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Archive of Silence: on intergenerational memories of gendered trauma

Jana Kriechbaum

Part 1 | an autoethnographic letter

Foreword: On silence, and walls

There is a saying that I remember, although I cannot recall where from, saying that there is a connection between every second generation of family members; this essentially asserts that grandmothers and granddaughters have a long enough gap in between their lives to provide ground for a different quality of relationship to flourish. It builds a connection that can overcome the walls that some daughters have built between themselves and their mothers. Granddaughters do not feel this need for walls towards their grandmothers since the distance in time, in space, and often in place, is given through the nature of the generational interval. This saying certainly seems to be true for my family. And while I had just begun to write to my grandmother, it turned out to become a letter that went through the walls, passed by the generation that places us in comforting distance, returning to myself.

Dear Granny,

I see you throwing away your wedding dress. For me, this act illustrates the moment when I suddenly understood something. I think. Or rather, I understood it when you told me in a completely indifferent voice, like it was the most casual thing in the world, that, after almost fifty years of marriage, you had just thrown it into the bin. You were talking about it as if you were talking about this old pair of running shoes that had always hurt you when you would wear them. It equally seemed to not mean anything to you anymore. I could glimpse a spark of gladness in your eyes, the sort of gladness that comes with trashing something you had no longer wanted in your life for a

while. Like the easing of weight from a past that had visibly passed. In this moment, I understood that your life was never about yourself. That is how I saw it. I saw you.

It was not solely the anecdote about this white, abandoned dress made of fine lace no longer sleeping in the cupboard that astounded me, but the determination that led to this. Your wedding dress had to move out—you had coexisted in intimate proximity for too many years. It lived in the old cupboard, keeping memories of times long past, paled as the colours of its wild mix of fabrics. You, sleeping in the room underneath and the dress upstairs—forgotten, but not forgotten enough. Anyway, it was not the demise of the dress in the first place but the way you said it that struck me. I could not really understand what had gotten into you. I wondered how it made you feel the day you decided to get rid of it, you must have felt estranged to the day you wore it for the first and only time, mustn't you? Nothing had remained of the young bride other than this dress. I recognised your action, understanding what I could not understand.

And still, it made me contemplate your life from an entirely new perspective. I'm probably thinking about this loss more than you did. The loss of a dress, the materialised memory of an initiation ritual for life on the side of a husband, occurred to me as the first act of emancipation I have seen you perform since I have known you. It was this resoluteness of your decision that made an impression on me, that was so different to how I knew you. The image I had of you. Or the image of this younger version of you that hangs on the wall in your bedroom. But how well do I know you, in the end?

This piece of fabric represents an inconvenient witness of a marriage that you do not want to be part of anymore. That is what I read into: this act of separating from something that solely belongs to your past, not to your present. To me, it enacts a symbolic divorce. A divorce from the material dress as an annulment of that promise before the family, the people, the state, maybe God. It was an elegant white dress, sewed by your favourite sister. That is about all I know about it. It ended up sewing you into a life that you did not want to live anymore, didn't it? I would not dare to ask you, as I would not want to unsettle you. Consequently, complying to my intuition to make sense of your action without unsettling your fragile relief, I go on trying to understand you in my oh-so-limited capacity, on my own.

You were raised to live up to expectations that were not yours, to serve others. Others' needs come first in your life. Always. That is, at least, how I knew you. Did this attitude make you forget about yourself? You somehow disappeared without anyone around you even noticing it. Something inside you left, only a husk remained. How did that happen, and when? Have I ever known you before you left, or have we missed each other in time? I can see you in front of my inner eye, I was young, and you were young too. I kept these memories of you in mind. Now I cannot recognise this person I thought I knew anymore, as much as a granddaughter can know her grandmother. But maybe I did not know you at all. Something makes me think that you might not have known yourself too well either. Again, I question my written thoughts: who am I to think this, to question you, or your life? I feel I am not allowed to make such assumptions at all. Still, I go on with my take on your story that I do not know if I have the right to build up, to write down, but somehow need to understand. Can you understand that?

Was it your way to say something in annihilating this wedding dress? Your solo run. A silent protest. A way to avoid confronting anyone with your emotions, your crisis, but still not wanting to continue the same as before. You, making a difference. You, living a life without this dress.

