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Silent Dogwhistles

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Dogwhistles have recently begun to receive more attention in the philosophical literature.[1] They are usually explored with a focus on manipulative and corrupting speech—how certain phrases or words can be used to consciously or unconsciously influence audiences or audience-subsets. As such, dogwhistles can have significant impact not only on political discourse, but on society more broadly. They can function in manipulative and corruptive ways, shaping both conscious and unconscious attitudes and senses of in-group membership.

As Drainville and Saul (2024) note, in philosophy, explorations into dogwhistles have primarily focused on the linguistic side of things, owing to the fact that they have mostly been undertaken by philosophers of language. As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to *other* ways in which dogwhistles can occur and influence people. Saul and Drainville's study aims to fill part of this gap in the literature by focusing on *visual* dogwhistles.

My argument in this paper is offered in a similar spirit: I want to draw attention to a *part* of our linguistic practices that so far have not been explored in detail as a potential dogwhistle—*acts of remaining silent*. I argue that such silences can function in similar ways to the "spoken"; dogwhistles that have so far been the main focus of philosophical discussions. More specifically, I will show that acts of remaining silent can be *overt code*[2] dogwhistles. My discussion aims to shed light on silence as a dimension of (ma-nipulative) communicative acts and, at the same time, will high-light the communicative and political potential of silence.[3]

A question that might arise at this point is why the statement that dogwhistles can be silent is interesting at all. Obviously dogwhistles involve silence in *some* way. For one, literal dog-whistles, the ones we borrowed the metaphor from, work on the very premise that only some (dogs) can hear them, while they

are "silent" for others (humans). Likewise, the kind of dogwhis-tles that the literature has come to understand as akin to *code-words* are supposed to communicate a message that can only be "heard" by a certain subsets of audiences. Put differently, a par-ticular "dogwhistled" message might be "silent" for some, but "loud and clear" for others. When I talk about *acts of remaining silent*; however, I have something much more specific in mind. I am thinking of somebody *literally* remaining silent, either in a direct exchange, or when the broader context would *require* them to comment. My discussion is about silence *as a communi-cative act in and of itself*.

All this will require further elaboration. Here is my plan for the paper: I'll first identify the definition of dogwhistles that is cen-tral to this paper—*overt code dogwhistles*, following Saul (2024), to then clarify what I mean by *conversational silence*. I'll define the notion as cases where somebody remains *literally* silent, and that silence carries communicative force. In a third step, I will present and discuss various cases of silent dogwhistles: I will start with two fictional examples, in order to illustrate how, in theory, a silent dogwhistle can be created. Next, I discuss two less straightforward cases, but argue that these can still be con-sidered as silent dogwhistling: Donald Trump's silence during the January 6th storm on the Capitol and Justin Trudeau's si-lence in response to a reporter's question about Black Lives Matter protesters in the US. I will conclude with some general remarks about the implications of this discussion for our politi-cal analysis of speech.

1 | What Makes a Dogwhistle?

As mentioned above, there is no lack of work on dogwhistles. Conventionally, we often understand dogwhistles as a kind of

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"code," intentionally crafted to communicate a particular message to only one part of an audience. However, dogwhistles can also work by raising to salience subconscious attitudes, for example, racist resentments, without the receiver of the message being aware of that.[4] Saul (2024) proposes a "bifurcated model" of dogwhistles, taking into account both kinds of dogwhistles just characterized—differentiating between *overt code dogwhistles* (referring to the first phenomenon just mentioned), and *covert effect dogwhistles* (referring to the second). It is her model of "overt-code" dogwhistles I'll be using throughout.

Note that "covert effect" dogwhistles work in quite different ways than "overt code" dogwhistles, even though they share certain features. This paper will be focusing on the latter for two reasons: For one, the kind of silences I am interested in have, so far, been underexplored in discussions of dogwhistles and political speech generally. My goal is to show that silences *can* function as dogwhistles, and focusing on only one part of the bifurcated model seems to be, for now, the pragmatic choice. In addition, the kind of silence exemplified in the cases I will go on to provide seems to fit better with the overt code model. Silences *may* also have a covert effect in some cases,[5] but this would need backing up through empirical studies. To my knowledge, no such studies currently exist. My focus will therefore remain on the use of silence as an overt code.

Saul (2018) describes an (overt, intentional) dogwhistle, following Kimberly Witten (2008, 2), as a "speech act designed, with intent, to allow two plausible interpretations, with one interpretation being a private, coded message targeted for a subset of the general audience, and concealed in such a way that this general audience is unaware of the existence of the second, coded interpretation" (ibid.). Saul (2024) later labels these kinds of dogwhistles more specifically as *overt code dogwhistles*, and further highlights the possibility of *unintentional* dogwhistles:

> "—Intentional: a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, such that one of these violates some widespread norm, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who are comfortable with this norm violation; and the other appears innocent, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who would not want to see the norm being violated.

> —Unintentional: a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, one of which violates some widespread norm, and one of which doesn't violate that norm, which is used by someone unaware of the norm-violating interpretation."

A classic example of this is George W. Bush's statement that "there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people" (quoted in Saul 2018, 362).[6] This statement was made in a particular context. Bush needed the votes of fundamentalist Christians, but also of those who might find explicit appeals to fundamentalists suspicious. The words "wonder-working power," then, functioned as a dogwhistle to fundamentalists, to whom this "is a favoured phrase

that refers specifically to the power of Christ." (ibid., 362). On the other hand, anyone *not* versed in the kind of language fundamentalists use would not have any particular association with this term, nor derive any sense of belonging from its use. So, (a) a (fundamentalist) Christian audience might read Bush's statement as one that explicitly yields a Christian message—that the "power of Christ" resides among the American people—and (b) they might understand him as trying to communicate to them something along the lines of "I am one of you." This interpretation of Bush's utterance shows us, then, how one and the same statement can be performed to deliberately communicate different things to two subsets of an audience.

