The National Embryo Donation Center is a nonprofit organization in the United States whose stated mission is “to protect the lives and dignity of human embryos” by facilitating the adoption of embryos. (Embryo transfer could lead to pregnancy.) It happens to be located in my city of Knoxville, Tennessee. When I first became interested in having children, years ago, I learned that I was excluded from the center’s services because I was single. The question “Who can adopt?” posted among the NEDC website’s Frequently Asked Questions is answered with a one-sentence statement followed by a bulleted list of eight restrictive criteria. The statement is, “We work hard to assure our donors that their embryos will be placed in healthy, stable homes with loving parents.” The first criterion is, “Couples must be a genetic male and a genetic female married for a minimum of 3 years.” No explanation is given for this placement restriction. Common-sense reasoning connects “a minimum of 3 years” of marriage back to “stable homes with loving parents.” The longevity of the marriage arguably indicates that the household is
stable and the parents are loving. But why married? (Why the sanction of the state?) Why genetic male and genetic female? Why male and female? Why couples? Reasons for these provisos are unavailable within the text. For understanding, the reader must consult some unstated, extratextual logic, which is, I venture: married, heterosexual cisgender couples are normal, adequate, and proper (would-be) parents while various other people are not. The fact that this logic is not articulated reflects its dominance and helps sustain its impact.

This book proceeds from an understanding that what is not said does foundational work for the sake of harmful social arrangements. Unsaid does, invites, and conceals harm. The aims of the book are to draw attention to the effects of unsaid on harm and to advance a methodological approach for determining what is unsaid within texts, particularly where unsaid matters to well-being. Generically I call the approach unsaid analysis.

Analyzing what is not said is tricky business indeed. All communication excludes. To make a point, communicators “leave out” far more—incalculably more—than they “put in.” In writing that last sentence, I did not write about the changing seasons or my most recent meal. I wrote “communicators” and not “speakers,” “agents,” or “people.” Arguably these “unsaid” things are banal. The things I have in mind, however, are exclusions that matter for social justice and well-being.

Critical scholars from numerous fields—critical race theory; feminist, postcolonial, queer, and disability studies; and ecolinguistics, to name a few—observe that beyond material arrangements, discursive processes—including discursive erasures—produce and reflect relations of power. People are silent, either by virtue of their oppression—in which case they are said to be silenced—or by virtue of their position of power, and in order to maintain such power. Even unintentionally and unaware, people carry forward exclusions that are collectively based (Jalbert 1994). A broad social scientific and activist literature recognizes the understatement of hegemonic logics and the exclusion of oppositional logics as co-constructive of
power arrangements and harm. Elaborating how the exclusions and exclusionary understandings can systematically be discovered makes an important contribution to social research and activism. The field of unsaid analysis has been pioneered and developed by literary scholars, communication analysts, linguists, philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists. A criminological/zeiiological perspective provides new theoretically informed tools for discerning what is unsaid.¹

Yet, unsaid is no mere academic concern. Not only researchers, but also laypersons, often suspect that some text is “coded”—that it contains some “subtext.” They believe that the subtext achieves something that is socially consequential, specifically that it obscures or supports some misconduct. Coded communication includes “dog whistles” that disseminate hateful messages with presumed intention and often as a signal to committed haters of where the communicator stands. Also coded are understandings of right relations that are simply, perhaps innocently, taken for granted. Left implicit, unsaid is shielded from critique. A cohesive strategy for identifying these sorts of unsaid things in a systematic fashion has been lacking. This book develops such a strategy as a contribution to the critical social research and activism toolkit.

The next section of this introductory chapter sets out the many ways in which power, mainly dominance but also resistance, is wielded via unsaid. I then describe the ideas and theories that inform my methodology.

POWER, HARM, AND UNSAID

Power, harm, and unsaid are variously connected. The voices of the powerless are excluded from, and silenced in, myriad social spaces, which reinforces their powerlessness. Across power positions, one may censor what one says or veil it somehow in order to gain advantage and/or avoid social sanctions for provoking or facilitating
harm. The powerful gain and maintain considerable power by keeping quiet.

