



Materializing Silence in Feminist Activism

Jessica Rose Corey

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*To my husband, who challenges and supports me in my efforts to do more
and do better*

*To Gram, Grandpa, and Jaybird, who loved me enough to support my
dreams even when those dreams took me away from them*

*To my closest women friends, Barbara George and Lauren Esposito, who
provide a constant source of inspiration and invention*

*To my former teachers and professors, whose work and encouragement made
the world a magnificent mystery to be endlessly pursued*

*To every woman who uses her intelligence, wisdom, talent, and fortitude to
fight for equity and justice—silently, quietly, or loudly*

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Introduction

People have long valued activism as a way to “give voice” to minoritized and otherwise oppressed individuals and populations.¹ But these individuals and populations have always had a voice, albeit unheard and dismissed (Boo, n.d.; Buttry, 2016; Callahan, 2018). We must recognize, then, that embedded within activist opportunities are social, psychological, and political complexities of having, composing, “giving,” and using voice through alternative means, such as material composition.² Through exploring the role of materiality, rhetoric, and silence in activism, this book illuminates how those in oppressed subject positions use literacy publicly and subversively in an attempt to create change, whether that change occurs on an individual level or a more collective scale. This work expands upon the long-standing feminist notion that “the personal is political” and explores the intricacies of blurred boundaries—how paradoxes like “silence speaks” allow for subversive communication in material forms.

¹ I use the term “minoritized,” and many other terms throughout the book, because at the time of this writing, scholars and activists seem to widely accept the terms, and they encompass what I wish to communicate. I acknowledge, however, that language evolves and, therefore, the understanding and use of these terms may change.

² In this book, “material” refers to non-digital and non-electronic materials and tools, such as fabrics, markers and other drawing/writing utensils, paints, clay, wood, yarn, and materials involved in crafting (paper, pipe cleaners, pom poms, beads, etc.).

Notions of active participation bombard us not only in activist spaces but within academic spaces (and in their intersections), from course syllabi to university mission statements that call for something often worded like “engaged citizens.” People in many contexts commonly conceptualize active participation as extroverted participation (a noticeable public presence accompanied by verbal contributions to discussions). But such notions become increasingly complicated in a world with unfavorable, sometimes even dangerous, consequences to such displays of participation. One needs to look no further than Anita Hill, Monica Lewinski, and most recently, Dr. Christina Blasey Ford to see the physical and psychological threat of participation in America’s justice system.

To address the complexities of participation, then, I conceptualize the subject matter of this book as consisting of two major elements: literate artifacts and psychosocial compositions. Literate artifacts refer to documents or materials, such as those produced during social action events (e.g., protest signs or other artifacts, listserv sign-up sheets, and exhibits). I use the term “psychosocial compositions” to refer to the metaphorical composing and revising of individual participants and society, and the contribution of alphabetic and visual texts (literate artifacts) as an input and output of the relationships between individuals and cultures. Psychosocial compositions include influences on one’s ideologies and actions—for instance, ways in which literate practices and cultural discourse affect individuals’ participation *in* and reception *of* civic engagement. The concept builds on Young’s (1997) notion of “discursive activism,” which involves action “directed at promoting new grammars, new social paradigms through which individuals, collectives, and institutions interpret social circumstances and devise responses to them” (p. 3). In other words, Young (1997) looks at a component of psychosocial composing—discourse as an input to people’s understandings of a concept that creates a particular output/response. Through Young’s (1997) discursive activism, change occurs via “reinterpretations of and, consequently, revised responses to sociopolitical situations...[so] language and society are co-constitutive” (Clark, 2016, p. 791).

If we conceive of psychosocial composing as such a process, it looks something like the following (written linearly for the sake of clarity, though the process occurs recursively):

1. Worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies are constructed and sustained in society through circulation of texts (with “text”

broadly conceived as anything that communicates a message, locally or globally). These texts are outputs of the symbiosis between individuals' identities and existing worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies (steps 2 and 3 below). These texts are also inputs to the symbiosis between sustaining and revising existing worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies and composing new worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies (steps 3, 4, and 5 below).

2. Individuals' identities are constructed (composed) in part *by*, in the context *of*, and in response *to* existing worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies and circulating texts.
3. A person or group of people composes a text, within the context *of*, and in direct or indirect response to, existing worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies and circulating texts.
4. Individuals' identities continue to be influenced (composed) by old and new circulating texts.
5. Existing worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies are perpetuated and/or revised, and new worldviews/schemas/social narratives/ideologies are composed and circulated. Step 5, then, becomes step 1.