At the same time, we can imagine something like this happening *unintentionally*. Say I am running late for my train, and only manage to get it because there is an unexpected delay in my train's arrival at the station. When I tell my friend about this, suppose I say, "... and through some wonder-working power I managed to get the train after all!" My friend might not think anything of my using these words in this context (and, let's say, neither do I). But, if a fundamentalist Christian is sitting near us and hears me say this, they might think that I am actually talking about the "wonder-working power of Christ," and believe that I am "one of them."

Aptly summed up by Saul (2024, 38): "The select group knows the code, and happily receives the message; while the broader audience does not realize what is happening, and takes the message to have a more innocent meaning." However, the code is "overt" because it is supposed to be *explicitly* understood by a group of people (see ibid., 42).

So far for the definition of overt-code dogwhistles, specifically. This entails some features that dogwhistles of this kind tend to share.[7] It is particularly relevant that overt-code dogwhistles make use of a certain set of background assumptions, shared by a speaker and a specific target audience, but ignored or not known by others.[8] In politically charged examples (such as racist dogwhistles) this will often involve the navigation of conflicting *norms* in a particular context, as sets of background assumptions differ between the multiple audiences this will necessarily involve. Provided this, deniability is crucial (and a useful thing dogwhistles can provide us with). Even *if* someone is challenged on their use of a dogwhistle term, because their message is implicit and (ideally) only recoverable for a certain subset of an audience (though, of course, we do sometimes figure it out anyways), they can deny the encoded meaning. For example, Santana (2021, 1) takes deniability to be the defining feature of dogwhistles—understanding them as *involving* a "deniable violation of egalitarian norms."[9] And, as Khoo (2021, 149) highlights in his discussion of code-words, one central reason why we speak in code in the first place is that leaving certain things implicit allows us to navigate misinterpretations, for instance; but is also beneficial when we're not sure how an audience might take our message. This is especially useful when we want to be able to deny norm-violating interpretations of certain conversational contributions.

This philosophical discussion about norms and dogwhistles has been strongly informed by Mendelberg (2001, 2008). Focusing on the US, Mendelberg discusses how overt racism became less

and less acceptable, until people didn't want to think of themselves as racist anymore. According to Mendelberg, certain *norms of racial equality* came to be effective, while underlying racial resentment still continued.[10] Dogwhistles can, on the surface, conform to these norms, but still violate them on other levels.

It's important to note that, as Saul (2018, 365) points out, Mendelberg mostly talks about covert effect dogwhistles—those that give rise to resentments without the message's receiver being aware of it. This is different from the cases we are focusing on—after all, for codes to communicate, an audience is required to understand and be fully aware of the concealed message. What still stands is the point that, in overt code cases too, dogwhistles navigate certain existing norms that only *part* of an audience subscribes to. In Khoo's (2021, 150) words: "Coded speech generates plausible deniability that makes it unclear whether the norm-violating behavior really is norm-violating." This highlights, again, the existence of multiple audiences, and how complex it can be to navigate differing assessments of what counts as norm-violating.

Let me now make explicit what makes (overt) dogwhistles *manipulative*. For one, sending a kind of code to a sub-group of an audience while trying to keep another part of the audience unaware of it is not a very upfront way of communicating. Dogwhistles can be misleading—for example, they can make it opaque to part of an audience where a speaker "really" stands, while still expressing (for instance) misinformation that is difficult to call out. In addition, dogwhistles have a strong *affective* side: they can give people a heightened sense of belonging to a privileged ingroup. As such, they can boost and even strengthen certain ideological commitments. For one, the kind of belonging and intimacy that overt code dogwhistles can raise between a speaker and an audience seems politically and ideologically central. Dogwhistles can stir debates precisely *because* part of an audience might be very aware of the message, while other parts are either unaware or simply unsure. Overt codes—including silent codes—tell us something crucial about our language use: how we develop senses of belonging through speech, navigate conflicting norms, and maintain deniability.

All that said, I now want to outline what I mean by conversational silence, before I explore some examples of silent overt code dogwhistles.

2 | What Silence? Why Silence?

Silence as distinctively communicative has been largely absent from discussions in philosophy until recently (e.g., see Tanesini 2018; Goldberg 2020; Klieber 2021, 2024a; Degerman and Bellazzi 2024; Holdier 2024)—while it has received much more attention in linguistics and social anthropology (e.g., Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985; Goffman 1981; Ephratt 2012, 2017; Kurzon 2011; Jensen 1973; Jaworski 1997, 1993; more on the side of political science, see Vieira 2020a, 2020b; Schröter 2013). The study of silence in the literature reveals many ways of thinking about the phenomenon—for example, such silences that can be described as pauses, lapses, or omissions/what remains *unsaid*.

A lot of this linguistic nuance will be absent from my philosophical discussion in this paper. I am going to largely exclude the idea of silence as omissions—that is, cases where we *do* speak, but nonetheless "remain silent" about *something else*. While these omissions can be striking and quite politically significant, I am more interested here in a more concrete sense of silence: cases where somebody literally does not say anything, and wants to communicate something *by* not saying anything. For the purposes of this paper, I will term this kind of silence *conversational silence*—a silent conversational contribution that is *intended* to bring something across, even though nothing is said explicitly.[11]

While this category can include plenty of linguistic phenomena, still not just *any* silence will count as communicative in this active (or intentional) way. For example, while our silently reading a book in a train might communicate "I'm not up for a chat" in a somewhat secondary sense, I am more interested here in cases where our silences are much more direct (see also Jaworski 1993, 35–6 for a discussion of how to demarcate non-communicative silences). To illustrate this, consider the following example:

> **(1)** In a scene in the TV-show *Dear White People*, Samantha White and Troy Fairbanks, a young couple, visit Troy's father Walter Fairbanks in his office to tell him they are planning on taking a trip over their break. The following exchange happens:
>
> Troy: So... We were thinking of taking a four-day weekend and heading up to Toronto. See the sights. Do a little legal Canadian wine tasting.
>
> Walter: [...]
>
> Troy looks resigned.
>
> Samantha: Wait, what just happened? Are we still going?
>
> Troy (mumbling): We're not going.
>
> (see Season 1 *Dear White People*, Episode 3, min 1:32–1:58)

For now, I simply want to stress that, in this case, silence functions as an *active conversational contribution*. In short, it is a specific, *literal* kind of silence I have in mind when talking about "conversational silence."[12]

However, things can get a bit murkier. Take the following example—which is in some ways a bit closer to omissions, but still constitutes a conversational silence in my sense:

> **(2)** At a University, a dedicated team has worked hard to create a policy to take some steps to improve the equality and inclusion of its members along the axis of race, gender, and disability. They decide to hold an event to present the policy, and invite a vice-chancellor to speak at the event. They never receive a

response—eventually somebody else agrees to come and speak. The originally invited vice-chancellor never publicly comments and remains silent about the existence of the policy.

While it may not be the most obvious interpretation, I consider this vice-chancellor's silence in response to the invitation to be a case of *literal, conversational* silence. Not only their position, but their having been explicitly invited to comment, urges them to say *something*. Making no statement *at all* constitutes a public conversational silence in my sense.

This kind of silence is still different from what I have called "omissive silence." Omissive silence refers to cases where someone remains silent *about* something while, or by, talking about *another* thing. Take a contrast case:

> **(3)** At a University, a dedicated team has worked hard to put a policy in place with the aim to take some steps to improve the equality and inclusion of its members. They decide to hold an event to present the policy. The group leader provides various target examples and outcomes. While the examples explicitly address gender, sexism, disability, and ableism, they omit any mention of race or racism.

We can communicate *a lot* with what we leave unsaid while talking a lot about something else. Still, it seems that the omissive sense of remaining silent *about something* is a different conversational phenomenon from the more direct and literal ways of remaining silent we've seen. I am not claiming that omissive silence is not (politically) interesting, or shouldn't receive attention. But, it is, arguably, a much broader category than acts of literally remaining silent, and, to some extent, has already been covered in discussions of (political) speech.[13] The more literal form of silence, however, has received far less directed attention.

For now, let me define *conversational silence*[14] as follows:

Conversational silence occurs when

  i. Somebody doesn't utter anything *explicitly*, that is, remains silent, and
  ii. They remain silent *in order to* communicate something and in order to be *understood* as doing so. Their silence functions as an *active conversational contribution*.

As we've seen, conversational silence can come in different shapes. What differentiates conversational from omissive silence, ultimately, is that, in cases of conversational silence, nothing is uttered explicitly—whereas omissions mean that you say *something* but purposefully leave something else *unsaid* in the course of this.[15]

So, with some important definitions out of the way, let me raise the following question: why *are* silences so interesting when it comes to political speech, and in particular political dogwhistles?

For one, I want to stress again that communicative silences *are* part of our linguistic practices. How we shape our linguistic lives, so to speak, is not only a theoretical matter—it is highly dependent on social and political circumstances and environments. Most of us would agree that speech is of tremendous importance in our political discourses. If silences can do things that speech can do—that is, communicate things, have impact, for example—they also need to be considered as having *political and social impact*.

The highly contextual nature of conversational silence makes it a very flexible communicative tool. One and the same act, varying only in length and (often) accompanied by non-verbal cues, can mean very different things depending on when and how it is used, and who it is used by. So, two points about conversational silence seem important to emphasize, especially in the context of dogwhistles. First, silence grants a very high degree of *deniability*. Since we don't say anything explicitly, we do not commit ourselves in the same way as in cases where we produce a very precise speech act with a direct message, or even, arguably, when we use a code that could be researched and documented by our audiences.

Second, silence can be used to send a particular message to certain people who have some knowledge that is salient to the context, without other people knowing *what* is communicated by that silence. Reconsider example **(1)**, in which Troy is visiting his dad with his girlfriend Sam, and is talking to his dad about a trip the two plan to take. If we don't know that Troy's dad is fairly strict and wants his son to focus on school, the silence would arguably be more ambiguous. The example itself hints at that: Sam realizes Walter communicates *something* with his silence, but can't decipher it quite as confidently because she's lacking important background information.

These considerations suggest that some silences could function as dogwhistles. If even *not saying anything at all* can communicate politically risky messages, we have a reason to extend the linguistic "level" on which we analyze dogwhistles. Conversely, this also shows us something about the power of silence. An analysis of silent dogwhistles will draw attention to silence as a powerful communicative phenomenon, one that can be used flexibly and with various purposes.

3 | Motivating the Possibility of Silent Dogwhistles

The structure of a silent dogwhistle will look something like this: Someone remains conversationally silent in a particular context, where there is some known, relatively high-stakes context lurking in the background, while there are "multiple audiences" and their varying interpretations to be considered. One interpretation of the silence is norm-violating, while the other interpretation is more innocent. Silence can allow us to maintain a high degree of deniability, relying on various possible interpretations of that silence, which may diverge depending on audience and their background and contextual knowledge.

What emerges from the literature review above is that, sometimes, dogwhistle terms or phrases are established very

explicitly and intentionally, and used with this prior established meaning in mind. Examples of this are white supremacist codes, such as putting three parenthesis around a name "(((name)))" to dogwhistle that someone is Jewish (discussed in Saul 2024, 45), or using the number "88" (which numerically represents "HH," that is, "Heil Hitler") to dogwhistle that one belongs to a neo-Nazi group (see ibid., 21). A community establishes the code, and understands each other as they communicate using this particular code, while it remains unclear or innocent to others. Other times, however, dogwhistle terms or phrases are used without being clearly established *prior*, instead speakers trust or hope that the right group will be able to recover it in the right ways.