**Speakers Excluded, Speech Repressed**

Obstacles to speaking are materially and culturally structured at multiple levels of social engagement. Silence helps some achieve their purposes and causes others to suffer. It is woven into and serves social divisions. Numerous institutions and domains of social life differentially impose silence.

Social positions confer or withhold epistemic authority. Hedges and Fishkin (1994, 3), in reviewing the work of Tillie Olsen, reflect on how “being born into the wrong class, race, or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muffled by censorship, or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing” create unequal patterns of voice. That is, stratification determines epistemic authority in terms of being too bogged down to speak and in terms of speech being deemed differentially important or tellable. In Western society, the preferred tellers of illness stories have been physicians (Frank 1995). In Western courtrooms professionals are supposed to speak on behalf of the actual parties to conflict (Christie 1977). Generally, persons who are not white, not male, not heterosexual, and not cisgender, and who are poor, cognitively atypical, and “young” or “old,” have been discredited. Stigmas associated with some putative trait or conduct also limit standing. Criminalized youth, for example, are compelled to silence in institutional spaces:

It is often to a young person’s detriment to speak in court, because their pleas of innocence, attempts to explain themselves, or their expressions of change may actually hurt their legal defense. Thus, many defense attorneys, and even judges, will stop young people from speaking in court, except at moments when their speech may be safe, for example, during an allocution at a guilty plea, or when young people can describe their compliance with treatment. (Cox 2017, 90)
In everyday life, elites talk too much and prevent others from talking. They establish the rules for communication, set the agenda, summarize “main” points, and otherwise take control linguistically and tonally. The powerful arbitrate the credibility of (the speech of) less powerful communicators. The latter (would-be) communicators are effectively silenced: they have trouble entering or staying in or at the center of conversation. Reductive labels and jokes can silence as well. They do so by negating the diversity of the group, and by denying targets their authority and expertise. “Angry women” who “persist” merit being ignored.

People are silenced depending on what they might say. Authoritarian regimes characteristically impose silence. Among other things, criticisms of the government and accounts of particular injustices, of the present as well as the past, must not be conveyed in speech or writing; penalties can be severe. Notably, authoritarian regimes may also impose speech requirements, such as to praise the country’s leaders or a particular god. This pattern—prohibiting some speech, ordering other speech—will become relevant in chapter 2, where the dialectic of too much and too little said is exploited methodologically.

Even under conditions of democracy, particular topics cannot be openly discussed; particular stories cannot be told. Waxman (2003) points to contemporary scholars’ tendency to ignore women’s stories of the Holocaust to the extent that they are morally complex, not gender-normative, and/or not redemptive. They diverge from the official story of Holocaust victimization—from its “master narrative.” Gair and Moloney (2013) dispel the idea that narratives that diverge from the official story are always embraced by progressive audiences. Moloney shared her experience of relinquishing a child to adoption in an article she submitted to a qualitative research journal: the submission received unfavorable reviews. She described “a lingering perception that beneath these logical criticisms, the intense emotional pain described in my article was too personal and too confronting, and that my counter narrative from the dark underbelly of adoption fell outside the exclusion zone” (56). Similarly, the “chaos
narratives” of chronically ill people are hard for other people to hear, noncompliant as they are with dominant narrative expectations, including conventionalized life and story trajectories of triumph, progress, and redemption (Frank 1995). These observations testify to the historical and cultural situatedness of acceptable stories.

Some experiences cannot be spoken of, at least not for a time. The forces behind such silences are complex. They are both external and internal(ized). Many forms and instances of victimization go unrecognized, even unnamed. They are collectively and individually repressed. Examples include state torture, domestic violence, and various forms of sexual violence, including the sexual dimension of other violence. Victims’ accounts—sometimes more than the acts of victimization themselves—are forbidden, discouraged, sanctioned, and/or trivialized. To speak would be to threaten current orders and the norms that maintain them: the would-be narratives are unnarratable (Prince 1988, 1).