In fact, I never actually saw you throw away your wedding dress. I did not witness the moment you eradicated this part of your past that goes before my existence. Though I remember it, your wedding dress, a touch of nothing but a heavy symbol of decision-making that eventually made you give yourself up. Was it an act of your own? An attempt to change your life eventually, or was it already too late at that point? Without a doubt this removal meant more to you than sorting out your wardrobe. You meant to express more when you spontaneously decided to free your closet of this old, useless piece of cloth, an innocent wedding dress that you once told me some would even pass on for generations. Much rather, it was your way of sorting out your past. At least, that is what it means to me. I cannot help but parse this act with overtones of symbolic detachment, one that you performed for yourself to mark the lapse of your married life stage, the stage of being a woman, employed, and mother of two; by discarding your dress you leave these things behind you. Or, better still, you were facing the same lack of choice in this matter as you had in retiring. By this time, nothing would fit together anymore, would it? I imagine it must have felt like you lost an essential part of yourself. Still, on the surface, it seemed as if nothing had changed fundamentally in your life. You continued living in the same house with the black and white picture of you in this dress, that now is not anymore. You, next to your husband, smiling, unsettled, at the camera. You were only

twenty-one, pregnant with my mom underneath the layers of bleached fabric, and about to begin your life as a wife in your mother-in-law's house and farm; a place, your new home, where you would receive disapproval from the family that you had just joined. This was only back in 1969, and your full-time job must have been your personal escape, a way to live a life on your own, to find yourself as an earning woman outside of a family that gave you a hard time. That is what I know from the stories I have been told.

We, your granddaughters, we do not come back anymore. Even if we did not mean to, we left you behind when you must have needed us. We left without even having known you. Just like you do not really know us. We never write letters to each other, other than birthday cards. We talk on the phone sometimes, but mostly about the weather and sports. That is what you like to talk about. You, reduced into the role of a wife, a housewife. The latter is a job that you had never chosen, certainly never wanted to be sentenced to, but slipped into, wearing a white dress when agreeing to a contract that you did not see an option to withdraw from. One day, there was no way forward other than leaving yourself behind. Though who am I to know what had really moved you?

I have never written to you, granny. And even the idea of it makes me feel, makes me notice how little we share with each other, how we never talked about anything that mattered to either of us. When I think of you, there is so much silence about yourself that I then begin to doubt that there is a self hiding deep inside you. As if you would have left your body at some point in your life, indiscernible. A disturbing silence remained, a silence of not living for yourself and having given up the very idea of it. I only see self-sacrifice for a husband that takes your services for granted; I see sacrifice to traditions that solidified around you while you have not; I see assimilation into a life that does not suit you after all. The wedding dress did not fit in your world anymore. Silence remained as the only alternative, in the only way to live this life that you knew and worked hard to build up. So, you stayed, but left as well—silently. It must have turned out to be an unbearable alternative, though. At least from the point of your retirement; that must have led to the loss of your primary identity as a working woman. That must have been an important achievement for yourself. More than I can imagine, really. You loved your office job, your life outside of the home, being away from the farm.

Sometime later, you told me that you have always been told to not speak up as a girl. I assume it must have been your mother, my great grandma, teaching you silence. You explained to me that you simply had not learned to speak out, to ever say how you felt. This conversation was the sincerest moment of self-reflection you entrusted to me. And now, so many years later, it seems like it really has become impossible for you to express how you feel, to feel anything, really. I had also never thought about asking you much, knowing in a strange way I would not get an answer. I cannot say how I feel about you, about our thin relationship, but it makes me write these lines, periodically call you, check-in on you, and, in your absence, try to understand you. Or better, search for ways to make sense of everything, the little that I know about you.

