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Sounds of Silence: Presence and Absence in a Narrative of Forced Migration

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Silence and emptiness drives the focus of this paper as it examines the impact of forced migration on family life across the generations. The silence stems from the absent voices of children and grandchildren and the emptiness is the individual self's coming to terms over time with this personal catastrophe. This rupture of the expected flow of family life and proximity of generations and generational relationships occurs in different languages, geographical and sociopolitical spaces. The ensuing family narrative is recorded in letters, which are translated informally, and photos whose resonance has changed over time in terms of understanding family life. As Stanley (2004) notes, letters are by their very nature fragments of a lived life. The letters presented here contain the mundane details of life recorded by the writer for the reader/s and also include the extraordinary aspects of an individual's life during a period of forced migration due to revolution. The extraordinary is recorded and passed between family members in the letters and re/discovered as hidden messages whose meanings may never be fully discovered.

The letters are written to absent children and to grandchildren and are an attempt to retain links across the generations. They are evidence of the sets of relationships which migration affects as they relate to mother and daughter and grandmother and grandchild among others. Research on grandparent-grandchild ties demonstrates that the bonds of emotional ties and emotional closeness are strengthened when 'normative expectations' of family life across the generations are met. Forced migration upsets such normative expectations so that they are fragmented. In addition, the dislocation affects the narrative of the family as well individual interpretations of the family meta-narrative including the understanding of the self within the narrative. Such understanding comes in the presence of absence across the generations.

Dr Sheridan is currently the Academic Coordinator of the BA in Contemporary Culture and Society at Dublin City University. She has worked extensively abroad including Zimbabwe after independence where she became interested in questions of identity. Research interests and publications are in the relationships between language, culture and identity and the narrative shaping of self/selves across the life-span.