Or victims may be “at a loss for words.” Das and Nandy (1985) observe that victims of atrocity may suffer a “loss of signification” in that “violence cannot be contained within any structure of ideas” (194; see also Bar-On 1999; Welz 2016). Survivors have “a limited capacity of any narrative resources to convey the profundity of the traumatic experiences” (Schwartzmann 2015, 285). The story cannot begin to capture the breadth or strangeness of the experience. What is more, “the survivor’s own shame can restrict disclosure” (284). Shame, a form of self-blame, is nurtured by outside forces, yet it is also arguably a means of coping, as one reaches for some meaning for suffering, or sense of justice in the world. Yet, a worry that others “might think it’s your fault” (“it” being racist treatment, for example) can inhibit speech (research participant Robertson, quoted in Sheriff 2000, 124). Or, survivors may fear that disclosure will be sanctioned by still-corrupt agents, including formal authorities; victims might then bury their allegations.

Atrocity scholars have shown that silence can be part of a broad societal project of denial (Cohen 2001), one that functions at multi-
ple levels of social life (Savelsberg 2021). Knowledge of violence, its impacts, how it is defined, and the fact that it persists have all been subject to repression, backed by more violence. Beyond genocidal regimes, at a meso level, silence can be coerced by the threat of blackmail or extralegal violence—think of punishment by crime syndicates—and job dismissal or demotion in retaliation for complaining of mistreatment or calling it out (whistleblowing). But also, quite legal institutional mechanisms (e.g., the nondisclosure agreement) exist for suppressing what could be said.

At the same time, silence may be normative, which is to say that it need not be coerced. Sheriff (2000) coins the expression “cultural censorship” to describe a collective prohibition on discussing racism in Brazil, notwithstanding the race consciousness of Brazilians of African descent. She writes: “In Brazil, the subject of racism is circumscribed not only by evasive rhetorical strategies but also by historically rooted, customary silences” (121). Unsaid is broadly structured, but individual speakers opt in. They avoid talking about racism in an attempt to forget it or avoid its emotional sting. Cultures of silence, and fear of the consequences of breaking the silence, foster the passivity of bystanders in the face of harm (Hallsworth and Young 2008; Manji, Presser, and Dickey 2014).

Silence, Voice, and Resistance

Silencing compounds subjugation and suffering for those directly affected. It keeps oppressive structures in place. It also results in lost contributions and incomplete and inaccurate social histories. Speech—call it testimony—can be resistance. We can begin to mount opposition and intervention when we name unjust circumstances, their impacts, and their sources/perpetrators. James Baldwin (1976, 11) thus observed: “The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he or she has become a threat.” To speak the truth of victimization is to begin to upset the
power arrangements that have made the victimization possible. It is an expression of power, however rudimentary.

However, silence can also strengthen one’s position (Givhan 2020). Simmel (1906, 466) observed that secrecy “confers power to modify fortunes, to produce surprises, joys, and calamities.”

Choosing silence can be a tool of resistance—a denunciation of a system of epistemic oppression (Carter 2006), an attempt to reestablish the “ordinariness” of one’s daily life in the face of violent disruption (Fleetwood 2019), a “regenerative force” (Godart 2016), or a refusal to participate in one’s own subjugation, hence “the right to remain silent” when state agents might interrogate. Poor Brazilians of African descent spoke to Sheriff (2000) of their silence about racism as adaptive, “directed toward protecting oneself and one’s intimates from protracted anger and the festering of emotional pain” (125). Though chosen, this silence was an accommodation to things as they are.

During research or institutional interviews, participants’ silence, in general or after a specific question, can be a bid to challenge stigmatization or the questioner’s authority (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2018; Charmaz 2002). Wherever voice is demanded, silence is protest. Not speaking, like other deliberate not-doings, can be a relatively safe strategy of resistance (Kärki 2018). One tends to “get in trouble” for doing, less often for not doing. Also, one might tactically exploit an unseen and unheard position, as slaves do in waging revolts and vagrant people do in evading the police. Invisibility can confer considerable logistical advantages in struggles against injustice. Codes of silence can facilitate various endeavors and struggles.