Writing these lines—trying to understand how you must have felt, how you got to where I see you today—has stirred something unexpected in me. I found myself relating to your experience, remembering suddenly this one moment in a period of my life that I have wanted to forget and that I have gradually, successfully moved into my subconscious. In this particular moment, I found myself on the ground of a sunken ship, a failing relationship where I could not breathe nor get out. I found myself in an emotional state that led me to the sort of self-denial that made you eventually lose yourself. And whilst my mind was gasping for breath, in a state so desperate that I did not recognize myself anymore, I could relate to you clearly. It was a time when I also became silent when I always felt like I could speak to anyone, when I started on a journey of self-alienation because I had begun to sacrifice my life for someone else's. I thought this was what love meant at that point. Even though I was not in your shoes at all, I wasn't married, or settled with a family—I haven't really been in your position in that sense, yet—I could not see a way out. Although I had learned to speak out for myself and no one had urged me to keep silent, I had stopped articulating how difficult things had become over time. It just seemed pointless, dull, and above all incomprehensible for anyone outside of the four walls we lived in. So, I gave up even mentioning it to anyone. Instead, I shrouded myself in silence voluntarily. Unable to speak, I began to disown myself. There was this one day in my then-life without colours, I remember it vividly now. I was on my own in the living room, playing this role of suburban existence so convincingly, when this feeling of hopelessness took control over me. A strange mood struck me, making me think that there was no way out of this silence other than to disappear. And in the next moment, when disappearing forever felt an alternative to packing my stuff and walking out the door, I thought, this must be the feeling that you felt before me. I suddenly could relate to you. Out of the blue, something that I had always thought about as something that would never make sense for me, merged in a logic of silence, isolation, and despair.

Regardless of our generational distance, I made this connection in my mind, even though I tried to erase it shortly after. Eventually, I was able to leave this life that was erasing me from the inside, I stepped out of a relationship that wasn't for me. Me, still young, wayward, and supported enough. I left before something inside me was forced to slip away silently. I left on my own, an act without speaking, without reflecting. How could I have forgotten about it, and only now, in writing about it, realise that your story mirrors inside mine? I wonder if there is an intergenerational understanding that you and I share when speaking in silence. While I dismiss the idea that we got trapped in our past, I keep thinking about the possibility that our silences are akin. Or, was this whole idea, relating your archive of silence that I, in fact, cannot know—that I rather made up with all my imagination—with all the clues that I have got, merely a detour to find out about my own silenced archive?

I now see your wedding dress whispering towards me, reminding me to take another turn in my life. Always. I will keep it next to this feeling of utter desperation as two, now absent keepsakes that represent symbols for lives that we wanted to detach from, each of us in our own way and at our own pace. You and me, relating in silent affinity.

Part 2 | Concept

I: Me as an archive

This piece of work certainly represents the most personal project that I have ever shared with anyone. Preceding the personal narrative of this work, I conceptualised the idea of an intergenerational archive of silence that I find myself carrying out within the framework of a feminist methodology. To understand one's body, its memories, or feelings as embodied data and make these the sources of knowledge means troubling the taken-for-granted, and outlines a core element of feminist research practices (Ettorre, 2017, p. 4; Puwar, 2021, p. 11; Page, 2017, p. 26; Harcourt et al., 2022, p. 9). In *Carrying as Method* (2021), Puwar describes how all sorts of archives can be rooted in a researcher's life or history; we 'carry' them with us, so to speak (ibid., p. 1, 2). It was also Nirmal Puwar who encouraged me to dive into this intergenerational archive through letter writing. Writing a letter to your grandmother that you are never going to send may strike many as a rather

unusual research practice—as in, radically opposed to the hegemonic understanding of doing academic research (Ettorre, 2017, p. 10, 11; Harcourt et al., 2022, p. 12). Following this feminist mode of researching, my subjective perspective presents the center of this archival body (Ettorre, 2017, p. 6). Drawing on the definition of subjectivity put forward by Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty, ‘human lived experience and the physical historical political content of that experience’ (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992, p. 1), I am researching what I call an intergenerational archive of silence that I access through my embodied experience. It is a yet embryonic repertoire reflecting blurred memories, empathising with my interpretation of the story of my grandmother, an imagined story that is also my story, and maybe your story as well. At least, I hope to connect these embodied experiences to other archives of silence.

