# The State of Cypriot Silences

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that rather than disappearing, Cypriot silences about inconvenient histories have in fact become 'louder' since the 2003 opening of the checkpoints. The paper uses Derrida's analysis of the border as that which can but should not be crossed to explore the new silences that emerged in Cypriots' encounters with each other and with the past in the wake of the 'opening'. That opening, the paper attempts to show, not only transformed the unrecognised 'border' (Green Line, ceasefire line) into something more closely resembling a border through the problematic act of crossing, but it also made the Cyprus Problem increasingly aporetic, a space that cannot be crossed even when there is no 'border'. Denial arises in this space where the 'border' disappears, making crossing a non-passage even in the era of an open border.*

If all histories are constituted both by what is remembered and what is forgotten, they are also shaped by what is vocalised and what is left in silence. Although both pairs are characterised by recognition and denial, what is covered over in silence may not always be the same as what is forgotten. Looking at the historical record, it is easy to see that in Cyprus, the period about which one side in the conflict has been the most vocal is the period about which the other side has maintained relative silence. These are periods that one side recognises as a moment of collective suffering, a rupture or turning point in history. While the ways that Cypriots deny or cover over certain histories are in some senses well known, what is perhaps more puzzling is the complicity of scholars and scholarship in maintaining relative silence about these subjects. The periods about which Cypriots are silent are also the periods that scholars tend to leave unexamined, so that dark holes appear in the historical record, and casting light into them falls to investigative journalists. Indeed, this is a common theme in many conflict situations: the tacit complicity of academia in silencing histories that scholars may want to know more about but do not dare to touch.[1]

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1     Perhaps the best known example is the case of Israel/Palestine, where the role of Israel Defence Forces in evicting Palestinians from their homes was covered up even as it was happening and was covered over in taboo until investigative journalist Benny Morris began to publish on the topic fifteen years ago. This was, importantly, a critique from within, and one that gave blow-by-blow documentation of the ways that Palestinians were driven from their homes. A subsequent flood of scholarship has emerged to document the expulsion of the Palestinians (Pappe, 2007), the cover-up of that expulsion (Esber, 2008), the mechanisms of their dispossession (Fischbach, 2003), and the subsequent Judaization of Israel (Abu el-Haj, 2002; Benvenisti, 2002; Yiftachel, 2006).

This essay, however, will touch only tangentially on academic complicity. Instead, I will briefly deal with an equally puzzling phenomenon: namely, the way in which silence has become 'louder' in Cyprus since the 2003 opening of the checkpoints. A historical silence is only a silence, after all, in the face of those who consider it a form of denial. Silence and denial are forms of non-recognition, a refusal to 'see' the other. As long as the actual geographical boundary that partitions the island was closed, there was no need to think of these silences as silences, because the persons to whom they applied in any case could not be 'seen'. The simultaneous knowing and not-knowing that constitutes denial was not visible, because there was no reason to become consciously aware of those parts of the past that one might simultaneously feel compelled to suppress. The persons about whom one might deny certain parts of the past were beyond 'the border', which was also the limit of imagination. As a result, Cypriot silences became 'silences' only in the period when 'crossing' was possible, in other words only when other histories were presented to one in visible and tangible ways. Crossing presented the possibility of an impossibility: namely, another history that one had always known while not knowing, and so a history that had to be resisted and denied.

I want to use the border (that is not a border) as both a metaphor for and an actor in the silencing of Cypriot pasts. The border is not simply a convenient intellectual trope but I believe is key to understanding the way that silences work today. And in order to avoid the usual objections, let me say from the start that I choose the word 'border' not for its political implications but because of the way that any sort of border – the border of a painting, for example – demarcates a space and hence defines an inside and an outside. Indeed, any definition is determined by borders: 'To define something is to mark its boundaries', notes Eviatar Zerubavel, 'to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from everything else' (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 2).