At least part of this process occurs subconsciously.

The concept of psychosocial compositions is inherent in the idea of storytelling, as “storytellers [are] story listeners” and narratives influence the very contexts that, in turn, shape narratives (Andersson et al., 2019, p. 6). Psychosocial compositions, then, guide literate practices such as writing therapy (Bolton, 2004). In fact, Almond (2012) stated: “literary endeavor has supplanted therapy as our dominant mode of personal investigation...the refuge of stories... remain the most reliable paths to meaning ever devised by our species” (“A Theory More or Less Guaranteed to Rankle Therapist and Writer Alike,” para. 2; “A Word in Defense of the Writing Cure,” para. 2). While one can question elevating stories to such a status, stories with personal and social significance can affect change. More specifically, life stories have had a significant role in creating a line of communication for marginalized and oppressed individuals and, as such, remain important to scholars in psychology, rhetoric and composition, women's studies, literacy studies, and pedagogy.

I further understand literate artifacts and psychosocial compositions in terms of how texts mediate trauma and recovery by allowing individuals to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct narratives related to identity (Andersson & Conley, 2013; Fiandt, 2006; Lepore & Smith, 2002; Lieblich, 2013; Pennebaker, 1997; Rose, 1999; Smyth et al., 2001; Sharma-Patel et al., 2012). Psychological experiences become concrete through the use of narrative (Lieblich, 2013), so that composing allows us to become different, “othered” so to speak, thereby allowing us the advantages of perspective, relief, honesty, and growth. Language (and image) can help people break themselves apart and put themselves back together in impermanent and experimental ways, achieved with a sense of agency and safety (Frangos, 1997).

With these notions in mind, this book responds to the following overarching questions:

1. How do written and visual literacy embody and mediate lived experiences?
2. How can people use literate artifacts to revise social narratives?
3. In what ways do activists use silence in communicating their messages?
4. How does multimodal composition serve as a mediator between silence (imposed or un-imposed) and meaningful communication?

I use a case study of a Clothesline Project (CP) archive to respond to the above questions. The CP is an international event that invites survivors of gender violence, and families of victims,³ to decorate tee shirts that get hung on clotheslines in public places; it began in Massachusetts in 1990 when a survivor of domestic violence and rape took the initiative to ask, “Where is our wall? Where is our memorial?...Where is the wall that commemorates the 51,000 women killed in the war against women?” (Hipple, 2000, p. 168). At that time, the Maryland Men’s Anti-Rape Resources Center (MARS) had released information which estimated:

During the 16 years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a war that claimed the lives of 58,000 men in Southeast Asia, more than 51,000 women were

³ See Table 1.1 for a discussion of “survivor” and “victim” terminology.

murdered in this country [the U.S.] by their husbands, male friends, dates, and casual male acquaintances. (Hipple, 2000, p. 168)

Today, an estimated 500 CP projects exist globally (Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, n.d.). While CP organizers may most commonly offer fabric paints and markers during tee shirt-making sessions/workshops, some participants decorate tee shirts with felt, burlap, lace, pieces from childhood dresses; broken candles; and photographs (Rose, 2014, p. x). Rose (2014) further notes:

Not everyone immediately understands the word ‘clothesline’ or will use T-shirts to break the silence. For example, in Venezuela, we needed to translate the word ‘Clothesline,’ and in Cameroon, we used traditional scarves as well as T-shirts; women there also felt more comfortable sewing or doing embroidery, a more familiar medium than drawing with paints and markers. But once explained, the concept resonates across cultures. (p. ix)

The CP, then, provides a rich site for critical examination of a variety of social dynamics and their complexities, which I address in the next section. Table 1.1 provides definitions of main terms critical to exploring those dynamics and complexities.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research in this book takes up work regarding violence against women “beyond criminal justice and medical approaches” and examines “community-based transformational justice strategies,” as arts and performing arts increasingly become part of activist efforts (Baker & Bevacqua, 2018, p. 371). This extended inquiry rests on a particular conceptualization of feminist activist work. I set forth this conceptualization with the understanding that others may perceive and define activism, and feminist activism, differently from the ways I define them for the purposes of this research. Certainly, other researchers have grappled with the complex issue of identifying criteria for engaging in feminist activism, as seen in Clover and Stalker (2008). Upon examining fabric arts projects created by women and used for raising awareness of particular social concerns, Clover and Stalker (2008) questioned the use of the