Both of these are possible with silence. Take a fairly innocent example of the first category:

> **(4)** In high school, Clare has to do an in-class spoken exam. In one part of the exam she is presented with an option of A or B for each question. Clare didn't have time to adequately prepare. Lucky for her, however, her classmate Sari is really good at this subject. They agree that whenever the right answer is A, Sari will make some kind of sound (shuffle their pencil case, cough, sneeze or something like that). Whenever the answer is B, Sari will remain silent.

We see in this example how silence can take on the character of a pre-established code with a specific meaning (with a similar structure to the previously mentioned white supremacists codes, but clearly much more innocent than that). Someone who doesn't know, such as the teacher conducting the exam, may not pick up on the character of this silence. This, I would say, is a kind of (innocent) silent dogwhistle. The established norm in the background is that you're not supposed to cheat in these exams. And while the "ingroup" message is not a high-stakes or a political one, giving another student the answer violates the norm established in that context. The innocent meaning of the silence, here, is that it is simply meaningless in the sense that the teacher is not supposed to pick up on it.

What I suspect to be more common in political discourse, however, is the second kind of silent dogwhistle—someone remains silent on the spot, meaning to communicate different things to different audiences, hoping they will recover it correctly. Take another fictional case:

> **(5)** Politician **P** takes part in a critical debate with interviewer **I**. Say **P** needs to convince a certain amount of people to vote for her in an upcoming local election so she has a chance on national level. As a final question, **I** asks **P's** thoughts on some controversial topic she has voiced an opinion on previously. **P** *knows* the topic is controversial, and a restoking of it may mean she loses some voters. Distancing herself from her old opinion, however, may lose her other voters. She decides to remain silent for 10 s, long enough for people to notice the distinct moment of silence, before she deflects to another topic, after which the panel closes. Her hope: For people to read the silence as a polite refusal to be drawn into a damaging debate, while those in the know (e.g., those closer to her ideological party commitments) will understand that she still holds this controversial opinion, but communicates it in a veiled way. And even if the general public doesn't accept this, she could always say "I didn't say anything."

There are a few ways this could go. Likely, there will be some media-discussion about the silence. One option is that no one really gets it—it's taken to be an awkward rather than a strategic pause. Another option is that everyone sees through it immediately. But, there is also the chance that some people will see it either as hoped (the polite refusal to be drawn into this debate), while others realize that it is a tacit confirmation of a continuous support for the opinion in question. Note too that this shows how the "innocent" message can be more complex than a simple "I don't have anything to say" or being understood as meaningless.[16] The fact that the silence *could* be meaningless, however, might do some work in terms of deniability in practice.

This story is illustrative for what silence can, theoretically, do, and shows the general structure of a silent dogwhistle, where the silence isn't an explicitly pre-established in-group code. There is a norm in the background and a set of assumptions shared by a large number of people, that makes the topic in question controversial in some sense. Being in favor of it violates this norm, and silence, at least so **P** hopes, helps to navigate this violation.

However, despite similarities, silent dogwhistles will be somewhat different from the more common "spoken" cases discussed in the literature. The one obvious difference is that in cases of silence, *nothing is said*. And not saying anything can often be quite disruptive. If we lack the background to decipher certain overt codes (like "88"), they may slip us by completely. In most cases of silence, that is unlikely to happen (maybe with the exception of case **(4)**). Remaining silent as an answer to a question, or where the context or our role requires a comment from us, is usually at least a bit disruptive or noticeable. At the same time, silences themselves simply do often occur in ways that are, broadly speaking, quite *meaningless*. We might be silent for no special reason at all, or we might not *know* what to say. This is a very common interpretation in cases where silence occurs as an answer to a question—someone is stumped, struggling for a good answer. As we will see, this feature can do a lot of work for silent dogwhistles when it comes to their "innocent" interpretations (in contrast with their "norm-violating" ones). While such meaningless/struggling-for-words silences still violate some conversational norms, they are "innocent" with respect to the *content* of the answer (again, note that innocent interpretations of silent dogwhistles can be more complex as well).

Cases **(4)** and **(5)** were supposed to illustrate some of these basic structures of silent dogwhistles. However, fictional examples

only take us so far. While example **(5)** still has political motivation, reality will be more messy. I think that *when* silent dogwhistles are effective, they will be very effective. But, since silent dogwhistles have not been studied extensively, we don't yet have a repertoire of clearly established and studied examples (unlike for various spoken dogwhistles, at this point). Because, as Saul (2024, 65–67) points out, it is in the nature of dogwhistles to be non-obvious, clear examples are not always easy to come by. But, the fact that it is not always clear whether something is a dogwhistles, or what kind it might be, should not lead us to doubt that they exist. If we agree with this sentiment for dogwhistle *terms*, I think we should extend it to silent dogwhistles, too. I agree with Saul that many terms can be dogwhistles, but we need to study them properly to know exactly what they do. Once we are at the point of studying dogwhistle terms, they will likely not work as dogwhistles anymore, precisely because they have been discovered. Similar things go for the silent dogwhistles I want to consider below (more so for the first case, then the second). But, this doesn't mean that dogwhistling with silence isn't possible. We may still be able to show that dogwhistling with silence was *attempted*, and point out how even a failed attempt brings with it some of the benefits provided through dogwhistle communication.