It is this sense of demarcating both geographical and mental space that I wish to employ here. In sum, I wish to see history in Cyprus as a type of border, and the border as a history. In Derrida's masterful analysis of the border (Derrida, 1993), he notes that the border is defined by the simultaneous capacity to cross it and knowledge that one should not cross it. Using the example of illegal immigrants, he notes that borders may also become problematic when one crosses them when one should not. But he uses 'problematic' in a special sense, referring to the Greek etymology of 'problem' as both pro-ject and pro-tection, both something to be accomplished and something that shields. Derrida implies, then, that borders are primarily about inclusion and exclusion, delineating between 'us' and 'them'. Already in Derrida's discussion, then, is the recognition that borders are both mental and physical – an overlap that he describes as that between 'problematic closure', or the borders between domains of discourse, and 'the anthropological border', or the actual physical geographical line that separates us. These two types of border may mutually define each other, as well as what may be crossed or 'transgressed'. And in Cyprus, too, for almost three decades that 'line' was visible in the figure of the line partitioning the island, which came to bear a great historical weight. The border came to represent ruptured histories, injured communities, and an 'other' on the opposite side of the barrier. The border was both symbol and proof of what 'they' had done to 'us'.

History, then, is defined by ways of delineating it, by deciding whose history is included and whose excluded, and hence by a border. But the idea of a 'problematic closure' implies that domains of discourse are never fully sealed, are always threatened by what has been refused. In the case of Cyprus, 'the refused' is not only a particular version of history but also those persons who refuse one's history by remaining in one's house, by living beside desecrated churches, by occupying a state that should have been shared. While this dynamic is most likely common to all conflict zones, indeed to all contested histories, Cyprus is unusual in that refused histories may also be represented territorially, as something found on the other side of a dividing line. At the same time, this is a dividing line that is itself threatened or refused: while Greek Cypriots reject or refuse it as a border, Turkish Cypriots have insisted on a border that is also in daily life unrecognised and so refused.

At this point, however, we may also see where Derrida's thought about borders may lead us, in thinking about Cyprus, in different directions. Because in Cyprus the border (what Derrida would call the anthropological border) is a 'border', i.e. it is a dividing line that is also unrecognised, threatened, and threatening. For in Cyprus the 'border' has come to stand for the Cyprus Problem, a form of 'problematic closure' that has to be resolved and whose resolution would presumably result in the dissolution of that same 'border'. I wish to suggest, then, that for quite a few decades in Cyprus, the Cyprus Problem has in fact been the 'real' border, the line that one can cross but should not, while the 'border' (ceasefire line, Green Line, Atilla Line) only stood for it in some figurative way, eliminating the necessity of turning the Cyprus Problem into a 'problem' in Derrida's sense, i.e. a problem created in the act of crossing.

If we turn this analysis to the opening of the Cyprus checkpoints, we may see that the 'border' was reconstituted as border – or one might even argue that for the first time a ceasefire line was actually constituted as a border – when crossing it became a 'problem' (see also Demetriou, 2007). In other words, in the period of the closed checkpoints, one was not confronted with the 'problem' of whether or not to cross; the indivisible line that marked the division of the island was simply impenetrable. If a border becomes a border through the possibility of crossing it, the 'problem' created by the crossing was also a recognition of this, in that many of those who refused to cross were those who feared that crossing would constitute a tacit 'recognition' of the ceasefire line as a border. And so while most Greek Cypriots imagine that there is no border, in order to maintain that belief in the non-border, they must, paradoxically, remain in their 'own side', whether physically or mentally, even in the act of crossing. And while most Turkish Cypriots imagine that there is a border, this is a border always threatened by non-recognition and so one that can only be maintained by a refusal of non-recognition, or again by a refusal to 'cross' into the other's history.

But if the 'border' became something more closely resembling a border through the problematic act of crossing, the Cyprus Problem, I wish to suggest, has become increasingly aporetic. In his analysis, Derrida poses the border in tension with the aporia, the space of non-passage, the point from which crossing is impossible despite there being no 'problem', no border between us. The aporia is, one might say, the mystery of that which separates us when there is no visible line to divide us. The aporia is 'the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage,

the refused, denied or prohibited passage' (Derrida, 1993, p. 8). Cypriot silences, I wish to suggest, are a form of aporia, what Derrida calls 'a space of nonpassage', that is in tension with the figure of the border.