Silence can be used strategically. Bhattacharya (2009, 370–71) observes that the use of silence by violated women in Lahaul, India, “is not some kind of pure political resistance—it is compromised, negotiated, and yet powerful enough that within it is contained the possibility of activism, feminist critique of honor and sexuality, and actual practical changes with regard to different forms of violence against women.” Still, the choice to stay quiet can be problematic.
The silent party alone may be aware of the intention to protest, which is to say that the protest may not register with oppressors and others. Then, silence may be taken as indifference, ineptitude, or even consent. “Not speaking can entail accepting someone else’s story about what happened to you” (Winter 2010, 8). Silence by and large speaks less precisely than voice. Thus it is a precarious strategy for the put-upon and oppressed. It may not even give the feeling of power that voice does. Poet Audre Lorde (1997) relates:

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

Absences within Texts

Houston and Kramarae (1991, 389) astutely observe that “the power to silence another is not simply the power to prevent her talk; it is also the power to shape and control her talk, to restrict the things that she may talk about and the ways she is permitted to express them, to permit her to speak, but to suppress her authentic voice” (emphases in the original). Beyond persons being altogether silenced or choosing silence, a variety of things that persons might say go missing from texts. Much would-be speech is censored, formally or informally, generally or conditionally—that is to say, at certain times and in certain social settings.

Again, social position directs such absences. Concealment is bound to power positions; (some) power is altogether necessary to achieve absences in the first place. Institutional power—that of governments, media corporations, schools, and so forth—is in part the power to omit. The Russian government, with Vladimir Putin at the helm, criminalized the sharing of “false information” about the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began February 24, 2022. This included calling the war a war. The penalties were harsh, including...
prison terms up to fifteen years. No other body could suppress speech quite so absolutely as the government.

As previously discussed, we censor ourselves for strategic reasons—simply to get along or to advance our interests. Savelsberg (2020), who studied family histories written by children and grandchildren of the German Holocaust perpetrator generation, observed that many people in the older generation disclosed their past activity or passivity vis-à-vis the Holocaust selectively in order to manage stigma and shame. Their descendants kept the silence for similar reasons or to protect their relationships with their elders. But self-censorship is more quotidian than that example implies.

Arguably more benign is so-called discretion or tact. Social norms and settings demand, and selectively enforce, tact. (The social norms that make these demands are themselves often unspoken.) Politeness may inspire indirect, and thus supposedly not-so-informative, utterances (Thomas 1995). Ambiguous comments routinely take the place of direct criticism. Tact may furthermore inspire outright silence, in response to something said, in lieu of outright disagreement. In these cases, unsaid supports interactants’ positive self-image (Goffman 1955, 1959). Indirect expression thus can be quite normative, with straightforward expression the deviant kind.6

What is worthwhile or advisable to say is altogether bound to social context. We limit what we say depending on the circumstance. For example, different situations call for different amounts of sharing about oneself. What “should be said” also varies with historical period in a society as well as across societies. Cultural groups differ in how directly or indirectly they communicate. Then there are cultural taboos, which forbid actions including speech actions. An example is the taboo in many societies against discussing or even mentioning certain bodily functions.

Taboos are powerful means of so-called informal social control. Not-saying is also formal, enforced by governments. Subjugated persons may be compelled to say certain things, such as to signify their obedience and “reform.” Prisoners in China and the United States,
for example, have been made to recite their moral transformation from waywardness in a way that validates particular institutional expectations (Fox 1999; Zhang and Dong 2019). Similarly, states coerce criminal confessions through means that are both licit (e.g., plea bargains) and illicit (e.g., torture). “The oppression of speech exists right alongside the oppression of silence” (Gullette 2017, 185). The subaltern has been made to say that which accommodates the other’s position of control, while leaving out that which might threaten that position. This is not to say that the subject does not get anything from the subjection. They may get less horrible treatment or early release from confinement. Ginio (2010), in examining the situation of Africans who fought for France, observes that their complicity with a narrative that occludes violence on behalf of colonial power may reflect a desire for some place in French history.

