

Polyphony and Silence

Counter-hegemonic writing practices,
migration, and multilingualism

Keynote:

Professor Shahram Khosravi
Stockholm University

Interdisciplinary Symposium

15-16 May 2025

KU Leuven, Belgium

Call for Papers

Convenors:

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Polyphony and silence are concepts that refer to sonority and voice, as multitude or as absence. While they may seem to be in opposition to each other, both can be counter-hegemonic tools for writing against monolingual and ethno-nationalist imaginaries – in political movements, in literature and the arts, in institutions, in media, and in everyday life. We use the concept of polyphony to highlight the political significance of maintaining difference in unity, and silence to emphasize the importance of omitting, refusing, and listening. This symposium aims to bring together reflections on these practices, foregrounding texts and political initiatives by writers with multiple belongings, in diaspora, and with minoritized linguistic backgrounds. We focus on migration and language as axes by which the nation-state system constructs imaginaries of (un)belonging, which in turn give rise to solidarities that contest nationalist framings.

Questions of voice and the power to narrate have long animated critical debate and theorization across academic disciplines, illuminating the ways in which hegemonic political and representational regimes within racial capitalism repress and appropriate the voices of (post)colonial, migrant, indigenous, racialized, and otherwise marginalized subjects (Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Trouillot 1995). In this context, works by subaltern individuals and groups to (re)assert voice and carve out spaces for a multiplicity of subjectivities can be acts of subversion.

However, as Adania Shibli illustrates in rich and diverse ways in her writings set in Palestine, silence can also be a place of refuge and a powerful tool of resistance to colonial forces (Shibli 2002, 2006, 2017).

Deriving from the Greek word (πολυφωνία) meaning “many voices,” polyphony migrated from music to literary analysis in Bakhtin’s work on Dostoyevsky (1984), centering the idea of dialogue and de-centering the authorial (monophonic) voice of the singular narrator. Research on literary and translation practices emphasizes the involvement of actors beyond those formally recognized as “authors” (Stillinger 1991) and explores the ways in which translators’ voices enter into translated texts (Herman 1996). The concept of polyphony has also been applied in diverse ways in the social sciences, for example to denote modes of ethnographic writing (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and to frame anthropological research as an intersubjective process, highlighting the importance of listening (Tsing 2015). Thinking from these interdisciplinary perspectives about polyphony as the interplay of voices invites us to consider questions such as: How is difference balanced with unity in political and creative practices? What are the possibilities and challenges of collaborative research methods? What (divisions of) labor do these practices entail? How is polyphony used as a tool of expression by writers and artists to produce multivocal (co)creations?

Complementing rather than contradicting these logics, silence does not just apply to repressive acts but also denotes a range of writing tactics for countering nationalist logics. In this line of reasoning, we ask: how is silence used as a tool to contest power structures, tropes, and colonial logics of “knowing” and representing Others? How does silence function as a space of listening? Critiquing the ways in which “uncritical appeals to voice” can serve to replicate colonial dynamics, Ferrari proposes viewing silence as “a fecund source of radical meaning-making” (2020, 130 & 133). In contexts in which asylum seekers are obliged to recount their experiences to “legitimize” their claims in the eyes of the state, silence or tactical omission can be a tool of resistance, especially when acts of speaking (or writing) outside of socially accepted discourses leave them vulnerable to persecution. In critical migration studies, silence is also posited as an ethical choice by researchers who seek to avoid reproducing reductive narratives or exposing resistance tactics. Drawing from Glissant (1997), Khosravi discusses the idea of a “right to opacity” against “the colonizer’s demand for knowability” (2024, 7) and advocates “the refusal of academic reproduction of descriptive migrant objecthood” (Ibid, 2). Similarly, as work in translation studies shows, choices of whether and how to translate are not neutral but politically charged (Spivak 2000) and embracing “untranslatability” (Apter 2014) can be a mode of subverting language hierarchies and the commodification of cultural singularity. In multilingual literary performances, choosing not to translate can push the audience to pay more attention to sensory dynamics, such as sounds and bodies, which evoke different affective responses and elicit different modes of understanding. Finally, silence also regards the task of the recipients, the readers or listeners of a language or experience they might not know, constituting a positive space where understanding

and solidarity may be formed: as put by poet Fady Joudah, “the space in which a Palestinian speaks and others listen” (2024).

For this symposium, we seek to bring together scholars from across academic disciplines as well as writers, artists, and activists whose work engages with these themes. We encourage participation from junior scholars as well as presentations of works-in-progress. Interventions may take the form of empirical, methodological, or theoretical reflections as well as artistic engagements with the symposium themes. Possible topics include:

- Collaborative writing practices (literary, academic, political)
- Writers’ collectives
- Migrant justice movements’ writing
- Self- and co-translation practices
- Non-translation and untranslatability
- Writing as (polyphonic) labor
- Literary writing and political mobilizing
- Literary activism
- Multimodal literary practices (spoken word, zines, audiovisual creation)
- Writing and unwriting as refusal
- Multilingualism and modes of understanding through and beyond language

We welcome proposals from a variety of fields both from the humanities and the social sciences, in line with our interdisciplinary composition and approach, including but *not* limited to:

- Literary History
- Postcolonial Literature and Decolonialism
- Comparative Literature
- Literary and Critical Translation
- Political Theory and Social Movements
- Sociology of Literature and Translation
- Multilingualism Studies and Linguistic Anthropology
- Anthropology of Migration and Mobility
- Anthropology of Literature
- Aesthetics
- Narratology
- Cultural Studies

Submission guidelines:

1. Submit a description of maximum 250 words of your proposed contribution (paper or artistic intervention) to collab@kuleuven.be by 6 December 2024.
2. You will receive a confirmation email letting you know that we have received your application.
3. We will reach out by 20 December 2024 once we have made our decision.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about this process, including questions about symposium accessibility

Dates to remember:

- **Call for contributions: 21 October 2024 – 6 December 2024**
- **Submission Deadline: 6 December 2024 by 11:59pm CEST**
- **Decision Date: 20 December 2024**
- **Symposium: 15-16 May 2025, Leuven (Belgium)**

Organizing committee

COLLAB

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