If the aporia is the impossible possibility, I interpret that here as the impossibility of 'crossing' into the other's history. For once the 'border' becomes something more closely resembling a border – i.e. something that one must choose to cross or not – it becomes clear that the Cyprus Problem becomes a space of non-passage, i.e. a space where crossing must be refused and denied. In other words, denial arises in this space where the 'border' disappears, and so history in Cyprus becomes aporetic, the impossibility of a possibility, that makes crossing a non-passage even in the era of an open border.

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My research on the opening of the checkpoints began in the summer of 2003, but it was early 2004 before I went on a visit with Greek Cypriots to the homes that they had lost. I was conducting research on Lapithos, what was once a large, prosperous town on the north coast of the island with a predominantly Greek Cypriot population and a Turkish Cypriot minority of approximately 12%. Turkish Lapithiotes had fled the town in January 1964 and lived in tents and makeshift housing in Turkish Cypriot enclaves for a decade. Greek Lapithiotes fled the town in 1974 and had been scattered throughout the island. I went on a visit to the town with a couple that I call Maroulla and Vasillis, who had been the children of land-owning families and had lost much in 1974. They are now in their mid-sixties, and Vasillis had been a strong supporter of the Annan Plan primarily because he thought it would return him to his home.

On that first day, I picked them up and drove them in my car across the checkpoint. As we wound up through the mountains and began the descent into Kyrenia, Maroulla leaned forward and grabbed my arm and began describing her first visit. 'Can you imagine what it's like to go back to your home after so many years? The home that you left without even a handkerchief? I cried and cried all the way there'.

They were silent for much of the ride along the coast road, but when we reached the turning into the town, they began immediately to point out the houses of relatives and friends, commenting on the changes in them. Many of the refugees, in returning to their homes, found them shabby and untended. Many had puzzled over it, asking me, 'Why is everything so dirty? Why have they not cared for things?'.

Maroulla also asked me this question during that first trip there, as we stood by the spring known as Koufi Petra, today only a trickle, and gazed out over the neighbourhood below, now occupied by settlers from Turkey. 'Why have they not cared for things?' she asked. As though in explanation of her question, Maroulla described to me how she and Vasillis had built their house, as so many villagers do, first as one floor but with the possibility of adding a second. Like many villagers, they had built the original house with a flat roof that sprouted supports for what would

later be an apartment on the floor above, and the possibility of building stairs to one side. According to Maroulla, it had taken them many years to put aside the money to build the upper floor, and they had completed it only a short time before the war that forced them to flee. 'We had a renter', she told me. 'He was going to move in on that same day, the day of the invasion. Everything was there. It had new furniture, new curtains. It had everything, right down to dishrags and tablecloths. Right down to the sponge for washing dishes'.

We left the spring that day and made our way to the top of the town, in the mountains, to survey some land that used to belong to Maroulla's family. It was at the highest point in the town, where the mountain plateaus in an open stretch of field, that day covered in white and yellow spring daffodils. A portion of the field had been inherited by Maroulla; on that day it stood empty apart from a small shelter, though since then two large villas have been built at the edge of the open plateau, overlooking the sea.

From there we could see Maroulla's childhood home below, and as we stood gazing down at the white house of Maroulla's memories, a police car unexpectedly bounced down the mountain path and slowed to a stop near us. Vasillis approached the car and leaned in to talk to the driver, immediately understanding from the thick accent with which he spoke Greek that he was from Paphos. Vasillis soon learned that this Turkish Cypriot policeman was originally from Kouklia, near where they now live. When Maroulla heard that he spoke Greek, she also leaned into the car, and they began asking him what Greeks he remembered from Kouklia, trying to establish some link with him.