4 | (Attempted) Dogwhistling With Silence

In the following, I want to look at two real-life, slightly messy cases of what I think were at least attempted silent dogwhistles. Each displays distinctive facets: The first—Donald Trump's multiple-hour public silence during the 6th of January attack on the Capitol—is not an instance of silence in direct response to a question, but it is still *literal* because Trump said nothing when saying something was clearly due. The second—Justin Trudeau answering with silence to an interview question about the treatment of Black Lives Matter protesters in the US—highlights how one act of remaining silent can instantiate *several* dogwhistles, depending on the audience addressed, norms navigated, and the kind deniability attempted to obtain.[17]

4.1 | Case 1: Trump's January 6th Silence

On the 6th of January 2021, after Donald Trump lost his re-election for president in the United States, his supporters gathered in Washington DC after a speech given by the then-president, in which he claimed that the election was stolen. His speech included several blatant lies about the election being a "landslide" win, as well as several thinly veiled calls for his supporters to go to the Capitol, urging them to "fight like hell," Shortly after, Trump's supporters began to storm the Capitol.

We know that Trump returned to the White House shortly after finishing his speech at 1:00 p.m., at which point people began marching to the Capitol. Trump was made aware of the march, reportedly watching the riot on TV from 1:25 p.m., yet he didn't say anything and remained publicly silent. This public silence was interrupted when he tweeted a video of his earlier speech at 1:49 p.m. While it is now known that his staff pleaded with him to denounce the riot, Trump refrained from doing so and remained in silence, until he tweeted, about 2 h after the riot began, that Mike Pence didn't protect the country. About 15 min later, again via Twitter, he urged his supporters to remain peaceful. A public statement didn't happen until 4:03 p.m., when he told his followers to go home.[18] As mentioned earlier, this silence is not as direct as if Trump had, for example, gone on a stage and said nothing and left again. In addition, it was interrupted by a few tweets (which themselves represented omissive silences). My focus here will be on the literal silences that occurred in between those tweets.

First of all, recall that an intentional overt code dogwhistle has at least two plausible interpretations—one of which violates some kind of norm, and is supposed to be understood by those who are comfortable with this kind of norm violation. The other interpretation is more innocent, and supposed to be understood by those who are not comfortable with the violation.

I would argue that what Trump's silence attempted to do was to communicate agreement with or even encouragement of the protestors, while hoping that this message would not be recovered by the more general population, or—more likely—specifically his existing supporters *who are not in agreement with this particular norm violation* (e.g., that they would think that he "just assumed he didn't need to say anything"). As is usually the case with dogwhistles, we don't have access to what exactly people who are doing the dogwhistling are thinking (though in the case of some really well studied and documented ones, we are getting close). What we do know is that expressing agreement with the march on the Capitol on January 6th will have confronted Trump with pressure to navigate certain norms and background assumptions. These norms are somewhat related to what Mendelberg (2001, 2008) describes as *norms of racial equality*; the emerging feeling of white Americans as not wanting to see themselves as racist anymore, while still holding on to racial prejudices and ideas. Related norms may be, for instance, an adherence to general legal tenets of democracy or "law and order" more generally (including not inciting insurrections and accepting the results of elections) as well as some liberal norms surrounding protest conduct (e.g., them being registered, legally approved, and non-violent). Many people will not want to see themselves as violating these norms, or will not want to see their president violating them, even if they broadly agree with his politics. But, they may be happy with, or willing to explain away, less blatant violations of these norms.[19]

So, communicating encouragement, as the then-still president of the United States, of people storming the Capitol, as a response to a lost election, violates certain existing norms, and Trump was likely aware that a large contingent of voters, including many of his own, would not be happy with this turn of events. At the same time, it seems he would have wanted to encourage his supporters specifically, and communicate to them, without saying it "out loud," that he was in favor of what was going on. The norm-violating message that Trump may have been trying to send, specifically to his supporters, *with his silence* was one of support or encouragement, that he approves of their actions, and thinks that what they are doing is legitimate and important. One "innocent message," in this case, may be something like "I don't know what to say" or "it's not my responsibility."

Two questions arise here. (1) *Did* Trump's followers "decode" the silence in this way? And (2), did the general public, including Trump voters uncomfortable with this norm violation, miss it? I would argue that the answer to the first question is yes, and the answer to the second question is no, or only to some extent. However, as pointed out above, I do not think that this disqualifies Trump's silence from being an *attempt* to dogwhistle—also partly because he still managed to benefit from some of the deniability features provided even by dogwhistles that ultimately fail.

Regarding (1), the correct recovery of the above indicated norm-violating message seems to be confirmed, to some extent, by Trump's own supporters. Take Stephen Ayres, who was part of the storm on the capitol. He confessed in his testimony that "he wasn't planning to storm the Capitol before Trump's speech 'got everybody riled up'" (Kunzelman and Richer 2022) and claims that, in storming, they were "just following what he said" (ibid.). He stressed that he only decided to leave once Trump tweeted that they should do so. Now this alone doesn't say too much about the silence—Ayres could be only talking about the original speech here. However, he further comments that "[i]f Trump had done that earlier in the day [i.e., telling them to leave], 'maybe we wouldn't be in this bad of a situation.'" (ibid.). So, while Trump's original speech made them go there, the silence seems to have further communicated to them to go ahead ("we were just following"), and only the explicit tweet moved them to leave.

At the same time, Trump later explicitly endorsed a "innocent" interpretation. In conversation with *The Washington Post*, he "defended his long silence during the attack by claiming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and others were responsible for ending the deadly violence" (Dawsey 2022). Josh Dawsey cites Trump as saying:

> **(6)** I thought it was a shame, and I kept asking why isn't she doing something about it? Why isn't Nancy Pelosi doing something about it? And the mayor of D.C. also. The mayor of D.C. and Nancy Pelosi are in charge. [...] I hated seeing it. I hated seeing it. And I said, "It's got to be taken care of," and I assumed they were taking care of it.

