



## Revealing Silences: Voiceless Traces of Gendered Trauma in Female Holocaust Survivors' Writing

LAURA MIÑANO MAÑERO\*  
*Universitat de València (Spain)*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper intends to unravel the nexus between sexual violence and silence in textual and figurative silence in female Holocaust survivors' writing. I will argue that these tropes allow authors to acknowledge and explore the nature of a gender-specific trauma. The sources under examination encompass Ruth Klüger (2001), Gisella Perl (1948), Judith Magyar-Isaacson (1990), Judith Dribben (1970) and Elzbieta Ettinger (1986), whose works significantly delve into these unspoken realms. I suggest that the tension between the endured sexual violence and the challenges of bearing witness to it is mirrored in these silences, which are infused with narrative strategies that gender the Shoah, illustrate embodied experience and reclaim the victim's agency. Though feminist Holocaust scholarship has recently turned its focus to the study of sexual violence, its imbrication with silence merits further scrutiny. My approach provides a new framework to stimulate this discussion by igniting the reflection on literary silences.

**KEYWORDS:** Holocaust; Gender; Trauma; Sexual Violence Narratives; Silence.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, when silence has been explored through the lens of rhetoric, it has been presumed to be a position of weakness and a sign of disempowerment. Yet its rhetorical force allows the author to draw the reader's attention to something that they would otherwise not notice (Grant-Davies, 2013: 2). Presence can be stated as silence, which should never be considered a semantic void. Instead, "like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions" (Schlant, 1999: 7). Authors may endow

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\**Address for correspondence:* Facultad de Filología, Traducción y Comunicación, Universidad de Valencia, Avenida Blasco Ibáñez 32, 46010, Valencia, España; e-mail: [laura.minano@uv.es](mailto:laura.minano@uv.es)

absence with meaning, leading readers to perceive figurative silences as non-accidental and contributive to the texture of the text, thus requiring their active interpretation. This applies particularly to works of literature, as readers acknowledge the existence of an aesthetic communicative situation inducing them to regard everything as potentially meaningful (Wolf, 2016). In terms of Gestalt principles of perception, silence reverses the way we separate figure from ground. According to the figure-ground principle, our perceptive world is instinctively divided into foreground and background. In literature, silence exceeds the aural dimension and penetrates the physical and visible realm, but we tend to devote more attention to words than the silences accompanying them. However, when silence works rhetorically, those spaces around and between words become the figure, forcing the audience to engage and infer their meaning (Grant-Davies, 2013: 2-3). In Holocaust literature, I suggest, female authors resort to such silence to frame experiences of sexual violence in a way that the nonhegemonic voice, conventionally relegated to the margins of the narrative, becomes the figure.

If we turn our attention to the feeling, shared by countless survivors, that language is insufficient to convey their ordeal, silence seems inherent to the Shoah. Trauma is a double wound, “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature [...] returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, 1996: 4). To come to terms with a traumatic past, trauma studies have emphasized the necessity of testimony. Following Laub, the act of bearing witness may only be fully realized if someone is listening. The listener to trauma needs to recognize and respect the victim’s voluntary and unconscious silence, understanding that silence “serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath” (Laub, 1992: 58). In literature, the limitations of representation and the ineffable nature of trauma in terms of expression by a survivor-writer, in turn, impose limits on the act of reading. Jessica Lang (2017) is adamant that unreadability is crucial to Holocaust texts, which bear within them a quality of blankness, illegibility. The concept of unreadability or textual silence may be defined as those moments of “non-illumination in the reading process –aspects of the text that simply cannot be opened, accessed, interpreted, or decoded” (2017: 3). In Lang’s ethics of unreading, the reader is compelled to recognize the silent and the illegible by respecting “that which resists being told, narrated, or represented and, consequently, that which resists being read” (2017: 28). These limitations, though unbridgeable, carry profound and symbolic meaning, elevating the position of textual silence both literarily and morally.

