

## What Silent Languages Do: An Analysis of Unspoken Forms of Communication in Social Relations in Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days*

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**Abstract:** Widowhood in Africa is deeply marked by deep-seated social and cultural norms that manifest themselves in both verbal and nonverbal communication. In many African societies, widows often face harmful traditional practices through patriarchal influence, widowhood rites and social stigma imbedded in some silent languages such as gestures, body positioning, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues that reveal power relations and societal expectations. This study therefore, explores the role of nonverbal communication in shaping social relations in Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days*. Using discourse analysis and semiotic theory, the study examines these unspoken forms of communication and highlights how meaning and social realities are constructed beyond words. The paper argues that nonverbal communication in *Lonely Days* serves as both an instrument of social control and a medium for defiance. While silence and bodily gestures often not only reinforce societal oppression, but also provide widows with subtle means of resistance and self-expression.

**Keywords :** Discourse analysis, Nonverbal communication, Semiotics, Social relations, Widowhood

### Ce que font les langages silencieux : une analyse des formes non dites de la communication dans les relations sociales dans *Lonely Days* de Bayo Adebawale

**Résumé:** Le veuvage en Afrique est profondément marqué par des normes sociales et culturelles enracinées, qui se manifestent à travers la communication verbale et non verbale. Dans de nombreuses sociétés africaines, les veuves sont souvent confrontées à des pratiques traditionnelles néfastes, issues de l'influence patriarcale, des rites de veuvage et de la stigmatisation sociale, qui s'expriment dans certains langages silencieux tels que les gestes, les postures corporelles, les expressions faciales et d'autres signaux non verbaux révélant les rapports de pouvoir et les attentes sociétales. Cette étude explore donc le rôle de la communication non verbale dans la structuration des relations sociales dans *Lonely Days* de Bayo Adebawale. En s'appuyant sur l'analyse du discours et la théorie sémiotique, elle examine ces formes de communication non dites et met en évidence la manière dont le sens et les réalités sociales se construisent au-delà des mots, offrant ainsi une compréhension plus profonde de la portée symbolique des expressions culturellement silencieuses. L'article soutient que la communication non verbale dans *Lonely Days* fonctionne à la fois comme un instrument de contrôle social et comme un moyen de défiance. Le silence et les gestes corporels non seulement renforcent

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l'oppression sociétale, mais offrent également aux veuves des moyens subtils de résistance et d'expression de soi.

**Mots-clés** : Analyse du discours, Communication non verbale, Sémiotique, Relations sociales, Veuvage

## Introduction

Language is a means of communication that goes beyond verbal utterances to take into account non-verbal forms of communication such as kinesics, silence and some symbolic acts to communicate meaning. As **Birdwhistell** (1970) mentioned, "human interaction is structured not only by spoken words but also by what remains unspoken; that is "silent languages." Much has already been done on silent languages. But, what can be observed is that, through most of these developments or studies, silent languages studied focused mainly on their nature and classifications. In this paper, precedence is given to the meaning dimension of silent languages in social relations. The purpose in doing so, is then to explore some linguistics and semiotic characteristics found in silent languages. The study purposely targets to trigger awareness on the fact that there are valid and strong reasons to consider silent languages as means of conveying information or expressing mood. In this endeavor, Bayo Adebawale's novel *Lonely Days* reveals that non-verbal languages are communicative tools that play crucial roles in representing social realities; simply because they embody meanings that words often fail to capture. Thus, the present study therefore, seeks to examine how nonverbal languages construct social realities; hence the absolute necessity to answer the following questions:

What are the markers of non-verbal communication in Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days*? How does the interpretation of non-verbal languages contribute to understanding widowhood? In which way does the use of unspoken forms of communication reveal and construct social realities?