The policeman was polite but reticent. Finally, Vasillis straightened up and asked with a sigh the inevitable question: 'Wouldn't it be better if we could just go back to the way things once were?'. I had heard this question many times, an expression of a core axiom of Greek Cypriot politics, namely that the Cyprus Problem is not one between Cypriots but a problem of invasion and occupation by Turkey. I had come to see, though, that this is also a core belief for many Greek Cypriots regarding their own pasts. The policeman, in response, bent toward the steering wheel and gave a slight, reluctant nod of the head. He could not acquiesce, but he also did not want to offend.

I realised in that moment that even though the checkpoints had opened, so little had really changed. Even at the level of simple, interpersonal interaction, Vasillis' insistence and the policeman's resistance maintained two parallel worlds. Vasillis might see the Paphian policeman as acquiescing, admitting that they should return to the past. The policeman, in turn, might see Vasillis as trying to impose a Greek version of history upon him. As far as I could tell, each turned away from the encounter with the sense of his own world reinforced. And those worlds were reinforced just at the moment when they should have been open to disruption.

The problem was not only that the policeman refused to accept Vasillis' version of the past, but that in keeping silent, he also refused to accept that Vasillis might understand his own. It was an encounter I would see repeated often, as Cypriots discovered not only that the other might see the past differently, but also that seeing it differently had shaped their lives in the present and given

them different hopes for the future. Before the opening of the checkpoints, I heard Turkish Cypriots repeat again and again, 'France and Germany put aside their differences, and we can, too': But the opening of the checkpoints, and especially the Annan Plan referendum, changed things. Many Turkish Cypriots expressed to me the sense that even though they spoke to their former neighbours, there remained a rupture between them, a rupture of experience, and one that had been reflected in the referendum's lopsided results. One older Turkish Cypriot, a retired policeman who now works in construction in the south, told me, 'We eat and drink together, but there's a vacuum between us. Things can't be the way they once were'. I would hear this again and again: 'We used to have neighbours, and they even looked after my mother when she was sick', one Turkish Cypriot woman originally from Paphos told me, 'but you don't know what they're thinking'. 'Eskisi gibi olamaz. Things can't be the way they once were'.

After the checkpoints opened, then, the buffer zone that divides the island came to stand for more than a political division and began also to symbolise a rupture. On either side of the ceasefire line, new worlds had been created, and at the juncture where these worlds now meet, silences have arisen. These are sometimes silences that express a lack of words, and they are often silences that express that the words at one's own disposal no longer fit, no longer allow one to grasp the thing at hand. Sometimes these are silences that hide open secrets. More often, though, like the policeman's bowed head, they are silences that express that the other simply cannot understand.

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Not long after my first trip to Lapithos with Vasillis and Maroulla, I decided to go there with a Turkish Cypriot friend who had once taught in the town's Turkish high school. I wanted to go to the mayor, a former student of hers, to ask him about a *şehitlik*, or memorial to Turkish Cypriot 'martyrs', which graces a roundabout in the centre of the town. Although it was the Lapithos, or Lapta, şehitlik, the twenty-one names inscribed on it had places of birth and death elsewhere in the island. The mayor, in common Greek Cypriot parlance, is the 'pseudo-mayor', the one whose existence cannot be recognised and who is illegally occupying the municipality. He is also a refugee from the Paphos district and had followed his family to Lapithos when they fled their own village in the south.

When we arrived, the mayor offered us coffee, while his assistant Hasan, also a former student of my friend, hovered about. Hasan, it turned out, was the nephew of one of two young men whose murder on Christmas Day in 1963 sparked the Turks' exodus from the town. They explained to us that the monument honoured not only Turks originally from the town who had been killed, but the relatives of all those now living there.

'We erected it a couple of years ago because of pressure from the Cypriot martyrs' families', the mayor explained. 'Afterwards, the Turks from Turkey who had lost relatives wanted their own memorial, but we decided to wait to see what's going to happen'. The *Türkiyeliler*, or Turks from Turkey, to whom he referred were all those families who had lost sons during the Turkish military intervention of 1974 and who had been given property in the town.

