

# Locations of Silence

By Roselle Pineda

## Dinner Table: The Theory of Space-Time in Silent Dimensions

*The stars we see farthest away are the stars we are seeing longest ago.<sup>1</sup>*

In physics, it is said that each object, each person, each planet, each star, each galaxy, exists in what is called "the space-time continuum."<sup>2</sup> If a space-

to compute the coordinates of the axis become very inconsistent. Here, the light doesn't travel in a straight path but refracts even without the aid of a prism.

Einstein's first postulate of the Special Theory of Relativity states that, "all laws of nature are the same in all uniformly moving frames of reference."<sup>4</sup> But in

ironically one of the most common locations of silence within the family.

Usually, it is during dinner when members of the family share their thoughts, whether these are exchanges of opinions on a specific subject, or just narrating their experiences that day. But for most lesbians, particularly this lesbian, dinner tables are sites of uncomfortable silences, where sound waves travel and blur into a cacophony of sounds within each of the family members' inner spaces (including mine). It is the ambivalent knowledge that everybody wants to say something, or that there are pounding questions, maybe even feelings of frustration and anger within each one's chest, but nobody knows when, where and how to start.

In physics, a body's exact position could be measured through coordinating the x, y and z, axis, but at dinner tables, silence makes it harder to compute where a body rests. Come to think of it, there is almost no resting ground on locations like the dinner table. Every body moves somewhat slower than usual, and the space seems a bit larger than usual, that you find yourself being sucked into a dimension of space-time that could not be measured.

In your head, you wish

for someone to break that silence because it is making you unbearably uneasy. You even attempt to break it yourself, but you become afraid of getting sucked into this black hole that you are in even more, so you remain silent in the hope that keeping the silence will somewhat make the conditions of your space-time consistent.

The paranoia of the atoms inside you would not allow your space-time to be consistent, however. It will churn and grind your guts until you wish someone else around the dinner table could break the silence for you in the hope that it would be easier to handle things that way. But by this time, you become more afraid to speak than to drift in a space-time dimension that is perplexing you, so you just wish that dinner would be over soon so that no one has to say anything. No one has to say anything about the latest girl that they saw you kiss the other day or the way you dress, or no one has to ask you when you are getting hitched. And you would not have to answer any questions or explain anything to anyone, at least not at that point.

After dinner, you would be able to breathe and your space-time dimension will turn to normal again. At least, you wouldn't have to think about the black hole until the next session of silence at the dinner table.

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time dimension is given, a body's exact location could be computed by determining its distance relationship to the x, y and z, axis located within that given space and time.<sup>3</sup>

In my observation, space seems to expand tenfold in locations of silences. Distance seems to increase at a faster rate in these space-time dimensions. In these locations, it becomes harder to measure a body's exact position because not only does the given space-time shift dramatically in terms of size and dimension, the conditions allowing one

locations of silences, nothing is moving uniformly... and every thing is almost always uncertain. Language becomes so indeterminate and words become so jaded, that there is no choice but to succumb to the uncertainty principle, in which, all determinate things have a counterpart indeterminacy. In locations of silences, what is undetermined becomes more meaningful than the ones being said.

Within a family with lesbians, gays, or other "queer" members, it is not unusual to find locations of silences. The dinner table is

**Chronicles of Silence:  
The Theory of Invisibility**

Silence has always been one of the problems of women in general. It has been theorised over and over how silence has kept women captive at the hands of patriarchy for centuries. In particular, silence has been instrumental in keeping women's sexualities in the shadows. Silence has kept lesbians in the closet for many years. Silence is still the lock that keeps the problem of lesbian invisibility thriving.

Throughout history, lesbian existence was not only discouraged but the practice was meted certain sanctions by society. Not only did the violent erasure of our existence erase us from history, it also drove us out along with other outcasts—witches, spinsters and prostitutes.

In a study on images of witches and prostitutes in the 16th century it was concluded that sexual practices of women that excluded men (lesbian sexual practice) were seen as deviant behaviours and were legally punishable by execution.<sup>5</sup> In another study, theorist Adrienne Rich said that these punishments for lesbian practices did not only promote compulsory heterosexuality but also relegated lesbians to the margins until they became invisible. For survival, lesbians allowed this invisibility to take over.