For elites, silence on a baneful or controversial action is a prerogative, and often a strategy, for acquiring and maintaining power.7 Leaving things unsaid can help communicators avoid criticism and accountability. Hence the ambiguous orders to perpetrate violence such as crime-syndicate “bosses,” genocidaires, and other political leaders are known to dispense. Goffman (1959, 62) observed: “Communication techniques such as innuendo, strategic ambiguity, and crucial omissions allow the misinformer to profit from lies without, technically, telling any.” Keeping quiet or speaking in coded fashion may accompany explicit denials of morally troublesome conduct and/or its effects.

Even in saying something about our troublesome conduct and its effects, we leave things out. We tailor our message so that our actions sound relatively benign or, if not, so that we come across as minimally culpable. Power shapes the capacity to withhold information from others (Zerubavel 2006, 39). Selective or ambiguous speech is a tool of power. Politicians use oblique or otherwise ambiguous expressions to describe situations for which they might bear some responsibility (e.g., “collateral damage” rather than “killing”). George Orwell (1968, 136) observed that obfuscation is an important
strategy leaders use to communicate about “the indefensible” and thus avoid raising alarm:

Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.

The news media uphold power structures by adopting euphemisms favorable to elites and elite rule: for example, attributing “misstatements” rather than “lies” to politicians at the highest levels (Bauder 2018; see also deMause 2020). Even minute exclusions reflect and substantiate power positions. Consider differential use of race terms for people, such that, as bell hooks (1981, 138) observed, “the word woman is synonymous with white woman.” The word *animal* is synonymous with the nonhuman kind; humans’ animality requires special comment (Singer 1990). Status quo power relations are linguistically coded as standard, and dominant beings are coded as central in the moral scheme of things (Butler 2004, Opotow 1993). Zerubavel (2019) similarly points out the nonuse of words for that which is normalized, such as *hetererotic*, in contrast to the deviantized and therefore marked *homoerotic*. Supposedly normal life is “semiotically superfluous” (64–65).

One of the foremost exclusions of elite communication is the communicator’s own position, meaning both their identity and their stake in what they are saying. Who is speaking? Why are they speaking? What interests are being served by their speaking? The scholarly claim to objectivity traditionally implies that the scholar’s only interests are to create knowledge and perhaps to be of some real-world use. Critical scholars call out the hollowness of that implication and furthermore turn objectivity on its head. Criminologist Biko Agozino (2003, 163) defines objectivity not as “positionlessness but . . . as the procedure of taking a position without concealing or
distorting oppositions to the position taken.” Agozino and other critical scholars make plain their own commitments in doing scholarly work.

In addition to their own positionality and interests, elite communicators exclude potential counterarguments to, or problems with, what they say. Or, they include the arguments and problems but minimize the challenges these pose. The work of excluding is a kind of art for public relations specialists such as speechwriters and marketing executives.

Selective communication fails to give a full and authentic picture of some phenomenon. It might be countered that the charge of obfuscation wrongly presumes that a full and authentic picture is possible. Or, it could be said that we cannot know what the speaker knows, and therefore that the charge is unfair. I take the point that “what there is to know” of other minds (and all else) is indeterminate. Still, these criticisms strike me as pedantic. It has been revealed time and again, across political regimes and epochs, that there was more to reveal and that authorities knew things that they kept hidden. I have many times in my life kept some fuller awareness from myself, a feat I only recognized later on. I did so—it occurs to me now—to avoid some emotional pain, including the pain of knowing about harm-doing in which I was implicated. But also, I did not know all that was knowable from my particular vantage. Whereas the words obfuscate and obscure seem to imply intent, the speaker’s intent to conceal information is far less important than the fact that information is concealed impactfully.

Omissions and Ignorance

We speak in ways that omit; we may not even be aware of the omissions. The question arises: How can we lack such awareness?

We avoid knowing. We ignore information that would contradict our existing ideas, including but not limited to ideas about self. Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory offers an explanation.
Cognitive dissonance is unease due to holding conflicting ideas. It motivates action to reduce the dissonance. In line with the theory, Swann, Johnson, and Bosson (2009, 84) state: “When people receive feedback that challenges their self-views, they behaviorally resist such challenges, and such resistance activity stabilizes their self-views.” Resistance, of course, includes not-doings, like disattention. Narayan, Case, and Edwards (2011, 5) observe: “Most people seek out information which agrees with their current world-view and cognitive skill levels rather than acknowledge or seek new information that causes an uncomfortable conflict in their minds.” They asked 34 study participants to record information-related thoughts and activities in daily journals over a period of five months.