Thus, when it comes to reading the Holocaust, readers stand at a crossroads: not only do we need to leave room for the unreadable by acknowledging textual silence, *i.e.*, those moments of intrinsic non-fulfillment resisting any attempt of interpretation, but we also need to examine the author’s active, rhetorical use of silence, which requires us to fill the voids and bridge the gaps. This article seeks to unravel the relationship between textual and figurative

silence, theorized as literary resources that recognize the nature of a gender-specific Holocaust trauma, essentially connected to the experience of sexual violence. To conduct this study, I have selected illuminating passages from the works of Ruth Klüger, Gisella Perl, Judith Magyar-Isaacson, Judith Dribben, and Elzbieta Ettinger. Each literary rendition examines the unspoken realms of sexual violence and gender-based discrimination through different lenses. For instance, Klüger's reflective prose in *Still Alive* (2001) is explicitly addressed to a female readership, with whom the author negotiates the boundaries of gendered traumatic representation. Perl's bare and informed testimony, *I was a doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), offers an unparalleled insight into the assault on women's bodies in the *Lager*. Magyar-Isaacson's memoir *Seed of Sarah* (1990) explores female kinship and the intergenerational dialogue about the gendered trauma. In *A Girl Called Judith Strick*, Dribben (1970) conveys the events through the eyes of a teenager, exposing the extreme vulnerability of young girls. Finally, Ettinger's novel *Kindergarten* (1986) captures her Holocaust experience through fictionalized female characters who, though abused, resist their oppressors.

Though stylistically, thematically, and ontologically diverse, these works reverberate with the voiceless traces of the same underlying trauma. They reinforce each other by delving into different vertices of such trauma, demonstrating their suitability for this research. After this succinct introduction, I begin by introducing the field of gender and Holocaust studies, placing emphasis on the need to conduct a gendered reading of Holocaust literature, embedded in trauma studies. Next, I explore the concept of silence through the prism of feminist theory, focusing on its potentially empowering force in sexual violence narratives and in relation to Holocaust literature. I then offer my analysis of the examined works. First, I delve into the fullness of textual silence, as defined by Lang (2017); second, I examine the authors' figurative uses of silence, as it surfaces in various manifestations connected to voice, violence, and power. While sexual violence is a central concern in current feminist Holocaust studies, its representation through literary silences remains an under-researched area. This reflection on the iconicity of silence may, thus, allow us to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the experience of sexual abuse in the Shoah.

## 2. GENDER AND HOLOCAUST LITERARY STUDIES

Violence against women in the Holocaust has traditionally been silenced and dismissed. It was not until the mid-1980s that Joan Ringelheim (1984) exposed the risks of disregarding the gendered nature of women's victimhood and their invisibility within the dominant narrative of the Holocaust. The first scholar to speak out against this neglect and to challenge the status quo, Ringelheim was criticized for ostensibly appropriating and trivializing Jewish suffering in order to further her feminist agenda (Waxman, 2017: 1). She did, however, lay the foundations for the gendered approach that would expand in the coming years. The

groundbreaking endeavor of scholarship devoted to women's specific experiences crystallized in Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman's *Women in the Holocaust* (1998). This anthology emphasized the diversified reality of victims and explored the complexity of gender differences, offering a theoretical conceptualization that would allow scholars to critically examine women's responses to genocidal violence in different environments. Gender and Holocaust studies have evolved into an interdisciplinary field aiming to underscore the unique tribulations of women, both during and after the events, in order to obtain a fuller insight into the Shoah. While it emerged as a counter-scholarly, counter-cultural, anti-canonical, and anti-androcentric effort to challenge the overwhelmingly biased hegemonic perspective, it has finally established itself as a legitimate discipline.