This led us to a discussion of the upcoming referendum, scheduled for only a couple of weeks later. Both were wary, Hasan saying that he expected his family would lose quite a bit of property if the plan passed. The mayor, in turn, said that they had owned a lot of land in Paphos and had never been fully compensated. 'I went to England to work when I was eighteen', the mayor told me, 'and I wrote to my father often. You know, I used to see how well the English would treat their dogs, and I thought about the kind of life my family was living in Cyprus. And I'll never forget, I wrote to my father saying, "If only I'd been born in England, and I'd been born a dog". Can you imagine writing that? "If only I'd been born in England, and I'd been born a dog."'

Hasan turned to me then. 'So what do you think is going to happen in the referendum?'

I told them what they already knew, which was that the prospects for the plan passing looked pretty bleak.

And then the mayor faced me with the inevitable question, the one that everyone invariably asked: 'So what do they say? Do they want to come back?'.

By this time I had discerned that the mayor was fairly nationalistic, following a party that preferred a permanent partition, and so I hesitated in my reply. 'Almost all the ones I've talked to want to come back', I finally answered. 'Not all the refugees want to come back, but the ones from Lapta do. I've tried to ask them why that is, but they can't really explain it to me. They're very attached to the place'.

The mayor and his assistant exchanged glances, and then the mayor leaned forward, his face dark. 'Do you want to know why they're so insistent about coming back?' he asked rhetorically. 'It's because they worked so hard to rid the town of the Turks, and now they can't stand to see it in Turkish hands'.

The mayor's reply startled me, not because I had not heard it before, but because I had heard it from a close friend only the previous day. She had told me, 'Do you know why Lapta is a symbolic village for the Greeks? Because in 1963, when all of the Turkish Cypriots left the village, it was seen as a big victory. And after that, when that victory was taken from them in 1974, they were devastated'. Indeed, this same answer was one that I would later hear again and again. I would hear it from an old mason as we sat in the garden of his home. I would hear it from a younger friend, a graphic artist, as we had lunch. I would hear it from another schoolteacher about ten years my senior as she described the enclave period of her youth. In reply to the question, 'Why do they want to come back?', then, this was the answer that so many people gave. Like Vasillis' question, it was a sentence that encapsulated a particular version of the past and projected it onto an uncertain future.

Both Vasillis' wistful question and the mayor's harsh explanation would recur like refrains throughout my research, staccato answers to complex melodies. These phrases seemed a type of shorthand that encoded complicated histories of friendships and betrayals, of fear, and of loss, in ways that those who had shared these histories would immediately understand. And it was also a way of excluding other histories, of shutting them off. It was a way of wrapping up history into a neatly sealed phrase and trimming off anything that seemed to dangle at the edges.

But unlike Vasillis' question, the mayor's answer required no affirmation. And that, too, made me uncomfortable – this too-neat statement that sealed off all possibilities for loss, for longing, for dreams damaged or deferred. Because encoded in the mayor's neat summary was not only a refusal to see the other's suffering, but also an explanation for why they refused to see. The mayor, and the mason, and all the other people who summed up Greek Cypriots' longing in this neat phrase knew very well what their former neighbours had lost, and how they had lost it. They knew very well about all those who had died in the war, and all those who had never been found. They knew very well about damaged churches, gutted cemeteries. They knew about communities scattered.

They knew about all those things, and yet the mayor's remark still circulated as an explanation for Greek Cypriot longing. And while it acknowledged their longing, it also undermined it, denying their right to *be*long. It imbued that longing with misplaced pride and thwarted ambition, as well as a fair share of frustrated enmity. And that formulaic sentence stumped me in its decisiveness, because even as it raised other questions, it simultaneously sealed the passage to the past, leaving the questions on my lips with no way to ask.

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What are denied in these brief phrases that recurred throughout my research are histories that are in many ways visible and well known. Both Greek Cypriot official histories and much Greek Cypriot public discourse deny that the period between 1963-1974, which Turkish Cypriots remember as a period of fear and struggle, was that at all. Whereas Turkish Cypriots describe fleeing their villages in fear during this period, Greek Cypriot histories – both official and oral – of the period describe the retreat to enclaves as a plan by the Turkish Cypriot leadership to separate the communities and pave the way for partition. While it may *also* have been that, the common discourse of 'peaceful coexistence', or the idea that all Cypriots lived happily together until the unprovoked Turkish invasion of 1974, clearly denies the daily humiliations and fear that Turkish Cypriots experienced over a decade.