Feminism and the gay movement alike, for a long time, were also guilty of marginalising lesbians. On

the one hand, lesbian theorists like Rich, Wittig, Ferguson, Nestle and others criticised the heterosexism of the feminist movement. They pointed out, for instance, that heterosexual feminists misinterpreted, trivialised and marginalised lesbian identity, issues and concerns.<sup>6</sup> They were also concerned with the danger of superimposing the term "woman" to desexualise lesbians. In the name of (heterosexual) feminist-imposed identities, lesbians are compelled to deny instead of understand specific lesbian practices such as cross-dressing and lesbian sexual desires of the woman's body.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the gay movement was undeniably male-centric. Ever since the birth of the movement in the late 19th century, case studies and theories on homosexuality are based on the gay male subject-position.<sup>8</sup>

Cassandra Langer said that reducing lesbian identity to female versions of male homosexuality deprives lesbians of a legitimate political existence and attaching female practices to male patterns falsifies female reality and history.<sup>9</sup>

**The Bedroom:<sup>10</sup> The Theory of Energy and Motion in Silent Dimensions**

She kissed me. "I can't make love to you," she said. Relief and despair. "But I can kiss you." The greedy



Locked up in shadows, lesbians struggle to exist in heterosexism's midst.

body that clamours for satisfaction is forced to content itself with a single sensation, and, just as the blind hear more acutely and the deaf can feel the grass grow, so the mouth becomes the focus of love and all the things pass through it and are re-defined. It is a sweet and precise torture.<sup>11</sup>

The first law of Newton states that "every body continues in its state of rest, or in uniform motion in a straight line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it."<sup>12</sup>

When a body is perfectly still or moving in perfect uniformity, turbulence is not a possibility. In this perfect harmony, dissonance has no room, and disturbance is almost eternally avoided. In Newton's second law, "the acceleration of a body is directly proportional to the net force acting on the body and inversely proportional to the mass of the body."<sup>13</sup> Depending on the impact of that outside force upon the body at rest or the body moving in consistent motion that body will either change direction, or break upon it.

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The “lesbian” has been ultimately defined, as “a ghost, whose sexual activities cannot be defined, and yet she repeatedly reappears, haunting the heterosexual imaginary. This ghosting of lesbian desire has made possible a denial of its reality for too long.

I was moving in a straight path and my heart was at rest before I met her.

She came like a wild meteorite that crashed into my path and altered my direction in an instant. Maybe she broke me to pieces, I was not certain, but one thing was for sure, almost immediately she sent my atoms swirling and bouncing like wild electric currents.

But she and I only moved in silence and in my observations, motion seemed to slow down in locations of silence. I couldn't touch her, the way I would a lover and I couldn't uncover her body the way a lover would in normal space-time, and so we always moved in the dark alleys. We always hid in the safety of a locked room. Prayed that nobody would see. Prayed that nobody would overhear our love conversations. Prayed that nobody would smell the scent she left on my dresses whenever we embraced. Prayed that nobody would uncover the traces of liquid she marked around my lips whenever we kissed. Prayed that nobody would feel my heartbeat when it grew wild whenever

she was in sight or whenever her name rolled out from my mouth.

In locations of silence, the ears become so sensitive to every sound that we were able to listen to what the heart had to say even without the articulation of the tongue. In locations of silence, there is an absence of light, and so like vampires we only moved and danced gracefully in the dark.

We believed that nothing could caress us the way darkness could. Without memory and without sight, we listened carefully to each other's breath. We became keen to the rustling of our bodies and movements. In the dark, our senses grew keener. Our eyes saw things that we did not see with the aid of wash lights. Our skin became more alert to any encounter, and we sensed each other's presence even without seeing. We satisfied ourselves with this anonymity, and we took pleasure at each coming of the night.

But like vampires, we longed to step into the light. A world washed by rays of unguarded recognition. Maybe I would see her dif-

ferently without my night vision. I may never know because we were not able to stay long enough to step into the light. I don't mind. Her memory is complete in locations of silence. I have memorised her terrain like this and it is still meaningful.

#### **Locations of Silence: The Theory of the Uncertainty Principle**

I've seen that life touches us with pain and we change, becoming strangers to ourselves. Tell me what happened along the way? How did I lose me along the way?<sup>14</sup>

The uncertainty principle is a fundamental principle in Quantum Mechanics refuting the belief that we could obtain better accuracy in measurement if we simply improved our measuring system.<sup>15</sup> This principle also implies that perfect accuracy cannot be achieved and that uncertainties will always exist in every measurement we make, not only as a result of imperfect measuring instruments, but also because of the unavoidable interaction between the observer and the observed.<sup>16</sup>

In locations of silence, the ratio of the uncertain to the certain is always greater. If the lesbian almost always exists in locations of silence, it is highly probable that what we know about the lesbian is only a fragment of the whole and what we are uncertain about it is larger. As in the fundamental application of the uncertainty principle, un-

certainties may be brought about by imperfect measuring instruments; this was what happened when men, heterosexual women, male homosexuals tried to define lesbian sexuality, as I mentioned earlier.