This latter interpretation especially aids deniability.

What makes the Trump case tricky is the fact that the general public *as a whole* did not see his silence along the lines of this innocent message, even if this was what Trump had hoped for. Of course, it seems clear that not everybody's public silence during this event weighed the same. Trump, however, *clearly* had a duty to say something to the country, and to his supporters. Not only did the violence erupt as a direct consequence of his speech, but protesters claimed to be marching *for* him. This is part of the reason why Trump's silence didn't just bypass people. For one, his silence was an explicit topic of discussion during his impeachment trials in February 2021 (see Associated Press 2021). For instance, Rep. David Cicilline described Trump's silence as a "breathtaking dereliction of duty" (see ibid.). Further, in July 2022, over a year after the attack, the

Editorial Board of *The New York Post* judges Trump's silence as "damning":

> **(7)** As his followers stormed the Capitol, calling for his vice president to be hanged, President Donald Trump sat in his private dining room, watching TV, doing nothing. For three hours, seven minutes. There has been much debate over whether Trump's rally speech on Jan. 6, 2021, constituted "incitement." That's somewhat of a red herring. What matters more—and has become crystal clear in recent days— is that Trump didn't lift a finger to stop the violence that followed. And he was the only person who could stop what was happening. He was the only one the crowd was listening to. It was incitement by silence. (Editorial Board, New York Post 2022).

This context seems to be speaking *against* the fact of this silence being, ultimately, a successful dogwhistle. But, it neither disqualifies it from being an attempted silent dogwhistle, nor does it imply that silent dogwhistles will always fail.

The Trump case checks the overt-code dogwhistle list in a few ways: The navigation of conflicting norms, the fact that the silence seems to have been taken up as encouragement by the protesters, the fact that Trump later endorsed an innocent meaning of the silence, hinting at a (possibly planned) dual character of the silence. The point is that people just weren't convinced by this later on.

That said, even failed dogwhistles can give some kind of protection. Had Trump said explicitly "Just go ahead" there would be absolutely no doubt about his endorsement. And even though the extensive investigation into his actions and inactions have left little doubt about his mindset regarding the events, people *are* willing to explain away his endorsement and/or responsibility. So, despite the silent dogwhistle being somewhat dysfunctional overall, it seemed that Trump began to benefit from the dual character of the silence at a later stage. A Washington Post-University of Maryland poll (2024) reports that, 3 years after the attack, "Republicans are more sympathetic to those who stormed the U.S. Capitol and more likely to absolve Donald Trump of responsibility for the attack than they were in 2021." Democrats, on the other hand, largely agree that "the riot was a violent threat to democracy for which Trump bears responsibility." But, as mentioned above, it is quite likely that the dogwhistle was *always* for the first group—Trump supporters not comfortable with this kind of norm violation. And even though the dogwhistle didn't work at first, it paradoxically may have still worked to some extent—or even benefitted Trump—in the long run. It was even used by Trump's attorney, who argued that he could not be held responsible for something "he didn't do" (or, in extension, say) (see Gerstein and Cheney 2022).

Since silences can have such an open character, never actually explicitly explaining what silence means can allow long-running deniability and navigation of norm-violation, in particular as norm acceptance, or tolerance to norm violation, shifts. And

as such they can provide useful cover, even in cases such as Trump's.

4.2 | Case 2: Trudeau's Silent Rorschach Test

Consider the following scene, capturing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau remaining silent for 21 s in an interview with journalist Tom Parry, when Parry asked about Trudeau's position on Donald Trump's response to Black Lives Matter protesters. I want to argue that this kind of silence is a silent overt-code *Protean* (Saul 2018, 2024) dogwhistle:

> **(8)** Tom Parry: You've been reluctant to comment on the words and actions of the US president, but we do have Donald Trump now calling for military action against protesters, we saw protesters tear gassed yesterday to make way for a presidential photo-op. I'd like to ask you what you think about that. And if you don't want to comment, what message do you think you're sending?

> Justin Trudeau remains silent for 21 seconds.

> Justin Trudeau: We all watch in horror and consternation what is going on in the United States. It is a time to pull people together, but it is a time to listen, it is a time to learn what injustice is, continued, despite progress, over years and decades. But it is a time for us as Canadians to recognise that we too have our challenges. (Guardian-News 2020, 2nd of June 2020, 0:00–01:07).

Trudeau's silence fits quite neatly with what I have characterized as conversational silence earlier on. *Nothing* is said, for a significant amount of time, as an answer to a direct question in an exchange. It is not surprising that political commentators, news outlets, analysts, and individuals found Trudeau's silence remarkable in several respects. However, they differed in their opinions on what this silence could signify. Some wondered whether Trudeau was stumped by the question and struggling for words. Others considered it to be an awkward silence, whereas some talked about it as a "smooth" and metaphorical silence (Rolston 2020). According to Evan Solomon, Trudeau's "21 seconds of silence, says *a lot*, and it is now a kind of 'Silent Rorschach test' of your political leanings" (CTV News, 03.06. 2020, 0:32–1:17, emphasis mine), meaning that people read into it what they want it to be. He notes:

> People are just pouring into that silence what they want to interpret. One interpretation, it was carefully plotted, and the 20 seconds were Justin Trudeau's way of saying 'You know that I can't call Donald Trump out, our trading relationship is too important, I'm too worried about him reacting as he's done before, with anger, lashing out and hurting one of our industries [...]. So I'm just gonna

> sit here and you can marinate in this and read into this what you want.' The other side of it is, he just didn't know what to say. (ibid.).

This assessment alone, however, would not necessarily lead to us thinking of it as a dogwhistle, even though the silence *would* allow us to interpret what we want, and would grant Trudeau some level of deniability in any case. It could just be spontaneous ambiguity, the fact that people can "pour into" the silence what they want being an unplanned (but possibly welcome) side effect.

