



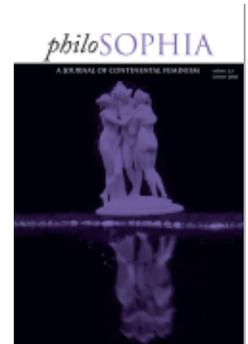
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Secret Name, or the Secret of a Name

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IN *HUMANIMAL: RACE, LAW, LANGUAGE*, Kalpana Seshadri carefully examines the secret of silence, the nonsovereign power of silence. She wants to conceive of silence as neither repressive nor transcendent; that is, on the one hand, she wants to resist the temptation to restore silence to speech, but on the other she also wants to resist the temptation to posit silence in opposition to speech, as something above and beyond language. Rather, she wants to think of silence as “an empty space where the regulatory power of discourse is nullified” (Seshadri 2012, 35).

Seshadri powerfully illustrates silence as an “empty space” that invalidates the power of speech through her provocative reading of Charles Chesnutt’s story “Dumb Witness.” In this story, about a mute slave who holds a secret, silence becomes a most unexpected secret weapon. The slave is mute because her master’s nephew has brutally cut off her tongue. The irony of this story is that the nephew realized, only *after* cutting off her tongue, that the slave is the only person entrusted with the secret of the will—the will that the nephew needs in order to claim his right to his uncle’s property, which would include the slave woman. As the story goes, the slave woman refuses to disclose the secret until after the nephew is dead. Her refusal is made possible by the wound of her tongue, by the brutal punishment inflicted by the nephew. As Seshadri points out, the secret of the slave woman’s silence exceeds her knowledge of the will. This is the case because the slave woman’s silence is not a simple silence, but rather “a capability of silence, which manifests as a withholding” (Seshadri 2012, 107). Indeed, it is through her silence that the law is rendered unenforceable. It is through her silence that the nephew failed to properly *own* her.

In Seshadri's reading, the silence of the slave woman is not a deprivation of speech, but rather a *capability* to withhold, a silent treatment designed to punish. I am fascinated by this notion of silence as an *active resistance*—a subversive power that confounds the law. Nonetheless, what is the political efficacy of this silence? Specifically, what can we *do* with this nonsovereign power, a power that seems contingent and conditional? After all, even if the slave woman was able to *use* her silence to outsmart her (would-be) master, at the end of the day she is still missing her tongue, and her nonsovereign “power” over the nephew may simply be a consolation prize.

I am equally fascinated by the idea that silence is a “capability.” Recasting silence as a kind of “capability” is noteworthy in light of contemporary debates on animal ethics, which often revolve around the kind of *capacities* that animals have. As is well known, Peter Singer, following Bentham, makes the capacity to suffer the ticket to the moral community, while for Tom Regan, one needs the capacity to experience life in order to become a moral patient. In other words, recasting silence as a capability actually conforms to, rather than challenges, a typical strategy in animal rights discourses.

What is at stake in this story is also the power of the *secret*. In her chapter on literature and the secret, Seshadri articulates different ways the secret manifests itself in literature. She writes, “literature is allied to the secret because it emerges from what is suspended (for example, meaning, truth, the word, a determinate context) and therefore can only be read and interpreted as a sign” (Seshadri 2012, 46–47). Literature always harbors secrets because its interpretation is never exhaustive. In this sense, language itself is also secretive because meaning is necessarily excessive of the sign. In a paradoxical way, every time we speak, we are necessarily withholding.

I will say more about secrets and silence as a mode of resistance in the context of animal advocacy at the end of my commentary. For now, I want to turn to Seshadri's excellent discussion on “naming” and hospitality. Specifically, I want to connect it to questions of secrecy and resistance.

In her chapter on the feral child, Seshadri raises the question of whether we can properly welcome a feral child. This question, of course, comes from Derrida's conception of hospitality. For Derrida, hospitality is unconditional when it is extended even to the unknown, anonymous other: when the host doesn't ask for anything from the guest in return, not even the *name* of the guest. But Derrida recognizes that this picture of unconditional hospitality is problematic. For how can we properly welcome someone, when we don't even know his or her name? The dilemma that Derrida acknowledges, and that Seshadri takes up, is as follows: “Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question? To call by the name or without the name? To give or to learn the name already given?” (Derrida 2000, 29; cited in Seshadri 2012, 166).