In line with Ann Cvetkovich’s conception of ‘Archives of Trauma’ as an archive incorporating the ‘unspeakable and unrepresentable’ (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7), the ‘Archive of Silence’ also comprises inaudible emotional responses. To be clear, archives consisting of culturally encoded feelings have nothing to do with archives in the common understanding of that term (*ibid.*). Thus, working with an embodied archive and emotional memories may require unconventional and creative practices of research, be those performances, photography, or letter writing (*ibid.*; Puwar, 2021, p. 11). Thinking of myself as an archive that is both collecting first-hand emotions but also absorbing experiences of those around me, I was following a trace of silence that I thought was not mine yet had become part of me. The ‘Archive of Silence’ forms an exploratory assemblage that bridges the inside and outside of myself and the world where my own and collective experiences remain helplessly entangled (Singh, 2018, p. 29, 30). In this sense, my subjectivity is no more than a pinpoint in a wider ‘emotional geography’ (Harcourt et al., 2022, p. 13), marked by time of a thick social fabric, woven by culture, located at specific coordinates of history (*ibid.*, p. 4, 13). The decision to open this box that I was carrying for so long has surprised even me. From the moment that I admitted carrying this intergenerational bundle, I felt compelled to make it the subject of a research project. And throughout the process, I could feel the heaviness of its emotional weight, a weight that not one alone could carry, but one that spreads across generations. The engine driving this research is my own past. I want to unroll the cross-generational and gendered enmeshments that silence and violence in and of power relations produce, inscribed in the socio-cultural universe that I find myself being part of. In other words, I am both subject and researcher in this endeavour (Puwar, 2021, p. 5, 6). As much as this piece of work can be identified as part of the genre that is best captured under the title ‘Fictions of Feminist Ethnography’ (Visweswaran, 1994), I strive similarly toward ways of transforming the very texture of a yet disturbing silence through a fictive narrative (*ibid.*, p. 15, 16). In order to open the imaginary archive, I am entering a written conversation with my grandmother

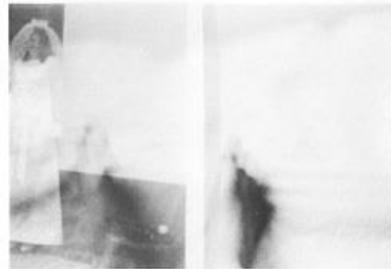
and segue into a search for experimental responses to her silence. What I find in response are my echoes. These echoes that I create working with text, imagination, and images form a language that not only exposes invisible wounds but also forgotten trauma. It is trauma amid the ordinariness of a culture that operates on the principles of a heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2006, p. 67; Page, 2017, p. 22). It is the sort of trauma that is disguised in the mundane that does not scream for attention but, on the contrary, is silent, is 'normalised through patterns and routine' (Page, 2017, p. 23). Here, I am drawing again on Ann Cvetkovich and her book 'An Archive of Feelings', where she outlines trauma as a 'socially situated political violence' (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3) in which the emotional and social memory of pain, caused from inside and outside, amalgamate (ibid., p. 18). Breaking Cvetkovich's definition of trauma down to its gendered angle, I find its traces hidden in the collective memory of lived experiences in my familial and personal environment, in female bodies across generations, and in myself. I, too, understand trauma as an intersubjective category that intertwines political and emotional notions into the fabric of the everyday that reveals itself in manifold kinds of affective reactions (ibid., p. 19). With this project, I try to evoke a dialogue with two silences that I recognize as affective reactions and intend to flesh out through a reflexive response from a feminist standpoint. An experiment in which I stand with one foot as a granddaughter and with the other as a researcher. I begin this research journey at the 'borderlands of embodied emotions' (Ettorre, 2017, p. 4), located between my grandmother, myself, and the social world that surrounds us, trying to write a letter and to re-frame faded black-and-white photos from our family album. From my embodied archive, I learn to look differently at a gendered culture of silencing silence, patterns that reach far beyond myself, my body-memory of feelings. Focussing on denied emotions across generations and different temporalities, this piece reaches beyond the resurgence of painful reactions, of paying attention to invisible wounds and scars (Berlant, 2011, p. 122). With time, the layers of the vibrant memories begin to shift and move in response to my intuitive writing, pulling the flesh underneath to the surface. Certainly, this project has become both a (inter)personal and feminist reaction to the intimate layers that constitute pain and anger in Sara Ahmed's terms. It is a reaction to uncomfortable and repressed feelings that are propelled by an urge to transform emotions retrospectively (Ahmed, 2014, p. 174). As I am re-reading my memories of both lived and narrated experiences, I am shedding new light onto this silent assemblage (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992, p. 7). It becomes indistinct how much of them belongs to me and what already is part of the generations before me—the boundaries between mine and others were never defined (Singh, 2018, p. 31). Carefully, I am approaching this sleeping and close-mouthed archive that unfolds like a dream, that I awake through anecdotes and images of two generations trying to make up for the 'missed understandings' (Visweswaran, 1994, p. xii) between us. After some time, I notice that the

archival body of forgotten feelings is changing from inside; it certainly does not feel the same anymore.