The answering process leads to a three-part development imbedded in discourse analysis and semiotic theory that help examine the unspoken forms of communication in Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days* and highlight how meaning and social realities are constructed beyond words. The first part discusses the indicators of non-verbal behavior. The second part identifies non-verbal languages as symbols and the third last one presents nonverbal languages as revelators and constructors of social realities

## 1. Indicators of Non-verbal Behavior in Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days*

It is admitted that "there is a division conventionally drawn between two aspects of human communication: the verbal **and** nonverbal." (J. Lyons, 1977, p. 67). Concerning the latter, it is worth mentioning that nonverbal communication refers to a communication that does not use words or that has no linguistic content but uses paralinguistic tools to mean something. Non-verbal communication, therefore, includes meaning provided by the way kinesics, silence and some semiotic elements behave in a socio-cultural context. Thus, in the corpus, there are many cues that indicate communication beyond words.

### 1.1. Non-verbal Semiotic of Cultural Identity

Nonverbal semiotic of cultural **identity** are signs, non-verbal cues or practices peculiar to a given society that have contents and which communicate meaning in specific social situations. M. A. K. Halliday (1978), concerning meaning, notes that meaning is socially constructed across modes and amongst these modes, there are nonverbal modes of communication. It is therefore admitted that the construction of meaning is manifold. This multimodal construction of meaning is revealed through many indicators or markers which are peculiar to non-verbal semiotics that carry cultural identity as can be seen in the following utterances drawn from the corpus:

- (1) When everything is over and we cash off these **black garments**, we will dance again (*Lonely Days*, p. 23)
- (2) We picked new **caps**, following the dictates of tradition.... **we wore the caps**. (*Lonely Days*, p. 112)

From a semiotic perspective, utterances above display symbols that vehicle meanings in the context of widowhood. These meanings are culturally based and determine or refer to a specific group. In fact, the evocation of 'black garments', 'caps' are symbolic elements or nonverbal cues that index the social position or status of the people who are described. They refer here to widows and they reinforce Goffman's view on the 'presentation of self' and social order when he stated the following concerning appearance and costume on the stage: "the front stage involves setting, appearance, and manner; appearance tells us of the performer's social status." (E. Goffman, 1959, p. 22).

The "black garments" and the "caps" in utterances (1) and (2), are symbols that speak. They are status recognition symbols. The "black garment" and the wearing of the "cap" refer to a cultural code that expresses widowhood. These are outfits that are only wore by specific individuals. They are informative tools that tell that a woman wearing them is a widow and as such, they communicate status at the first sight.

Moreover, other indicators of non-verbal communication can be seen in the following utterances through spatial positioning:

- (3) Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke **sat among the crowd, in their capacity as ex-widows** (*Lonely Days*, p. 110-111)
- (4) **The narrow river road** at Kufi upon which the high foliage sprinkled drops of sunlight had been **the widow's road**. (*Lonely Days*, p. 20)

Many symbolic elements in the utterances such as "sitting at the middle of people" and "having a special road" that leads to the river cross-refer to non-verbal language and they also communicate meaning. In utterance (3) "sat among the crowd" for example symbolizes the status of widows and reveals their place in public sphere. likewise, in (4), there is "The narrow river road ... the widow's road" can be understood that not only those sitting at the edges or periphery during public gatherings as in (3) and the ones taking the narrow river road are only a category of people: widows. Singling widows out in public is a symbol, it pictures the self and informs on their exclusion and ill-treatment in the society. The spatial positioning is a nonverbal language that acts as a visible

marker of widowhood in the community. One can see therefore, that being a widow is a sacrilege that purports to humiliation and social instantiation.

Moreover, another symbolic significance is communicated through the humiliating treatment the widows receive:

- (5) We pardoned those who asked the barber **to cut our hair to its roots** and those who forced us to confess to sins we did not commit, (*Lonely Days*, p. 111)

The “cutting hair to the root” reads as a visible text of nonverbal communication and reminds us Bourdieu when he states “the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in posture, bearing, dress and manners of speaking.” (P. Bourdieu, 1977, p. 94). In other words, recognition of the status of an individual can be seen in his or her appearance. Of course, the hair cutting to the root informs on a change in social status. The attire or appearance communicates to people the status of the person. The sight of women with their hair cut to the root helps identify and categorize them in the society. This is a silent sign that vehicles humiliation and ill treatments widows undergo. Signs or symbols inscribed upon widows’ posture, outfits or bodies are discourses that vehicle cultural perceptions and which more clearly communicate status than spoken words.