Table 1.1 Definitions of frequently used words

Survivor	Though not necessarily officially documented, common practice in activism is to refer to those who have experienced assault but not died at the hands of their assailant as “survivors.” There is, however, some argument that such terminology denies living survivors their victimhood and is an inaccurate representation of their lived experiences during and after an act of violence/assault (Miller, 2019). Throughout the book, then, I often combine the terms as “survivor/victim” or use them interchangeably
Victim	Though not necessarily officially documented, common practice in activism is to refer to those who have been murdered by an assailant as “victims” of violence (see additional note above)
Composing	The written or graphic constructing and construing of representations of our recognitions (adapted from Berthoff’s definition of “literacy”) (Berthoff, 1990)
Psychosocial compositions	The metaphorical composing and revising of individual participants and society, and the contribution of written and visual texts as an input and output of the relationships between individuals and social culture
Literacy	Understanding knowledge and ideas in relation to context
Visual literacy	“the ability to understand and use images and to think and learn in terms of images” (Kaplan & Mifflin, 1996, p.107)
Literate practice	Response to context, audience, and purpose with consideration of content and form of a composition, regardless of medium. Writing or composing a particular product is a literate practice. The conscious or subconscious consideration of the social conditions under which one composes is also a literate practice. What audiences do with a particular composition can be considered another literate practice
Literate artifacts	Documents or materials, such as those produced during social action events (protest signs, listserv sign-up sheets, and exhibits)
Material/Materiality/Material Composing/Material Multimodal Composing	Non-digital and non-electronic materials and tools, such as fabrics, markers and other drawing/writing utensils, paints, clay, wood, yarn, and materials involved in crafting (paper, pipe cleaners, pom poms, beads, etc.). Any act of composing with these materials is material composing or material multimodal composing
Women’s literate practices	Adoption, production, reproduction, or adaptation of textual or visual forms that respond to the needs of an individual or group of people in such a way that it advances personal and political positions within various forms of oppression

(continued)

Table 1.1 (continued)

Feminist	Relating to, or advocating for, rights, equality, and/or justice for all humans
Feminist activist work	The effort to bring about social change in regard to rights, equality and/or justice for people in oppressed positions
Silence	A “rhetorical art” (Glenn, 2004, p. 2), including an “absence of sound” and “absence with function” (Glenn, 2004, pp. 4-10)

term “feminist art,” given that the works address more than just women’s issues—though addressed “through the eyes of women” (p. 14).

Another definitional issue in regard to feminist activism comes in the question of whether people pay any mind to the work of women activists. Droogsma (2009) asks, “Do the persons who silenced woman abuse survivors, and therefore remain complicit in their oppression, listen to the Clothesline Project” (p. 494)? In other words, Droogsma (2009) questions whether those who dismiss, doubt, or blame sexual violence survivors pay mind to survivors’ acts of resistance. While evidence may not support a definitive answer to this question, even if the CP fails to reach those who directly or indirectly oppress women, it has potential advantages for its participants, and may reach people experiencing oppression in various forms (e.g., systemic oppression, invalidation of feelings and experiences, marginalization in personal relationships or other social contexts).

We must determine whether we want to base definitions of activism on, or determine the success of activism by, measures of widespread reactions to activist efforts or overall behaviors and attitudes in society. To do so might oversimplify the objectives of activism. While we may desire to change cultural narratives on a large scale, we have little evidence to suggest that this actually occurs. As a case in point, sexism remains prevalent despite many efforts to achieve equity and equality among genders. That said, tracking and measuring changes in beliefs outside of tangible changes (such as those regarding policies) proves difficult to say the least. As I suggest earlier, however, activist efforts can help participants revise their own narratives and inspire fellow people in marginalized and oppressed positions to seek help or engage in composing about their own experiences. It seems, then, that activism must often have the objective

of individual healing and satisfaction as much as that of societal or global change, especially if we seek evidence of the results of such efforts.

Moreover, activist efforts that focus on women, like the CP, have suffered criticism for their unintentional, and sometimes intentional, exclusion of men—because including men in shirt-making sessions or displaying shirts created by men may complicate participation by women whose perpetrators were male (Gregory et al., 2002) and because pervasive power dynamics between men and women may create tension. While some CP events do include male participants, we must question the extent to which we might encourage participation from males, non-binary individuals, and gender non-conforming individuals in the communication of experiences believed to affect women primarily, and determine how that communication influences activist efforts. This book, then, uses “feminist activist work” to mean *the effort to bring about social change in regard to rights, equity, equality, and/or justice for people in oppressed positions*.