you keep your feelings for yourself
and when you scream
you scream in silence
you scream inwards
so that no one would hear you
you scream to not fall apart

though your silence is not silent
it is loud
it is everywhere
wraps you
keeps you distant
all alone



II: Listening to silence as a mode of disruption

My research on the 'Archive of Silence' has been developed through the practice of creative, reflexive, and autoethnographic writing (Page, 2017, p. 25; Ettore, 2017; Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography, according to Ellis, builds on 'research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). The core tool I used when working with autoethnography in my bodily archive became what I call *listening* to the silence. Listening happened again and again through silent encounters with my grandmother, composed of remembering, collecting, and connecting individual parts in the form of unfinished letters, notes, and analogue photos. In an imaginary space that developed in between the two of us, I was intending to trace an intergenerational history of socially inscribed violence that remained hidden in silence, invisible and unarticulated, but present. By listening to it, I wanted to apprehend our shared language, a language that, with its cultural inscriptions, is a performative action on its own, much more than the disruption of speech (Butler, 2011, p. 237; Guillaume and Schweiger, 2019, p. 97). Silences often get lost in a loud world, where we, in the first place, tend to hear those who voice themselves. Even more than speech, silence 'requires a more nuanced, grounded

understanding' (Parpart and Parashar, 2019, p. 4) of its context and particular attention to gendered relations and similar unequal power structures (ibid., p. 3, 4). When complicating the dichotomy of silence and speech and listening to silence as a mode of active communication too, the sound of the world might shift (Guillaume and Schweiger, 2019, p. 101). I sensed this already in the microcosm of my embodied archive.

When taking the method of carrying (Puwar, 2021) further, I began to decode my grandma's story of silence as I imagined it. Unpacking silence is not a straightforward endeavour; in the first place, it implies listening inwards, or backwards, beyond our own archives of language, entering an affective universe that is not subjected to the codes of the spoken word (Guillaume and Schweiger, 2019, p. 97–98). For this purpose, I adopted the concept of 'intimacy in research' (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 1), which enabled me to trawl and unearth the body of this archive that I carry, translating it both intuitively and systematically into a fabric of shared knowledge. Additionally, I used visual artefacts, frozen memories from two generations that build layers to approach the 'unknowing' (Page, 2017, p. 28) of the archive (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 11). Initially, I was only seeing the subtle processes of violence of not speaking unfold, such as not being provided with the tools and conditions to speak (Puwar, 2021, p. 11; Page, 2017, p. 23). But soon, I had already advanced much deeper into the archive, where sensitive narratives dwelled, the sphere of the not- (wanting to be)-known. From that point on, the 'Archive of Silence' developed an increasingly intergenerational and personal dimension. Proceeding in a process of learning by doing, I remembered and reconnected fragments of her story through my personal experiences of silence. Hence, delving into a deeply fragile endeavour, I was following the trace of vulnerability that connected our stories, I was not 'questioning what is known, and what might come from an opening in not knowing' (Page, 2017, p. 14) anymore.

In materialising the archival content and re-assembling biographical abstracts of performed silence, something else happened: new echoes resonated, revealed new material of my own social coordinates of lived experiences, a silence that I had unknowingly reproduced and never reflected upon. I felt shaken when I was reaching a point when I remembered my own silence at a moment in my life when things did not fit into a logic rationalisable in words. Consequently, new autoethnographic layers emerged from the interwoven reading of experiences that I tried to make sense of, eventually breaking through into a deeper level of reflection (Aragon, 2021, p. 4). I was able to build a sense of empathy toward an understanding of silence, which is a vivid part of this form of ethnographic engagement that traces a fictive arch (Ellis, 2004, p. 125, 126) between my

grandma and myself. However, there certainly is a wider impact of restoring emotions beyond the subjective, both a political and social dimension of our silences and their echoes.

