, have used their silence to transgress and resist the patriarchal order by drawing the public's attention to the social and gendered injustices perpetrated by men such as domestic abuse and financial

negligence even if it comes at the expense of making their own emotional, physical, and mental pains a public spectacle (see Glenn 264). If anything, it may be said that silence, while powerful and symbolically violent, still makes women endure their own "silent slavery and silent martyrdom" while, on the other hand, also imbibe them with the power to disrupt, transgress, and resist the patriarchal order (Leclerc 76). As Delante rightfully points out: "[. . .] silence acts as a double-edged sword: as a form of resilience or strength or as a vehicle for potential and more damaging abuse to happen" (14).

Having discussed Tessa Luz Reyes-Sevilla's case, the question stands: Does it now mean that silence should be broken for it to have power? Or can silence, on its own, as a rhetorical act, carry power? I argue that having a polarized model of silence—that is, whether it should be broken or kept to have power—grossly misrepresents the rhetorical situation in which such an act is done. If anything, speaking out and keeping silent both bear significant rhetorical power. Speaking out, for example, provides an avenue for otherwise marginalized and ostracized groups to expose social, cultural, economic, and gendered inequalities in the status quo, thereby disrupting and calling attention to, if only for a brief moment, the current workings and ills of the hegemonic system. Reyes-Sevilla, for one, was able to effectively and publicly question the integrity of the Philippine military, a highly patriarchal and male-centric institution, by calling attention to how it treats battered military wives like her (see Abarca, "'Abused' wife blocks promotion of Army official at CA"; Cayabyab, "'Abused' wife blocks CA promotion of AFP general"). In this particular case, by speaking out, Reyes-Sevilla was able to amplify an otherwise discreet (or perhaps hushed?) matter for public scrutiny and consequent indignation. The power of speaking out or breaking one's silence is therefore contingent on its capacity to draw public attention to social inequalities and to visibilize otherwise marginalized and oppressed voices. As Patti Duncan in *Tell this Silence* propounds, "silence, rather than being outside of discourse, is very much within it, functioning along with and in relation to what is said" (14).

Keeping silent therefore bears significant rhetorical power in that it provides the rhetor space for resilience and strategic intrapersonal maneuvering. According to Delante, for example, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore regularly and reasonably speak out against their abusive employers, but they oftentimes "remain

silent or appear passive and subservient when talking with [. . .] employers [. . .] [in] fear of losing [their] domestic job" (14, emphasis mine). In other words, silence is deployed "to avoid altercation in the house [and . . .] to keep [one's] job", all of which are done to navigate the precarious position of Filipina migrants as both racialized Other and classed subjects (Delante 12; Barber 93-95). In a similar vein, Reyes-Sevilla kept her silence in order to navigate the complexities and inequalities of an otherwise patriarchal political and military system, choosing instead to use their silence *as* the locus of rhetorical meaning even if it is not rendered perceptible with speech. As Glenn saliently reiterates,

> Containing everything in itself, *silence is meaningful, even if it is invisible*. It can mean powerlessness or emptiness—but not always. Because it fills out the space in which it appears, it can be equated with a kind of emptiness, but that is not the same as absence. And silencing, for that matter, is not the same as erasing. Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function, and a rhetorical one at that. (*Unspoken* 4)

All of these, however, raise the question as to whether or not a rhetoric of silence may begin with or involve its enforcement by institutional structures and, instead, be done as a rhetorical choice resulting from female agency. As the case of Reyes-Sevilla—and those of Hill and Blasey Ford as well—shows, female agency and structures of power are two inextricably linked forces. On the one hand, their rhetorical silences were produced and influenced in part by patriarchal structures of power such as the Philippine military institution and the U.S. Supreme Court system, respectively, where they had experienced sexual abuse and assault. On the other hand, their silences were also kept and maintained not only as a way to shield themselves from becoming an object of public spectacle, but also to protect their loved ones (Glenn, *Unspoken*). Reyes-Sevilla's desire to safeguard her children's safety and anonymity further suggests that she had the agency to maintain her silence *and* decide when and where to break it, similar to the act of speaking. As Scott points out in "Rhetoric and Silence":

> Every decision to say something is a decision not to say something else, that is, if the utterance is a *choice*. In speaking we remain silent. And in remaining silent, we speak. (146)

Ultimately, Reyes-Sevilla's case illustrates how the rhetorical act of silence functions as a deliberate and strategic form of agency within patriarchal structures. This paper contributes to feminist scholarship and rhetoric studies by demonstrating that the exercise of silence—like the act of speaking—is a consequential and agentive rhetorical practice. Even though it is a direct manifestation of the physical and symbolic violence of the patriarchy on women, silence provides VAW victims the space to negotiate, resist, and subvert power within the patriarchal order in such a way that it gives them control of the rhetorical conditions under which their silence is broken—that is, by determining the time, place, and audience of their eventual disclosure. In doing so, this analysis foregrounds silence as an indispensable, yet often overlooked, site of rhetorical power and agency.

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