As is usually the case, we don't have first person testimony about whatever Trudeau planned or wanted to do with this silence. But, I think that what Saul (2018, 2024) calls *Protean* dogwhistles offer a more attractive interpretation. *Protean* dogwhistles are named after the Greek mythological figure Proteus, who was a shape-shifter (and therefore hard to catch). They are understood as "communicative devices which may dogwhistle different things to different audiences" (Saul 2024, 56). Saul's focus when discussing Protean dogwhistles is on covert-effect ones, in particular the use of anti-immigration rhetoric during the pro-Brexit campaigning in the UK (which alluded to and activated *various* prejudices and xenophobic as well as racist sentiments among different parts of the British public). A Protean overt-code dogwhistle, then, would be the kind of code that gets taken up in different ways by different parts of an audience. Silence is an attractive contender for this kind of code in general, exactly because of its shapeshifting qualities.

We ultimately can't know if Trudeau meant to use a (Protean) dogwhistle here. But, the reason why I think it is useful to consider his silence as one, is because the framework allows us to make sense of how and why different people ended up understanding the silence in such different ways, and how that ultimately *benefited* Trudeau.

To show this, let's look again at our overt code dogwhistle check-list. For one, there are various norms and background assumptions being navigated here. First, there are some very specific norms explicitly and implicitly established by Trump himself. Criticizing him could backfire, but, at the same time, there are certain liberal norms Trudeau himself presumably wants to uphold—for example, he would want to at least appear to be endorsing what Mendelberg (2001, 2008) calls the norms of racial equality. At the same time, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the question was specifically about Trump's treatment of BLM *protesters*, mentioning tear-gassing and military actions. Trudeau might have further interests, in the context of his more conservative voters, to *not* condemn such actions explicitly.

So, how can this silence mean different things? For the norm-context established by Trump himself, the norm-violating part of the dogwhistle could be a criticism of how protesters are being treated, or a criticism (broadly construed) of Trump's actions more specifically. For example, it might be interpreted by some along the lines of "I disagree with how Trump is treating protesters." The more innocent message, the one that doesn't violate this norm explicitly, would then be an acknowledgement

that no public and explicit critique will happen, possibly directed at Trump himself, as if to say, "I will not criticise or disagree with you publicly." In addition, silence opens up the possibility that the innocent message is simply a somewhat "meaningless" silence, as discussed earlier. Here is also where the Protean features of this silence come in strongly. Trudeau might also have strong reasons not to say something explicitly against cracking down on protesters, considering the treatment of protests in his own country, for instance. To communicate something like "I disagree with how Trump is treating protesters" could *simultaneously* also be the "innocent message," while the norm violating message, intended only to be understood by his more conservative voters, is that he still believes that some protest needs to see a clear state response and pushback.[20]

As such, Trudeau's act of remaining silent, could contain multiple dogwhistles. It allows him to communicate these different contents to different groups, attempting to bring across something to those who consider one message norm-violating, and another one innocent, while simultaneously satisfying (or attempting to satisfy) those who judge those norms in the exact opposite way. Solomon's metaphor of a "silent Rorschach test" seems accurate after all: Using silence allowed Trudeau to keep interpretation open, maintain deniability, and attempt to satisfy the different norm-contexts and multiple audiences listening to him—specifically playing on their political preconceptions, needs, and wants.

The concept of Protean overt-code dogwhistles provides us with a *framework* of how something like that can be achieved. The reader may wish to challenge this by saying that it is simply strategic ambiguity, rather than planned dogwhistling. To this I would answer "yes and no." On the one hand, the silence *absolutely* embraces strategic ambiguity.[21] That is the exact point, and the exact shapeshifting quality utilized here. But, it also not "just" that. The structure of the silence allows Trudeau to navigate background assumptions and norms, and satisfy different audiences in different ways. And even though the possibility that Trudeau *genuinely* did not know what to say and was simply struggling for words remains, his silence could have been an *unintentional* dogwhistle by being so ambiguous and multifaceted. While he could not have been entirely unaware of the norm-violating features of his silence (after all, it violating at least some *conversational* norms to remain silent for that long after being asked a question), he might not have *meant* to communicate the dogwhistles people ended up understanding. But, the point is that they did end up recovering these messages, and it did end up speaking to different people in different ways—a characteristic that can be explained, I think, by the framework indicated above.

5 | Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have investigated whether the phenomenon of dogwhistles can include acts of remaining silent, too. First, I defined dogwhistles and explained my focus on what Saul (2024) calls *overt code dogwhistles*, to then characterize what I mean by conversational silence. I then discussed several examples of political silences which, I argue, amount to silent dogwhistles.

To conclude, let me briefly remark on how all of this can tell us something interesting about political speech. For one, the present discussion highlights that the category of "dogwhistle" is *broader* than so-far recognized. Since silences have, so far, not really been looked at as dogwhistles, I see this project as emphasizing how broad the phenomenon of dogwhistles is, and in how many different context we can find them. But, we also see that silence itself is important. Dogwhistles can be manipulative in various ways—they can play on the affective qualities of ingroups and navigate norm violations in various, and often insidious, ways. Spelling out how *literally saying nothing* can also have this effect uncovers another level on which political speech (and silence) is powerful and influential.

One of the reasons why dogwhistles are so interesting is that they have urged philosophers to take into account more than what is explicitly put out in the open in political contexts. Dogwhistles, quite literally, aren't usually meant to be heard by just anyone. Different accounts analyzing dogwhistles, some discussed here in more details than others, have made us aware of the complexities and multiplicities of audiences, layers of conversations, conversational practices, and the role of deniability that come with the terrain of dogwhistles. In short, only focusing on the explicit contents of utterances could mean we miss something, and particularly miss how certain messages are politically manipulative. My discussion here has made the case that *also* silences are politically relevant in these ways. It is worth not only looking at what lies behind our utterances, but also our silences—how acts of remaining silent have communicative potential, potential which can be politically relevant in various ways.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] See Santana (2021), Saul (2018), Torices (2021), Quaranto (2022), Stanley (2015), Khoo (2017), and Henderson and McCready (2018) (to name only a few).