Nonverbal communication acts are embedded in the description of widows in terms of outfits, hair-cutting, spatial positioning that are inscribed in the community’s culture. To this end, it can be asserted that those nonverbal acts are emblems because they communicate the status of widows. Accordingly, Ekman and Fiesen conceive emblems as nonverbal acts with a direct verbal translation that is known by most members of a culture. More importantly, emblems have a set of precise meaning which are understood by all the members of a culture or subculture and the relationship between an emblem’s form and meaning is often described as arbitrary (P. Ekman and W. Fiesen, 1969, p. 65). Following this, the different nonverbal acts that indicate communication in the corpus are emblems since they have an agreed, conventional meaning which is shared in the community and in this trend, they have a direct verbal equivalent in the community and are culture-bound. They are therefore, what Bourdieu (1977) frames as symbolic practices that have a communicative value within cultural habitus.

## 1.2. Performative Non-verbal Markers of Authority

As noted by Butler, Performativity consists in repeated acts that sustain social norms. (J. Butler, 1990, p.140). It, therefore, can be seen that beyond non-verbal semiotic of cultural identity, one can notice other indicators of nonverbal communication that are imposed upon people namely windows in the corpus among which silence as in this utterance:

- (6) Here on this road, widows were **free to raise their voices like birds** just released from captivity and returning to the village. (*Lonely Days*, p. 21)

The utterance above implies that silence is the norm imposed upon widows and shows widows subordination to patriarchal authority. In this trend; and to borrow from Bourdieu, silence acts as a “symbolic power” (P. Bourdieu, 1991, p.55) since it reflects patriarchal or social dominance that encodes authority without words. The vocation of silence imposed on widows conveys the meaning

of submission and muffling. Altogether, it permits to understand that widows are not free say whatever they want or to express an opinion. Silence is imposed on widows and it is therefore a nonverbal language that communicates societal treatment of widows and it also symbolizes control and limitation of widows' agency. This goes to Austin's opinion when he argues that "to say something is in full normal sense to do something." (J. Austin, 1962, p.94). It can be then understood that words do not simply describe reality but they do something. In this perspective, silence imposed on widows is a negative performative. It enacts as obedience or submission to patriarchal authority.

Another marker of nonverbal communication of authority lies in elders' gestures:

- (7) Everything went like clock words at the village square. The elders **noded** their heads in satisfaction (*Lonely Days*, p.110)

Dealing with gestures, it is worth mentioning that any gesture is purposefully done and oriented. This view meets Goffman's view according to which "The gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all." (Goffman, 1967, p.91). It means that the simple act of nodding as mentioned in the utterance carries a deep social meaning. It operates as a performative marker of ratification and validation proving thus elders' authority. Moreover, the node of the elders represents a form of symbolic power in the words of Bourdieu that take place through natural practices that give them efficacy in maintaining social hierarchies:

Symbolic power ; as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization ; is a power that can be exercised only if it is recognized, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary. (P. Bourdieu, 1991, p.170)

There is here, the idea that gestures like nodding are used to legitimate social proceedings and in this very specific situation, the nodding constitutes approval or functions as an indexical sign of validation. Only this gesture is needed because it informs that there is a consent; and it is effective because members of the community recognize it as such. In this perspective, it is a binding act, an act that is performed by those endowed with power and this act itself expresses authority.

- (8) Yarami turned round and **bowed** to the elders who sat **speechless** and overwhelmed. She grimaced at the three widows with a hesitating countenance and began **picking her way back** to the house, leaving everybody under the odan tree gazing in petrified stupidity (*Lonely Days*, p. 116)

There are also some gestures such as: bowing, grimacing, and leaving in silence only to quote these performed by Yarami. These gestures can be read as nonverbal language of performative acts of resistance that are meant to deconstruct the myths around widowhood, respect, and community judgment. Butler tells us that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." (Butler, 1993, p.2). On this standpoint, through gestures, Yarami

instantiates her authority. She asserts her own right to command respect. These gestures must be interpreted denotatively.