Participants’ information journals revealed that although they were generally looking for more rather than less information on topics that interested them in their everyday lives, there were certain areas where they actively avoided information. These were specific issues with which the participants either had some previous experience or knowledge or wanted to avoid any new information that might interfere with their decisions or current way of thinking. It was a way of maintaining the status quo or not rocking the boat. This was noticed mainly in the following areas: financial affairs, certain medical issues, religious issues, and certain political issues. (4)

Hence, our statements may be missing something because we lack information, and we may lack information because we have steered clear of it. This ignorance is active and willful: “they do not know and they do not want to know” (Tuana 2006, 10; see also Gross and McGoey 2015). The desire not to know points to some measure of knowing in not-knowing. On that view Cohen (2001, 24) observes that denial “allows for the strange possibility of simultaneously knowing and not-knowing.” Cohen deploys psychoanalytic theory in describing such denial, as in the subject has an “unconscious need not to know about troubling matters” (24), although he also emphasizes the social support that bystanders to harm in particular receive for remaining ignorant.
Whereas individuals often have personal reasons to be uninformed, then—for instance, a patient opting to learn less than there is to know about their medical condition—knowledge avoidance is an indelibly communal phenomenon. “Whole societies have unmentioned and unmentionable rules about what should not be openly talked about” (Cohen 2001, 45). The cognitive communities of which we are members set out what we should or need to know and what we should or need not to know. Thus Zerubavel (2006, 23) observes that “ignoring something is more than simply failing to notice it. Indeed, it is quite often the result of some pressure to actively disregard it. Such pressure is usually a product of social norms of attention designed to separate what we conventionally consider ‘noteworthy’ from what we come to disregard as mere background ‘noise’.”

Nowhere is ignorance so patently socially organized as it is concerning racialized positions and interests (Mills 2007, 2015). Mills (2015, 219) takes note of the concept of color-blind racism that Bonilla-Silva theorized, “in which whites deny any racism, declare their support of nondiscriminatory liberal norms and ideals, but simultaneously decry the unwillingness to work, preference for living on welfare, culture of poverty, and/or refusal to assimilate of particular nonwhite groups.” In a revision of that concept, he writes: “The real heart of white ignorance today, whether accompanied by such prejudicial characterizations or not, is the refusal to recognize how the legacy of the past, as well as ongoing practices in the present, continues to handicap people of color now granted nominal and juridical and social equality.” This ignorance is systematic, as seen for example in schools’ miseducation of young people on how race operates historically and in the present day (Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2012; Chandler and McKnight 2009). Privilege, which “appears as the fabric of life, as the way things are” (Wildman and Davis 1995, 883), gives people an emotional stake in the ignorance.

Textual absences are reciprocally related to harm, generally mediated by blocking harm or its antecedents from view. We cannot
address what is “not there.” Ronald Reagan “was president for nearly five years before he said the word ‘AIDS’ in public, nearly seven years before he gave a speech on a health crisis that would go on to kill more than 650,000 Americans and stigmatize even more” (La Ganga 2016). AIDS activists recognized the violence of not-saying and coined the slogan, “Silence equals death” (Finkelstein 2018). Naming a problem is a co-requisite to treating it as one.

**Inspirations for Unsaid Analysis**

Absences of stunning variety assemble life as we know it. How to track them down? Jeff Ferrell (2018, 190) observes: “Absence may be present, but knowing how to notice it, record it, and account for it is another matter.” Ferrell had in mind all manner of exclusions from modern society but especially exclusion of persons compelled to “drift” in social space. The task of tracking down absences is no less daunting if we restrict the focus to *textual* absences. The things unsaid, unheard, or unseen, such as on the page or the electronic screen, are incalculable. What is said is simply what is foregrounded—dark on light; what is not said is everything else. The purpose of this book is to set out a method for discerning absences in texts. I wrote the book because I perceived the need for rigor in determining what is unsaid in discourse for the sake of critical social research. I agree with Watts (1997, 112) that silence “deserves to be given as much interpretive attention as talk.”