As for the exclusion of men in many CP and other activist events, Julier (1994) considers whether all collaboration serves as “democratic good or whether it merely restructures the sites at which privilege and control are enacted, thus far silencing individual expression” (p. 258). Therefore, while feminist activists should advocate for the equal status of all people (regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and so forth), each of these groups, at times, needs its own space in which to speak for itself and communicate its unique struggles. My ability to speak on behalf of others, and for them to speak on behalf of me, remains limited by our differing experiences and by the different ways in which we experience similar circumstances. As Julier (1994) points out, having men participate in the CP (or any event addressing offences primarily documented as offenses committed against women) increases the risk that women’s voices (or messages) will get lost among men’s (especially since CP tee shirts themselves do not necessarily indicate gender). Furthermore, violence against men remains a unique experience for which I, as a woman, would fail to address justly (at least to some extent). Though we may have similar experiences, the social construction of our identities likely changes the way we experience differently the same acts. Similarly, while I advocate for self-identifying members of the LGBTQIA community, as a heterosexual and cis-gender woman, I would make appeals to ethos and pathos different from those that a participating member of that community could make. The same holds true for women of different races and from various socioeconomic groups.

All subject positions involve worldviews and social systems that influence responses to circumstances. In essence, while some activist events can and should achieve all-inclusiveness, all groups deserve their own space in society to express their own identities and the issues that surround those identities uniquely. We must remain cautious that in our altruistic attempt to be all-inclusive and speak on behalf of multiple groups, we avoid dominating, silencing, or misrepresenting the distinctive voices of those groups. In practice, inclusivity can be unclear.

To illustrate, around the time that I conducted my study, a fraternity on campus hosted its own shirt-making sessions and did not donate shirts made during those sessions to the main CP on campus or affiliate with the project in any other way. Perhaps some of the above factors contributed to this decision. I remember, too, that same year, a group of men wanting to accompany women during a Take Back the Night event, which raised discussion over whether accepting such a show of support would undermine the very argument of Take Back the Night that it should be safe for women to walk at all hours without male protection. Similarly, though not related to gender or activism directly, Blackwell (2018) argues for “black only” or “people of color only” spaces, pointing out that:

In integrated spaces, patterns of white dominance are inevitable. These patterns include things like being legitimized for using academic language, an expectation of ‘getting it right’ (i.e., perfectionism), fear of open conflict, scapegoating those who cause discomfort, and a sense of urgency that takes precedence over inclusion... These patterns happen even when white people are doing the work of examining their privilege. They can happen even when facilitators design and model more inclusive ways of being together. Why? The values of whiteness are the water in which we all swim...It may be argued that to build an inclusive community, caucusing is actually necessary. In an article published by the American Political Science Association, citing her examination of intersectionality within women’s movements, professor Laurel Weldon argues that inviting marginalized subgroups to hold their own spaces tends to strengthen broader movements. (paras 8–10 & para 28)

Because the CP does not collect identifying or demographic information on participants, we have no data on identities such as race or with which gender (if either) participants identify. But any time in activism that dominant groups attempt to advocate for nondominant groups, the risk of overshadowing the voice or presence of marginalized people

remains. Dominant groups (determined by social structures) validating the message of nondominant groups may further a cause (such as when men recognize sexism and advocate for equality and equity for women); yet, such support may reaffirm the notion that reality is not real until men, white people, straight people, cisgender people, wealthy people (or people in other subject positions) say it is.

While some events and organizations focus on men's experiences with sexual violence (such as [lin6.org](#) and [malesurvivor.org](#)), seemingly fewer exist for the LGBTQIA community. The work discussed in this book, then, does not take a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) approach. My focus on "women" rather than on "females," and my use of non-binary pronouns, attempt to communicate this. Additionally, as I previously state, if transgender participants created a portion of the shirts I studied, I had no way to account for that, given that (1) the CP does not collect identifying information on participants and (2) nobody responded to requests for interviews for my study.

Similar to the complexities faced in defining activism and feminist activism, we must sift through issues of defining literacy and "women's literate practices." In this book, I define "literacy" as *understanding knowledge and ideas in relation to context*. I define "women's literate practices" as *adoption, production, reproduction, or adaptation of textual or visual forms that respond to the needs of an individual or group of people in such a way that it advances personal and/or political positions within various forms of oppression*. The adoption, production, reproduction, and adaptation of literate practices and the ideas contained within them lead women to have fragmented identities (for better or worse). These literate practices also lead women, however, to defragment their personal identities, to put pieces together in new ways and learn about themselves as "whole" beyond dichotomies. These practices inherently include accepting and rejecting pieces of narratives from the larger social structures in which women find themselves. A connection exists among individual, local, national, and global experiences, and these connections get severed and reconfigured, sometimes from moment to moment. Luckily, the act of composing provides a way to make sense of, and give form to, the very chaotic experiences of these dynamics (Lieblich, 2013). The composition, though not final (Lieblich, 2013), gives us a shape, a framework within which we can start working (Daniell, 2003); it gives a text in which we can revise and re-imagine the possible (Julier, 1994).

