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What are you reading?

Smilges, J. L. (2022). *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Review by David Lombard

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Smilges' *Queer Silence* takes as a starting point the postulate that there is meaning and power in what generally evades our senses: 'what remains undone, unseen, unheard, and untouched,' Smilges argues, can be both 'transformative and world-building' (Smilges, 2022, p. 3). *Queer Silence*, therefore, does not merely stand at the crossroads of rhetorical theory, disability studies, and queer studies, but challenges these fields' fundamental premises.

Moving away from situational rhetoric (i.e., when a rhetor addresses an audience in a specific situation), Smilges embraces an ecological and relational model of rhetoric that finds meaning in all forms of contextual discursive flows, or in what he terms rhetorical energy (Smilges, 2022, p. 25). Rhetorical energy, more precisely, is 'the constellation of signifiers and significations that inform how an object comes to mean,' and translates to the 'affective discourses that [one] do[es] not entirely choose but that nevertheless contribute[s] to how' this person 'is seen, heard, and understood by others' (Smilges, 2022, p. 27). Smilges' innovative rhetorical approach allows them to propose, building on affect theory (mainly Brian Massumi's work) and new materialist trends (by the likes of Karen Barad and Jane Bennett), the helpful concept of 'rhetorical matrix,' which 'positions silence—as rhetorical absence—at the center of all meaning making' (Smilges, 2022, p. 26). This concept democratizes rhetoric by suggesting that minorities that cannot use oral/verbal expression, or whose oral/verbal expression is undermined by dominant voices, make use of 'queer silence.' Queer silence consists of nonverbal rhetorical strategies, which can be at times haptic, material, or visual, that queer disabled people mobilize for community-building and coping with hostility and forms of institutional violence. Together, the notions of rhetorical energy and matrix as well as queer silence emphasize the 'pervasiveness of rhetoric' (Smilges, 2022, p. 39) as opposed to the dominance of verbal speech for meaning-making.

Smilges' rhetorical method also has the effect of revising conventional understandings of queerness and disability. At the core of their project, indeed, lies their intention to unearth the various and intricate ways through which queer disabled people retool their queerness or disability as queer silence, which is illustrated by a variety of original case studies. In the second chapter, Smilges discusses the visual rhetoric used in profiles on Grindr, an online dating application for LGBTQ people, or how the absence or presence of profile pictures (what he calls '*quieting*') circumvents the app's dependence on visuality as well as identity exposure to create meaningful virtual intimacies between queer community members. Chapter three, called 'Queer[crip] Masquerading,' for its part, considers how ex-gays, namely 'people who experience homoerotic desire or same-gender attraction but choose to pursue a heterosexual marriage and lifestyle' (Smilges, 2022, p. 103), disguise and/or repress their homosexual desire, a rhetorical move which does not comply with heteronormativity but recodes their bodies and minds (or 'bodyminds') as disability, itself serving as a means of reconstructing, silently, a sense of self. Then, the fourth chapter, 'Disidentifying Silence,' analyzes narratives of trans elders told via photo profiles to outline a definition of 'trans' not as a strict or 'authentic' identity but as a perpetual 'gender movement' (Smilges, 2022, p. 149). In that sense, the trans silence of elders who do not or cannot medically transition 'explodes trans temporality beyond the barometers of transition' and 'gives us a way to remember the trans child who never was, to imagine into existence the trans child who should have been, or to simply acknowledge the temporal gaps' (Smilges, 2022, p. 151). Lastly, the fifth chapter, called 'Neuroqueer Intimacies,' examines performance art works by disabled art collectives that produce intimacies between performers and between performers and audiences. Smilges describes these intimacies as neuroqueer in that they imaginarily defy heteronormativity and neurotypicality.

While grounded in strong rhetorical analysis, Smilges' book highlights the importance of lived experience in discussions of disability by using compelling personal experiences as illustrative cases: conversion therapy in the introduction, and a suicide attempt

in college in the epilogue. In doing so, they help foreground one of the book's key takeaways, namely that approaches to disability must explore beyond the biomedical and curative model that establishes a dichotomy between the abled/healthy and the disabled/ill. By focusing on lived experiences, Smilges suggests, one may begin to grasp affects (he investigates his feeling of shame in the epilogue), the social processes that produce them (e.g., normativity generated his shame) and, in turn, how affects shape our understanding of disability.

It is specifically in this respect that I found Smilges' book inspirational for my current postdoctoral project titled *The Twenty-First-Century Schizophrenia Memoir and Graphic Memoir: A Rhetorical-Narratological and Multi-Actor Materialist Approach*.¹ In my research on schizophrenia memoirs, I have stressed the necessity to develop a bio-psycho-socio-existential and interculturally sensitive model of mental illness. To do so, I suggest paying attention to the multiple actors that shape our understanding of illness. These actors can be healthcare professionals and patients, for example, but also contextual, material, and nonverbal agencies such as silence in therapy or forms of violence caused by medical institutions. My multi-actor materialist approach is directly informed by Smilges' concept of rhetorical matrix in that it views these affective agencies as productive of knowledge about illness, knowledge which complicates and/or enriches biomedical descriptions. Like Smilges, I am in favor of a queer turn in rhetorical studies that would shift focus from identity to how affective relations are made and impact illness and/or disability experiences. Following that line of inquiry, silence becomes a rhetorical strategy among people living with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia too, a way of navigating the fractured identity (or the absence of identity itself) induced by the experience of illness, and a way of countering the normative biomedical model. For a literary scholar studying memoirs written by people with schizophrenia, their relatives, or their caregivers, Smilges' book and concepts offer an insightful framework to interpret and make sense of the numerous agencies that are evoked in and by literary texts, however silent or 'absent' they might be, and which compose and remain crucial to understand illnesses and illness experiences.

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¹ I use the term 'schizophrenia' in my project because it is the term that is still the most commonly known and frequently used in the texts from my corpus. That being said, there is an ongoing debate on whether the word 'schizophrenia' should still be used or not. For example, it is no longer used in the UK and alternatives such as 'psychosis' and 'psychosis susceptibility syndrome' have been preferred in certain countries, even by communities of patient-experts themselves. My project is sensitive to terminology choices and always attempts to critically interrogate them when appropriate and/or necessary.