A focused program of research on unsaid has been gaining momentum, with incisive monographs (Jaworski 1993; Schröter 2013) and edited volumes (Jaworski 1997; Murray and Durrheim 2019a; Schröter and Taylor 2018; Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985). “We might say that the social sciences and humanities have taken a turn toward silence,” write Murray and Durrheim (2019b, 7). A somewhat older literature on silence in interpersonal exchanges is largely but not exclusively attentive to “literal silences” (Billig and...
Marinho 2007)—not speaking at all, if only for a short while (Kurzon 1998). In contrast, the unsaid program, and this book which is part of it, concern not speaking about some things when speaking about other things, what Kurzon (2007) calls thematic silence and Billig and Marinho (2007) call metaphorical silence.

It can seem mischievous to entify unsaid. But it is not extraordinary. Social actors themselves recognize the beingness of absences within speech. In popular culture silence is figured as “deafening” or something that can “be cut with a knife.” Human rights activists refer to “walls of silence” (i.e., among police) and “breaking the silence.” Scholars, too, discuss present-day suffering, grounded in current practices and past savagery, in terms of “shadows” (Briggs and Gamero 2017) and “shadowlands” (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001) and, more evocatively still, “ghosts,” “haunting,” and “spectralities” (Blanco and Peeren 2013; Fisher 2014; Gordon 1997; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001). Butalia (2000) refers to “layers of silence” attendant on the violence associated with the partition of India. For Abbott (2013, 22–23), a “palpable unknown” is “a hole in the narrative that travels through it and stays in the mind afterward.” Surely the move to treat what is not said as a thing is rhetorical, but it is not without precedent. By no means did I invent it. Moreover, it is no more rhetorical than treating what is said as a thing. Both represent processes of communication as physical objects.

Whereas I take the mischief of language as inspiration, I am ultimately keen to shed light on solemn things—actions and patterns that cause suffering and injustice. Particular textual absences sustain power relations and cause harm. They do so by downplaying nefarious actions and arrangements, absenting alternative perspectives, and obscuring the realities whereby some beings are marginalized and harmed. That is why the project of determining textual absences presupposes and even requires an interested analyst—one with ideas about what ought to be said but is not. The analyst must make those ideas plain. But reflexivity is only a start, if an essential one. Something more technical is required.
Just a few moments’ contemplation makes clear that texts make meaning only insofar as they exclude. “Selecting information, be it for encoding or retrieving, means rejecting and excluding other information—information deemed to be obscured, repressed or forgotten” (Brockmeier 2002, 22). Saying not only entails but necessitates not-saying. The idea that textual exclusions are endemic to communication is developed in various highly influential social theories. Poststructuralist thinking in general is focused on absence (Fuery 1995). Derrida’s concept of hauntology centers on missing-ness, as Fisher (2014, 17–18) explains:

Hauntology was the successor to previous concepts of Derrida’s such as the trace and différence; like those earlier terms, it referred to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does. In the famous example, any particular linguistic term gains its meaning not from its own positive qualities but from its difference from other terms.

Psychoanalysts following Freud have also been greatly concerned with absence. Freud assigned commanding roles to missing and distant things—the absence of the object of one’s desire, the lack of a penis, and the repression (i.e., forced retreat) of disturbing thoughts. Manifest behavior (e.g., obsessive conduct) reflects unseen functions. Hints of the unseen functions may be communicated, but stealthily: it is the work of the psychoanalyst to decipher them. Moving beyond Freud, Lacan connected absence and language. Inspired by Saussure’s linguistics and specifically the idea of meaning as always relational, Lacan (1977, 65) considered “the word” as “a presence made of absence.” Stockholder (1998, 405) explains Lacan’s thinking:

Meaning arises not from positive or freestanding ideas and concepts, but only from the systematic differences that constitute them. If meaning resides in a system of differences, and differences are kinds of nothings, empty spaces, as it were, then our sense of meaning arises