The new reading of the Holocaust is "predicated on the assumption that feminists are right to see gender [...] as a system of oppression –a system that operates to subordinate women" (Waxman, 2017: 18). Gender is theorized as a constitutive element of human relationality, based on constructed differences between the sexes and primarily used to signify and shape relations of power (Scott, 1988: 42). The extreme conditions of the Shoah reinforced the significance of gender and led to a systematic assault on women, who were targeted both reproductively and sexually. In this way, the Nazis manipulated and exploited the gendered traits of women as a source of dehumanization (Waxman, 2017: 149). Thus, we need to address the fact that biological vulnerability and socially constructed roles resulted in gendered methods of terror, which particularly violated women's bodily integrity (Ephgrave, 2016). Survivors' written legacy documents the singular and systematic assault perpetrated on their bodies through "induced amenorrhea, sterilization, forced abortions, punishment for pregnancy and subversive childbirth, annihilation based on maternal status, and sexual assault" (Kremer, 2010: 177). More significantly, Holocaust scholars need to confront the uncomfortable reality that this violence did not just unexpectedly come into being, but bore gendered identities as well as gendered sexual practices and norms from earlier times (Mühlhäuser, 2021). This is specifically significant in relation to sexual abuse, "one of culture's many modes of feminizing women," in which the abuser attempts to engrave the gender identity of "feminine victim" on his target (Marcus, 1992: 391).

Only through the use of gender as a conceptual instrument of analysis may we reach the polythetic perspective of Jewish victims needed understand the "gendered nature both of their victimhood and of their sense of self as well as the pivotal role that gender played during the Holocaust" (Waxman, 2017: 147). This feminist turn has profoundly impacted the study of Holocaust literature. Since the idea of claiming women's voices lies at the heart of the approach, exploring female-authored texts proves central to promote the discipline. Hence, gender and Holocaust studies are intrinsically also literary studies. Though English was never the native language of victims nor perpetrators, the field is profoundly embedded in the Anglophone world, because countless survivors chose this language to pen their experience.

Louise Vasvári has designated these as texts of translated trauma, referring to narratives of self-translation written by emigrated adult survivors. Their works, sometimes based on unpublished diaries or previous drafts in their mother tongue, pose further complexities of representation inasmuch as they bear witness to the author's self-shattering, self-altering past in an incompletely mastered foreign language or, sometimes, in an unstable space located between two languages (Vasvári, 2009: 159). My research integrates and reinforces this inherently transversal branch of knowledge. The corpus selected for this study bears the scars of history, testimony, fiction, and literature, merging their boundaries to explore different paths that allow for the literary representation of sexual violence. As a result, the dynamics of silence may become further layered in this context, defined by the coalescence of intrinsic unreadability, deliberate silences working rhetorically, and the limits of self-translated trauma.

### 3. GENDERED, EMPOWERING SILENCES

In spite of the challenges that bearing witness entails, survivors' testimonial literature allows us to delve into chapters in the history of the Shoah that have traditionally been overlooked, such as sexual abuse. Not only was it unlikely that the mostly female victims survived sexual assault, but those who did generally remained silent about it, mainly due to the cultural taboos against discussing it in public. Most survivors became hostages of their own traumatic memories, which they were not allowed to share and work through (Waxman, 2010: 117). Thus, the testimony of those who dared to voice it—either obliquely, metaphorically, or straightforwardly—assumes enormous significance. It is essential that the relationship between episodes of sexual violence and the challenges associated with recounting such experiences be explored, in order to defy the paradigm that has disregarded the central position that rape and other forms of sexual abuse hold within the narrative of the Holocaust. The rapist, inflicting one of the most alienating violations a person may endure, deliberately silences the victim, left alone in a world that they no longer recognize (Waxman, 2010: 119-122). I suggest that this tension, so enlighteningly emphasized by Zoë Waxman, between the abuse and the contingencies of bearing witness to it may be reflected in the textual and figurative silence that haunts female survivors' writing.

Because trauma simultaneously resists and demands our witness, it can only be conveyed through a language that is “always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth, 1996: 5). Resorting to the rhetorical resonance of silence, survivors persevere in bearing witness to this contradiction. Indeed, silence is valid to communicate certain experiences that escape conventional language, such as sexual violence. Following Fiona Ross, “pain's recognition requires imaginative engagement: acknowledgement of the limitations of language and the validity of silence or the apparent erasure of self as a means of communicating particular kinds of experience” (2003: 49). When

it attempts to transform the memory of rape into words, language becomes tainted, because it is not possible to convert certain utterances into narrative chains of cause and effect, with a sense of beginning and closure (Kabir, 2010: 156). Lawrence Langer's idea of durational time describes the unique perception of time experienced by Holocaust survivors, whose linear chronology becomes shattered by each violent event (1993: 272). The survivor resides within this durational time, defined by the existence of the event within a frame of temporal referentiality of its own –for rape victims “time doesn't eradicate what they have suffered,” writes Klüger (2001: 160). Because the violenced body remains always in existence, survivors may fear that the act of speech will render violence physically forth (Chandra, 2009: 38).