Additionally, for the sake of clarity, I separate rhetoric from literate practices. Understanding and using rhetorical strategies remains a part of the invention, production, and reception of any literate artifact. Rhetoric (commonly thought of as implicit and explicit argument) influences the construction of literate practices, as literate practices influence the construction and dissemination of texts. But one can choose methods of textual analysis other than rhetorical analysis. Likewise, we can examine rhetorical situations (purpose, audience, context) without focusing on the literate artifacts within those situations. We can understand the distinction in terms of “interpenetration,” described as “forg[ing] unities between subject and object, ultimately between all subjects and all objects, all subjects and all subjections, all objects and all objects, a total unity—without loss of individual identity” (Dolzani, 2012, pp. 27–28). In other words, rhetoric (or rhetorical strategy) remains embedded in composing processes and final products, as composing processes and final products remain embedded in rhetorical contexts. But we can have productive conversations about both of them separately.

Within these rhetorical considerations a symbiotic relationship exists between one’s narrative, one’s audience, and one’s life (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). As we find ourselves in constant tension with authoritative discourse and the discourse of all others we encounter, we must deal with persuasion and ideology as “not within us, but between us” (Warshauer & Ball, 2004, p. 29). Similarly, Kock and Villadsen (2012) use the term “rhetorical citizenship” to discuss the way in which discourse serves not as a precedent to action but as part of action itself (p. 1).

Davies (1992), in “Women’s Subjectivity and Feminist Stories,” points out that individuals use language and stories to understand themselves as “whole,” as both sides of almost any duality. In addition, Jane Marcus (1988), in “Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women,” notes that a sense of double-consciousness makes any writing performed by or for an individual a collective construction. We see these dynamics displayed in Daniell’s (2003) research with Mountain City women involved in Al-Anon (a support group for family members of people with alcohol addiction), which documents women using literacy to examine how other people dealt with adversity, seeking models to inform their own way of living. From there, the women from Mountain City turned to literacy as “practice,” not solely in the sense of doing something repeatedly, but in the sense of aiming to reach a higher level of performance; they began to use literacy for political endeavors, like

building community and creating empowerment (Daniell, 2003). Anne Ruggles Gere (1997) encountered similar dynamics in her studies of women's clubs and the ways in which women used writing to engage in personal development; but unlike the Mountain City women, the women in Gere's study felt it necessary to "appropriat[e] the ideology of selfless womanhood," thereby hiding motives for personal development behind humanitarian efforts (p. 12). Together, these scholars bring attention to "macro and micro practices" of literacy and deliberation (Kock & Villadsen, 2012, p. 6) and their implications for the status quo.

In contemporary culture, macro and micro literate practices have, of course, taken a multitude of forms, and led to many scholarly inquiries exploring multimodality as it intersects with social ideologies (Huang, 2015; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2016; Serafini, 2010). Clover and Stalker (2008), for example, present activists who feel the need to censor their art in order to avoid alienating their audience with the boldness of their message; these activists demonstrate knowledge of their compositions as they relate to audience and purpose. Furthermore, Hipple (2000) notes a CP tee shirt depicting a woman impaled by an oversized penis; the shirt reads, "Feel better now, Fucker?" Though the artist in Hipple's study certainly has a right to render their anger and agency however they feel compelled, it remains important to the issue of rhetoric and the objectives of activism, to consider how an audience may receive such work. After all, rhetorical efforts are collectivist (to the extent that they involve interaction with an audience) and productive (to the extent that rhetoric leads to action) (Miller & Bowdern, 1999).

The issue of censorship in women's activism endures regardless of mode. Women and members of other marginalized groups, and their narratives, have traditionally been "silenced" (Benstock, 1988; Coleman, 1997), whether in the form of censorship or dismissal. Often, though, those who have been silenced find subversive ways to defy power structures. As a matter of fact, much feminist activist work takes place within silent spaces. Take Back the Night uses silence to create a tone of remembrance. LGBTQ's National Day of Silence stresses that the more people who join together in silence, the louder the message becomes ("Info + Resources"). And the CP advocates for the right of the survivor by allowing an alternative fashion of "speaking out" via decorating tee shirts. Making a material statement functions protectively; more specifically, it protects the marginalized individual from identifying their self when communicating their story. In this way, composing mediates the