The bowing for example instead of signifying respect or submission, should be decoded as a nonverbal language of personal autonomy; the reclamation of her own dignity. Furthermore, grimacing is a nonverbal language of withdrawal and rejection of what widows undergo in the society. It conveys a refusal to conform to the social role dictated for women in this context. In addition, the gesture of "Picking her way back" implies her will of detachment so as to recover dignity. In so doing it is an act of communal practices' rejection for the affirmation of her agency; hence her authority. The elders sitting "speechless" and "overwhelmed"; people "gazing in petrified stupidity" are gesture that convey shock through the dismantlement of the myth of the obedient widow. These acts stand for Yarami that they have lost control and authority on her and that she is asserting her own authority. It can be seen through Yarami's gestures, a challenge to patriarchal order, a shift of the balance of power and authority in her favor.

## 2. Non-verbal Language as Symbols

Non-verbal language are linguistic signs that are purposefully used to communicate viewpoints symbolically. In fact, "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image." (F. Saussure, 1916/1983, p.66). As admitted by Saussure, a sign unites a signifier and a signified. This to say in the words of Saussure that the nonverbal cue is expressive since it unites a signifier or form to the concepts or signified and as such, the non-verbal marker is a symbol that communicates meaning.

### 2.1. Physical Positioning and Rituals as Visual Syntax of Subjugation

Visual syntax refers to the different systems of visible signs or symbolic acts that communicate information. In this perspective, Hodge and Kress (1988) assert the following:

Signs and messages; the subject matter of semiotics; must always be situated within the context of social relations and processes.... Each producer of a message relies on its recipients for it to function as intended. (R; I.V. Hodge & G. R. Kress, 1988, p.4)

For them, all semiotic systems are embedded in social relations and can be considered as a grammar or system of meaning that is socially grounded. From this, it is understandable that practices are socially rooted and shared. The physical positioning indicates treatments widows socially undergo and by so, it positions them in the social order as can be seen the marginality of widows in the social order through their physical positioning in communal settings in the following utterance:

- (9) Yarami was made to sit at the edge of the group, where she could hardly be heard. (*Lonely Days*, p. 45)

Through this physical positioning which clearly shows that Yarami as a widow sits at the periphery during public sittings, one can notice a kind of marginalization on account of her widow status. The

sitting at the periphery is a visual speech act of social relations that help understand on the one hand that; in so doing; it is to silence widows, to caricature them as without honorific statute so as not to have a word to say and on the other hand to exclude them from the society. The physical positioning represents a nonverbal assertion of social system over women. It permits to see that oppression is not articulated through words but it is enacted through nonverbal language or iconic signs that function as signs and acts. Moreover, other indexical signs such as oath-taking point to the visual syntax of women subjugation:

- (10) They asked Yarami **to swear by the ancestors** that she had no hand in Ajumobi's death. Her heart troubled as she was led before **the shrine**. (*Lonely Days*, p. 61)

Taking oath, the shrine are indexical signs showing rituals and function like "culturemes" where widows are taken with a binding social force to act. Culturemes is defined as: "any portion of cultural activity or non-activity perceived through sensible and intelligible signs with symbolic value." (F.Poyatos, 2002, p.27). As defined, these actions of swearing, being before the shrine are cultural activities that speak the language of widows' subjugation and humiliation. In asking widows to swear is to force them to act against their will under the social force. One can ascertain the patterned system of visible signs that materializes coercion, control and domination that are communicated. It can undoubtedly be said that authority of village elders' is exercised and communicated under rituals.

## 2.2. Outfits as Signifiers of Widows' Identity

Non-verbal languages are markers of identity. In fact, identity is something which is socially constructed and attributed; and that permits to recognize individuals in a given community. This conception is shared by Hall who posits that "cultural identity ... is a matter of becoming as *well as of being*. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture." (S.Hall, 1996, p.4) It is therefore obvious that as such, identity is perceived through signs that permit public recognition. Outfits for example are visible markers of identity namely widows' identity:

- (11) Her **garments** were no longer the bright, flowing clothes of her youthful days; the colorless cloths signaled her as one set apart (*Lonely Days*, p. 27)