Building on Mariam Fraser's and Nirmal Puwar's work, my piece resonates with the derivation of intimacy in research as '*stretched out*' (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 8, emphasis author). It stretches out both in the sense of what is considered 'researchable', as well as thinking of the dimensions of time, geographical distance, and language that assume additional distance (ibid.). In researching silence that is stretching out among generations, I have not produced an entirely unfiltered piece of work but have woven vulnerable fabric through the translation of my own experiences as a researcher-carrying granddaughter (ibid., p. 14; Puwar, 2021, p. 5). In this sense, opening this archive of silence and listening became an 'undoing' of forgotten and sealed silences when transforming into what, to me, feels like a silence that breathes again. Making the intergenerational archive accessible to a wider audience, I am entering the grey zones that intimacy in research implies. It allows me 'to challenge the boundaries between creativity and analysis; spatial and temporal proximity and distance; freedom and censorship; subjects and objects' (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 1) as the authors characterise intimate research subjects. Precisely this intimacy between researcher and researched makes this research disruptive too. It follows the mode of telling, which Tiffany Page calls a 'method of disruption' (Page, 2017, p. 23). Making all those hidden elements pivotal, which in conventional research tends to be cut out and erased as much as possible, offers an approach to research that is oriented towards the pace and rhythm of the subjectivities, bodies, and stories involved (ibid.). I'm researching upside down, so to say, as I'm moving back and forth in time, listening as the archives strike up their chant, seeking for a fuller body of knowledge that does not cover or cut but allows an unexpected imprint to be left in the texture of research (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 2). I'm finding myself helplessly involved in an ambiguous archive, where I must question my own boundaries as I drive into 'the *dynamics* of display and disclosure' (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 4, emphasis author), linked to questions of care that arise when disrupting archived silence of a collective nature (Harcourt et al., 2022, p. 14). It is this vulnerability of researching at the '*in between space*' (Ettorre, 2017, p. 4, emphasis author) that constitutes the very heart of my investigation.



you don't do it for you
but for the many one's
who don't know you
cannot hear you through your silence
& shadow that you cannot shake off

but what can I do when I cannot do anything
I can do nothing but one thing
understand you
even though I don't want to
I do understand your silence
strongly



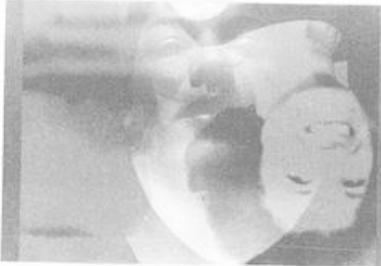
III: Epistemological violence and silent ambiguities

Taking on this project inevitably meant confronting ethical constraints and raising questions of personal and familial boundaries. I'm pondering where the line between freedom and censorship runs, remembering intimate moments that are familiar, accessible to me, but at the same time want to be shielded, as a family tacitly wants to know their secrets protected (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 7; Kuhn, 2002, p. 1, 2). Thus, I must navigate along this blurred line, developing stylistic devices that allow me to create distance and abstraction on the one hand, and identification and tangibility on the other. Making use of fiction, which I blend into my autobiographical writing, I tell of an imagined family, of a fantasised truth, so to say (ibid., p. 1). It is a totally new land to me, to expose and explore multiple layers of intergenerational twists and narrative features that allow me to proceed with this research ethically. I find legitimacy to advance my research as I recall my initial motivation, to alter personal traumatic experiences connected by the sounds of silence and potentially generate a broader emotional understanding across generations. To some extent, I play with the unforeseeable in my decision to follow what I was carrying; there are risks of both epistemic and symbolic violence that I can try to mitigate but cannot completely exclude (Page, 2017, p. 16; Puwar, 2021, p. 5). I question myself throughout the process, assessing and reassessing whether I have crossed the undefined border that separates vulnerable stories from violence (Page, 2017, p. 24). I