[2] I borrow this term from Saul (2024). Saul (2018) previously used the term *overt*-dogwhistles, following Witten (2008). In the interests of precision, I will use "overt code" throughout this paper.

[3] Quaranto (2022, 6) is, to my knowledge, the only place where the possibility of silent dogwhistles is hinted at.

[4] An example is the term "inner city." Hurwitz and Peffley's (2005) randomly assigned study participants to two groups, asking them

about government spendings surrounding prisons and anti-poverty programs: One group was asked about spendings to lock up "violent criminals," the other about "violent *inner city* criminals" (102–3; emphasis mine). It turns out that mentioning "inner city" raised people's *pre-existing racial attitudes* to salience, attitudes that wouldn't have surfaced in the same way, or at all, without the term. For more discussion on this in the context of dogwhistles, see, for example, Khoo (2017, 37), Saul (2018, 367) and Santana (2021, 4).

5 One example might be song lyrics. Consider a song where the word "bitch" is never said, but replaced by a brief silence every time the word would come up. If hearers unconsciously fill in the word, this could raise to salience misogynistic (or other) attitudes without the listener being aware of that effect. This is, of course, speculative, and surely would also be dependent on the broader context, for example, whether the rest of the song is misogynistic.

6 Also discussed in Khoo 2021, 148; 2017, 34; Torices 2021, 322, to name a few.

7 By this definition, dogwhistles can occur just as much outside political uses. For example, Saul (2018, 362) mentions that, while watching Bugs Bunny with her son, she saw references to films that children could not possibly be expected to know, such as *Last Tango in Paris*.

8 Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to make this point more explicit.

9 More specifically, Santana argues that the idea of an ingroup and outgroup who "hear" different messages (the "secret code" conception of dogwhistles) is only applicable to some dogwhistles, and so, to better understand them, we should focus instead on the general deniability of dogwhistles primarily (see Santana 2021, 3).

10 More detailed discussions of Mendelberg can be found in Saul (2018), Khoo (2021), and Drainville and Saul (2024).

11 Sanford Goldberg's (2020) *Conversational Pressure* dedicates a chapter to "conversational silence," discussing how silence (absent defeating conditions) usually amounts to agreement. Goldberg's underlying understanding of silence differs from mine—importantly, I do not believe that there is such a default entitlement to interpret silence as assent. I do not have the space to go into detail with this here, but explore this in detail in another paper (see Klieber 2024b).

12 Note too that these "conversational silences" in my sense don't *merely* arise through pauses when taking turns, or because somebody is simply preoccupied in a conversation (e.g., they are *just* distracted or taking a drag on their cigarette, etc.). This isn't to say that taking a drag of your cigarette can't be a communicative act in a conversation—it's just not the kind of conversational act I am interested in here. Finally, using sign language is not a form of communicating with silence in my sense, but *is* speech. While this requires further investigation, conversational silence in sign-languages could involve stopping signing to make a specific point. For a more detailed discussion of example **(1)** in a slightly different context, see Klieber (2024b).

13 For example, see Swanson 2017 and other discussions of Gricean conversational implicature more generally (and, at times, even more conventional discussions of dogwhistles).

14 I first develop a very similar notion of conversational silence in Klieber (2021), further discussed and applied in Klieber (2024a, 2024b).

15 Another question is how such silences communicate; that is, what is the linguistic mechanism through which silences communicate? Though silences haven't been studied intensely, there are various answers to this question in the literature. For example, we might consider silences to communicate via implicature (see Klieber 2021 for an account of "silent conversational implicature"), or as kinds of speech acts (see Tanesini 2018, who argues that silences can be illocutionary acts, belonging to adjacency pairs). Both of these accounts could make sense of silent dogwhistles. However, the existence of silent dogwhistles doesn't (and shouldn't) depend on any one of these particular

accounts. Developing a full account of the linguistic mechanisms by which silence communicates is its own project, and goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, in particular the account of silent conversational implicature seems an attractive candidate to account for the implicit character of silent dogwhistles. According to this, silence can function parallel to Gricean conversational implicatures, communicating something that goes beyond what is explicitly said (in the case of silence, nothing is said), and can be recovered by taking into account background knowledge, context, and so forth. For now, I begin my investigation from the observation (and assumption) *that* silence does do interesting things—and that we do frequently understand them as doing something interesting. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to address this point more explicitly.

16 Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to make this point more explicit.

17 Jaworski (1993, 106), drawing on Brummet (1980), discusses *strategic* political silence. I think that most cases of dogwhistles are strategic cases of political silence (the exception would be unintentional dogwhistling). However, there will be cases of strategic political silence that are not silent dogwhistles. I am only exploring the subset of silences that do fit these characteristics. As a contrast case, see for instance Ephratt's (2017) discussion on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanjahu's "Silence Address" at the UN General Assembly in 2015, when, in the middle of a speech on the US nuclear deal with Iran, he remained silent for 44 s. This is a case of remaining silent in a speech to make *specific* point supposed to address everyone at the same time.

18 My reconstruction of the events relies on Panetta et al. (2022). See their article for more details.

19 With thanks to an anonymous reviewer, who urged me to explain this point clearly.

20 Tweets cited in a Daily Mail online article, as well as comments to the article, seem to express quite strong certainty in (differing) interpretations of this silence (see Simpson 2020).

21 This is an excellent point raised by an anonymous reviewer.

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