- (12) : The widows sat in the corner, their **labankada caps** pulled low, as if to remind them of their collective fate ( *Lonely Days* , p. 41)

Identity can be understood as a distinctive element that permits to make difference. Drawing on this point, "Images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these ... constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification." (R. Barthes, 1967, p.45). With regard to the proceeding, it can; therefore be deduced from the point of view of semiology or semiotics that clothing is a system of signs and the widow's outfit can be read as a code that transmits meaning about her social condition. In utterance (11), the garments inscribe a social identity upon widows since they carry a collective cultural meaning. These garments attribute a particular status to those people wearing them to be recognizable accordingly. Moreover, other symbolic mechanisms materialize identity. In (12) the "labankada" or the cap-picking ceremony

devoted to and imposed on widows for their remarriage; is a traditional ceremony that stands as a visible sign of status; an index of identity expression because it encodes significance and communicates widowhood status.

### 2.3. Kinesics and Silence as Habitus and Control

Non-verbal languages function as a symbolic system that communicates meaning without words. Kinesics represents gestures, postures and facial expressions all of which are culturally and socially meaningful. Thus, “no body movement or expression is without meaning in the context in which it appears.” (R. Birdwhistell, 1970, p.158). As mentioned by Birdwhistell, Kinesics is a structured form of non-verbal language that functions as a symbolic mechanism of social control:

(13) *The elder **waved his hand toward** Yarami, a gesture that told her she had no right to speak* (Lonely Days, p. 52)

The elder’s gesture of hand waving as described in (13) is a kinesics that expresses forbiddance. In fact, for Birdwhistell (1970, p.158) “no body movement or expression is without meaning in the context in which it appears.” Thus, one can see that the elder’s movement embodies authority and control. The ultimate goal of waving hand is to intimidate Yarami so as to establish a patriarchal control over the addressee: asking the addressee to keep quiet. The silence is therefore a weapon imposed on people to marginalize and control them as can be seen in the following:

(14) *No widow **dared raise her voice**; their silence was the law of the land* (Lonely Days, p. 71)

Silence imposed on women is what Bourdieu’s (1991) termed as a ‘symbolic violence’ and is a subordination internalized as habitus among widows. The silence stands here as a marginalization tool that is used to reinforce dominance and control. We can therefore distinguish the silence of disgust which consists in being silent because one does not like something and the enforced silence which parallels with alignment with authority through non-verbal acquiescence and the later functions as habitus as noted : “The habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures.” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72). Kinesics and silence are culturally loaded and can be considered as part of this embodied habitus because they are internalized modes of conduct used as symbolic resources of authority control within the society.

### 3. Nonverbal Languages as Revelators and Constructors of Social Realities

Non-verbal languages such as gestures, bodily postures, dress codes, and silences are systems of meaning that reveal and construct social realities. They participate in the discursive production of meaning and help understand how language in its non-verbal form permits to uncover power relations in the social relations.

#### 3.1. Revealing Patriarchal Authority and Dominance through Nonverbal Cues

Nonverbal cues contain implicit power relations in which patriarchal authority is expressed as in (13) when the village elder imposed silence on Yarami: “The elder waved his hand toward Yaremi,



a gesture that told her she had no right to speak". Through this gesture, it can be noticed elders' dominance on women in particular on widows. It is also possible to understand through this act that hand waving is a nonverbal language that structures the discourse of authority. It is put that: "no bodily movement is without meaning; each gesture participates in a structured communicative system" (R. Birdwhistell (1970, p.158). From this premise, it can therefore, be ascertained that kinesics is a speech act that operates in the syntax of power. In doing so, it is a revelator of authority expression and dominance that characterizes the relationships between widows and the community in general. This is also perceptible in (5) "We pardoned those who asked the barber to cut our hair to its roots and those who forced us to confess to sins we did not commit". The air cutting and the enforced confession are symbols that vehicle imposition by means of a superior authority. Non-verbal cues expose the hidden structures of power, making the invisible visible and the unspoken spoken through symbolic signs.