insist, holding onto an optimism, an idea of reparative writing driven by ‘meticulous curiosity’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 124), that there must be a way of processing, of speaking that allows for another term, an alternative between violence of knowing and the violence of not wanting to know. When I am stressing the gendered notion of silence, I include the violence of staying silent that women like me and women I know are acquainted with. At the same time, I know about the safety and the comfort it can bring to keep silence for oneself, how it can provide shelter sometimes. So, when I open a silent archive, I am aware that I am exposing it to the unknown and, by doing that, unleashing the power of stories of silence which becomes uncomfortable, uncontrollable, and insecure at first. When opening a box of silence there is the risk to recall the pain of lifting its story buried in the past context of its time as well. To some extent, I understand this research as an attempt to take responsibility, working with a collective as well as vulnerable archive and to consciously reveal this unresolved dilemma between silence, violence, and power (Parpart and Parashar, 2019, p. 7). What carries this act of engaging with silence, a response to feelings that may reproduce injustices but also resist them, is the attempt to complicate the view of gender relations and tacit trauma by adding the weight of silence into the picture (Guillaume and Schweiger, 2019, p. 108). That becomes possible if we think of bodies as archives and listen to their memory for feelings and experiences, and their echoes that are reverberating over a lifetime, or generations even, even if our silences have been covered with empty stories and the marks of its times faded long ago.

Archives that never speak, nor forget, pose a potential source of power. Listening to silence form echoes responding to the ‘‘long emergency’ of slow violence’ (Page, 2017, p. 23) as Tiffany Page puts it (ibid., p. 22). And with no doubt, time plays a critical role when framing a transformative response to a long emergency that is rooted in silence. On the one hand, it requires endurance, geographical distance, and a supportive environment for silent archives to be willing to share their content. On the other, there is an immediacy that the responsibility of beginning a dialogue with silence postulates. The tension between these opposed temporalities forms an interplay of silence and violence. These tensions are certainly devolved into intimate research that centres on embodied knowledge (Fraser and Puwar, 2008, p. 6, 7). To me, some of these cleft feelings resemble the paradox of silent archives. Engaging with silence as an affective response to trauma, I slowly understand, silence is much more than a coping mechanism or an individual’s withdrawing action, it rather draws an ambiguity through its unsettled relation to power and isolation from speech. I notice that in between the ambivalent perceptions of silence as silenced power or silence as powerfully refusing to speak remains enough space for an archive of silence to evolve a micropolitical dimension on its own (Parpart and Parashar, 2019, p. 5, 6; Page, 2017, p. 19). It turns

out to be a complicated and incomplete matter to apprehend a way of acting through a language was not ours and yet has become part of us anyway.



I stay with the echoes of your silence
I keep them until they'll escape again
because I cannot stay silent
about your silence
I feel for you what I couldn't feel for me
escaping your shadow

as I'm listening up to your silence
I can hear my own
echoing back
can you hear me too
all I know is
you are not alone



IV: Finally, an echo on my own

As I was unpacking layers of the family archive that I'm carrying, my autoethnographic project tells of a collective experience that, in its subjective, internalised, invisible texture, hopefully does justice to what Carolyn Ellis characterises as the essence of autoethnographic writing: 'truthful, vulnerable, evocative and therapeutic' (Ellis, 2004, p. 135). It requires a sensitive reaction to structures of violence spanning across generations, including echoes of silence in a dialogue of creative writing and image collage; a practice that, as Nirmal Puwar argues, attempts to reverse trauma and generate the sort of knowledge that characterises intergenerational archives (Puwar, 2021, p. 7–9). It represents an attempt to shift silence away from individual coping strategies, uncovering vulnerability and insecurity, to reveal the layers that rest beneath, its potential power following the rhythm of history and rising over generations. In my case, opening the lid of this archive of silence and restoring an intergenerational story led me to remember and reinvent my own silence. In a balancing act between private intimacy and intimate politics, as I would call the process of making

this intuitive archive the very heart of my research. Eventually, I turned towards my own embodied memory, researching my heart, the place of my body where emotions live. In reworking the dynamics of violence, power, and emotion surrounding silences through unsent letters and obscure collaged photographs historically situated themselves, I am gently peeling off their protective layer to listen to what I was hoping to understand. These first acts of creating an echo chamber in which I would meet my grandma's silence led to the scarred texture of my own silence to emerge, reverberate and transform in an empathetic space. But can such an imagined archive really become a form of healing? Perhaps. If we succeed in making silences surface, be listened to, reclaim their significance by intertwining them with other silences, and in doing so, challenge the habit of silencing silence, then yes. What is for sure is that awaking silence is replicable, almost contagious. Taking Sara Ahmed's notions of healing wounds collectively to heart would certainly turn healing intimate trauma into a political act: 'Healing does not cover over, but exposes the wound to others: *the recovery is a form of exposure*. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 200, emphasis author).

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