Similarly, but at a different level of denial, while Turkish Cypriot histories may acknowledge that Greek Cypriots fled for their lives, that they abandoned their homes and ancestral villages and have experienced traumatic loss, both official histories and public discourse tends to minimise or even erase the importance of this. 'They deserved it', is what these histories say, in sum. This is why, for so many years, Turkish Cypriots were able to live in Greek Cypriot houses, or to live side-by-side with gutted churches and devastated cemeteries: because those buildings or objects left by Greek Cypriots were reminders of a history that had come full circle, that seemed to have been completed.

In a groundbreaking work on the social processes of denial, Stanley Cohen makes distinctions between our different ways of denying harm that we have done to others. The insistence on a period of 'peaceful coexistence' is what Cohen would call a denial of injury, or refusal to see the hurt done to others. This, he notes, may often be a blindness even at the moment of injury, when one simply cannot recognise the hurt done to others. 'Dramatic atrocities', he remarks, 'are felt less

acutely than the daily indignities, petty harassment and minor humiliations of road blocks, restrictions on movement, stop-and-search procedures and curfews. Just as sensitively as these minor injuries are felt – an old man being searched and verbally abused in front of his granddaughter – so are they utterly invisible to the powerful' (Cohen, 2001, p. 96). It is this sort of injury – the injury of enclave life – that is so powerfully etched in the memories of many Turkish Cypriots today and whose denial is expressed by Turkish Cypriots as an inability of Greek Cypriots to 'see'. 'The Greek Cypriots didn't know anything, they didn't see anything', one old Lapithiote woman told me, echoing what so many others would say. When that injury was visible, as in the case of persons actually killed during clashes in the 1960s, it tends to fall under what Cohen calls a 'denial of responsibility', in that even at the moment when the clashes were happening, responsibility was placed on Turkish Cypriots themselves, who were portrayed in the media of the time as 'rebels'.

The denial so prevalent in Turkish Cypriot history and public discourse, on the other hand, constitutes what Cohen would call a 'denial of the victim'. It is what Mahmood Mamdani summarises as 'when victims become killers' (Mamdani, 2001), though as both Mamdani and Cohen stress, one's victimhood may be structural, or part of imagined and reconstructed collective memory (e.g. Serbian 'victimhood' at the hands of Ottoman Muslims in the fifteenth century), rather than 'real' or immediate. 'This is your destiny', remarks Cohen. 'You must get rid of your enemies – the aggressors who started everything – and live in peace and security with your own people. A collective memory that denies full humanity to the out-group allows for various shades of "getting rid of" – from forcible segregation to ethnic cleansing or mass deportation ("transfer") to even genocide' (p. 97).

While these forms of denial may have constituted histories on either side of the 'border' before its opening, they became visible as forms of denial and audible as loud silences when it became possible to cross to the other side. A refusal to acknowledge that 'everything should go back to the way it once was'; a refusal by an other to leave the house one knows as one's own; or a knock at the door that indicated that the past had not come full circle, indeed had not yet been completed – all these became ways of breaking down the border that also presented one with other histories that were known but refused, present but also impossible.

This aporia – the impossible possibility of both knowing and not-knowing – is however, difficult to live with. This, I wish to suggest, is one very important reason for a growing refusal to cross, as well as for the growing popularity of permanent partition on both sides of the island. After all, a border makes it possible to refuse 'their' history, to leave it on 'the other side'. As long as a border exists, 'their' history has no possibility of contaminating or confusing one's own. It may, in fact, be the case that we love the border in order to not hate the Other ('Good fences make good neighbours'). Silence, in other words, stops at the border, but the ultimate, unfortunate result of silence may be to leave the border intact.

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