### 3.2. Conveying Marginalization through Nonverbal Languages

Authority imposition and dominance are fathers of marginalization. They deprive people of their agency and place them in a passive and non-honorific position as in (14) "In the gathering, *no widow dared raise her voice; their silence was the law of the land*". One can notice that the silencing of women namely widows in the society is a fact that situates opinions vis a vis their being, their position in the social hierarchy. Silence imposed on widows embeds marginalization. It pictures their exclusion and ability to have a word to say. Moreover, there is an expressive nonverbal that describe this marginalization as in:

(15) With her head bent, she sat quietly among the villagers, a picture of **silent endurance**" (*Lonely Days*, p. 64)

The notion of bowing illustrates the marginalization of women. Bowing communicates submission, social subordination and subjugation through which social hierarchies is revealed. Those practices can be referred as habitus: habitus "inscribes social hierarchies into the body, naturalizing inequality through bodily hexis." (P. Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87). Obviously, widows have a subordinate identity and status. They are considered as second class citizens in the society because they are denied any discursive agency and all this are understandable by means of nonverbal cues.

### 3.3. Nonverbal Languages as Acts of Redefinition and Resistance

Nonverbal cues communicate meanings that are polysomic in nature that is why Eco emphasizes that "signs are inherently open to multiple readings and reinterpretations." (U. Eco, 1976, p. 178). The multiplicity of signs interpretation permits to see some nonverbal languages on different angles. Gestures and silence allow room for redefinition and subtle resistance. Thus, the silence of Yarami in some situations is not submission to patriarchal authority but more importantly is a sign of resistance. In this utterance (16) "She uttered no word, but in her stillness was the strength of a woman who would not be broken" (*Lonely Days*, p. 89), one can see that her silence is a contestation, a resistance to the pressure of culture that wants her to remarry. In addition to resistance, she uses nonverbal cues to redefine herself as can be noted in this utterance:

(17) yarami was already resolved. For her, there was going back...Give these bag caps to the baboon.....she mumbled to herself,not to yaram (*Lonely Days* ,p.116)

(18) She threw off the ipele, which circled her neck, her eyes dimmed with tears of accumulated injustice (*Lonely Days*, p.141)

In, (17) the “bag cap” is the symbol of widows’ new marriage similarly to the ‘ipele’ in (18) which expresses widows’ identity. The gesture of giving and throwing off is a kinesics that show self-determination, her resistance to oppression widows undergoes and to redefine herself as a free woman who has a word to say concerning her future and who rejects social stigmatization. In doing so, she asserts her agency through a quiet protest to oppressive tradition and practices. Nonverbal language can be mobilized for resistance and redefinition. Her controlled silence and reserved gestures signify autonomy for widows and their gestures and they represent counter-signs that challenge hegemonic codes so as to rewrite widow’s identities against patriarchal prescriptions.

## Conclusion

The exploration of nonverbal languages in Bayo Adebowale’s *Lonely Days* reveals that meaning in communication extends far beyond the realm of words. Through gestures, bodily postures, clothing, silence, and spatial positioning, there is a construction of a universe in which social realities are revealed. On the basis of discourse and semiotic analysis, the study has demonstrated that nonverbal cues serve as mirrors through which culture is reflected. The indicators of nonverbal behavior such as the widows’ black garments, shaved heads, and physical marginalization vehicle identity and social hierarchy within the community. They are instruments of symbolic control that function as emblems to communicate social meanings that words often fail to convey. Moreover, silence and gestures are not simple facts but performative acts that legitimize authority and naturalize social inequalities.

The study, therefore, confirms Bourdieu’s view of symbolic power as the invisible mechanism through which domination is exercised and accepted within habitus. However, within this same nonverbal system of control lies the potential for resistance and redefinition. Thus, considering Yarami’s gestures and attitudes, one notice that these nonverbal cues are no more non-verbal language of subjugation but silent languages of agency affirmation. Here the nonverbal signs are inscribed in their polysemy since meaning is not fixed. Thus, silence is no more seen as mere absence but a silence that shows the quest for dignity and self-determination. Nonverbal communication is a powerful discourse that reveals, enforces, and contests social realities. Silent symbols help uncover power structure and identity so as to help understand that they are resources that embed meaning.

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