The “lesbian” has been ultimately defined, as “a ghost, whose sexual activities cannot be defined, and yet she repeatedly reappears, haunting the heterosexual imaginary. This ghosting of lesbian desire has made possible a denial of its reality for too long.”<sup>17</sup> It is true that locations of silence and imperfect measurements of lesbian identity have relegated our existence to the margins for so long. But on the other hand, these locations of silence and the idea of uncertainty have allowed us to penetrate into almost all fields without being detected, permitting us to survive for so long. Thus, the “apparitional lesbian” is not absent from history, but is to be found everywhere.”<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, it was the desire to unravel that compelled me to write this. It is a last attempt to wail, and to reclaim a past that was so violently taken from our hands. Somewhere along the way, we allowed this past to slip from us, so that today, when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we recall nothing that brought us here. We could not retrace the steps that we took to lead us here. There is only this presence that has no history. Ultimately, it was the responsibility to uncover this lost history that motivated me to write this. It

was the eagerness to shout and say, we are here. In the process however, I uncovered the crucial role of silence and locations of silence in lesbian lives. The subtle touch of the fingertips to a lover's hair, the contact of skin and lips, the strong friendships of women, the transgressive clothing, all of these are positioned in locations of silence, and all of these characterise lesbian space and identity.

In our everyday lives we negotiate relationships with everything around us—our families, work, lovers, and even the people surrounding our lovers—almost always in silence and discretion. We articulate the fullness of our sexuality in locations of silence. Whether the result may be a cacophony of sounds or the gift of vision even with the absence of light, we have managed to create and recreate languages that may be incomprehensible to the conventional eye, but all our own. In locations of silence, we have created a space-time realm that is free and unhindered of another's identity, expression, language, and space but ours.

Locations of silence may be double-edged but they have kept us from extinction all this time despite discrimination in the society. But then the "lesbian apparition" is as real as the "lesbian body." Writing this made me realise that uncertainty is as important as certainty.

In the end, there still isn't a day that I hope and try to work for the time

when we can all exist in the same realm of space-time, without fear, without the need to be silent, and without the need to be invisible. I still maintain that visibility and speech are crucial steps towards emancipation. But now, there is an added dimension in my frame of analysis, and this dimension is the radical potential of locations of silence in lesbian lives.

*The stars we see farthest away are the stars we are seeing longest ago, and even in silence, we will keep on existing, surviving, creating expressions, and gathering strengths, like we always have.*<sup>19</sup>

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#### Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Paul G. Hewitt, *Conceptual Physics: A New Introduction To Your Environment* Third Edition, (USA and Canada: Little, Brown and Company Inc., 1977) p. 568
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 566

<sup>5</sup> Laura Weigert, "Autonomy as Deviance: Sixteenth Century Images of Witches and Prostitutes," from *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary and Artistic Discourses of Auto-eroticism*, edited by Paula Bennet and Vernon Rosario II (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 21

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Martindale quoting Joan Nestle, in "What Makes Lesbianism Thinkable: Theorizing Lesbianism" from *Adrienne Rich to Queer Theory, from Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality*, edited by Nancy Mendell, (Canada: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1995) p.81

<sup>7</sup> Cheshire Calhoun, "The Gender Closet: Lesbian Disappearance Under the Sign Women", from *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader*, edited by Martha Vicinus, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 212

<sup>8</sup> Warren J. Blummenfeld and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), pp. 277-278

<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence," from *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 193

<sup>10</sup> The following passages are revised versions of an autobiographical narrative called "Eloquent Crevices" which was published by *Mirror Magazine* in part in 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 67

<sup>12</sup> Paul Hewitt, p. 25

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 28

<sup>14</sup> October Project, "Walls of Silence," from the album *October Project*, (USA: EMI Records, 1994)

<sup>15</sup> Hewitt, p. 511

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Martha Vicinus quoting Terry Castle, "Introduction," from

*Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader*, edited by Martha Vicinus, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 9

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Hewitt, p. 568

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