As Seshadri points out, there is an important link between welcoming someone and addressing that person with her or his proper name. This is especially evident in our relationships with animals. We don't eat the animals that we give names to: for example, our pets. And we don't name the animals that we eat. The animals we consume are always anonymous.

Indeed, Seshadri goes further to suggest that welcoming someone properly involves *saying* that person's name properly.

To have one's name pronounced correctly, to hear it used with ease, can seem (for those with so-called difficult names) an extraordinary gift of welcome. Each time someone refuses to know, learn, or pronounce the ostensibly "difficult" name, there is enacted a violence that consigns the de jure foreigner to the de facto barbarian. (Seshadri 2012, 167)

It is unclear whether Seshadri is speaking in her own voice or stating an observation in this passage. Either way, I cannot help but notice her emphasis on proper pronunciation, her emphasis on *saying* someone's name right. Although I agree with Seshadri that refusing to *say* someone's name properly signals a violent indifference, I am also suspicious of a kind of obsession with proper pronunciation when it comes to foreign names. Specifically, I am suspicious because this emphasis on proper pronunciation tends to equate—and reduce—a foreign name to a mere sound, when the name itself is more than its pronunciation.

During my second year in graduate school, one of my professors started calling me by my Chinese name. When I corrected him and made it clear that "Alison" is the name I want to go by, he explained that he simply wanted to call me by my "real" name. For him, "Alison" cannot be my real name. I was deeply ungrateful in refusing his welcoming gesture of trying to call me by my "real" name (and perhaps using this story in my commentary shows that I am a total ingrate). But at the end of the day, my "real" name is not made up of letters. The transliteration from Chinese characters into English letters feels like a reduction—even if it produces a "proper" way for English speakers to pronounce my name. And even if a non-Chinese speaker can *say* my name correctly, he still wouldn't *know* my name. My name remains inaccessible (a secret, perhaps?) to anyone who cannot read Chinese characters.

This anecdote is connected to Derrida's dilemma that Seshadri brings up, "Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question? to call by the name or without the name? to give or to learn the name already given?" (Seshadri 2012, 166). This set of questions interrogates what it would be like to properly welcome animals, even the pets that we love. On the one hand, it seems that we are always *asking* something of our pets. Minimally, we expect companionship, even as we are not sure if our cats/dogs love us back. So, our

“hospitality” to pets always seems conditional and calculative. On the other hand, there is something radically foreign about animals, insofar as we can never know their “real names.” We don’t know if they have a name of their own. And even when we do give them names, we can never be certain that they respond to the names we have given them. Even if they run to us when we call, we still cannot be certain that they are responding to the *name* that they have been given. As such, when we welcome animals to our home, we are welcoming the most foreign of foreigners, the foreigners who might not even *have* a name.

The secrecy of animal names brings us back to the question of the secret and silence, the idea of turning silence into an active resistance. This mode of resistance is fundamentally different from the one employed by mainstream animal advocacy, which typically relies on the strategy of “giving voice to the voiceless.”

In my comments earlier I expressed my concern with this nonsovereign power, specifically, how far this nonsovereign power can get us when the slave woman remains a *de facto* slave, *even if* her master could not properly own her. Just as I am uncertain about this nonsovereign power, I am ambivalent about the role of the “secret.” I appreciate the idea that the “secret” creates some kind of resistance, or that it provides some kind of protection for the oppressed. But secrets also serve those who are already in the position of power. In fact, in mainstream animal advocacy, secrets are often complicit with the institution of animal exploitation. Just take the 2009 documentary *The Cove* as an example. In that documentary, Japanese fishermen are trying to keep their dolphin-slaughtering practice a secret. They slaughter dolphins in a *secret* cove so that no one can hold them accountable. Indeed, the twist of the documentary is that in order to reveal the secret in the cove by getting footage of it, the dolphin advocates have to disguise themselves. As such, the secret works for both ends; it is a double-edged sword that can be used as a means to subvert, as well as to maintain, hierarchal power.

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