However, it is essential to “foreground the possibilities of speaking, of silence and the spaces between, and this is especially pertinent when narrativizing sexual violence, [because] the possibility emerges of it being a subversive choice in re-theorizing rape” (Thompson & Gunne, 2010: 15). Vena Das (1996) pioneeringly claimed that women's silence over sexual abuse may be an intentional and empowering act, pointing at the construction of a form of agency that does not reside in linguistic competency but rather in the refusal to permit it; in the ability to hold the experience inside, to remain silent. Drawing on Das, Ross is adamant that “silence marks particular kinds of knowing, and, further, silence may be gendered” (2003: 49). The rhetoric of speech and silence in the wake of sexual violence is not always comparable to the opposition between dominance and submission, because the act of remaining silent can potentially restore agency. Feminist scholars hint at “the paradoxical relationship between sound and silence that is obscured when we assume an equation between voice and agency, and its inverse equation –silence and oppression” (Malhotra & Carrillo, 2013: 1).

Instead, silence should be theorized as a space of fluidity, non-linearity, and possibility, in whose stillness women become able to communicate, at the limits of sounds (Malhotra & Carrillo, 2013: 2). Within the field of rhetoric, feminist academics have challenged the assumption that silence equates with absence. Rethinking the communicative power of silence, Kris Acheson's feminist treatment of the subject conceptualizes silence as a gesture that is enacted by the physical body, becoming thus crucial to embodied experience (2008). Engaging in feminist criticism, Patricia Laurence considers female characters' silence in novels authored by women to be a sign of both rhetorical and personal empowerment. These silences reverse the disempowering idea of women's passive surrender to the oppressive conditions of cultural exclusion and becomes “an alternative code of truth or, sometimes, an expression of anger. [...] Women's silence may be read as a strategy of resistance and choice –a ritual of truth” (1994: 156-167).

Hence, examining the rhetorical force of silence through the lens of gender studies may contribute to illuminating the complex nature of social inequality and relations of power. Feminist scholars should push different fields to reexamine our relationship to the gendered nature of silence, investigating several issues: “what forms of resistance and healing does

silence make possible? What nuances, strategic forms of engagement and ways of navigating or resisting power are made possible through silence? What alliances might be enabled as we learn to read silences? Under what conditions is it productive to move between voice and silence? How might the binaristic construction of voice and silence be reconfigured and with what political effects?” (Malhotra & Carrillo, 2013: 2). Sharing common roots with this approach, as I delve into textual and figurative silence, I aim to determine whether these unspoken realms may become the basis for a revealing non-fulfillment that not only genders the Shoah, but also demonstrates embodied experience and reclaims the victim’s agency.

## 4. VOICELESS TRACES OF GENDERED TRAUMA

### 4.1. Textual silence

In connection with Holocaust literature, my hypothesis is that the gendered experience of women may be mirrored in the language that subverts our understanding, that non-language, falling into Jessica Lang’s notion of textual silence, “which signals to readers what can and cannot be available for interpretation, analysis, and imaginative recourse” (2017: 2). Survivor-writers shift from a position of knowledge tainted by the boundaries of language to a position of vulnerability and exposure tempered by the limitations of reading. While they perceive the fallibility of their writing, they become witnesses to the boundaries inside the boundaries of traumatic representation. These limitations define the experience of textuality in trauma narratives, carving out a space for the memory that cannot be read or recorded alongside that which can (Lang, 2017: 57). My purpose is to explore the ways in which the survivor navigates between us, the non-witness readers, and the voiceless victims, defying our comprehension. More precisely, the issue that I will address next is to what extent, as female survivors evoke in their writing the fate of the abused women, they leave place for the unreadable. I then aim to determine whether, as survivors turn to the legibility of language to embed the illegibility of the murdered or silenced witness’s experience, they implicitly gender these textual silences.

To begin this discussion, I suggest that textual silence may be triggered by the allusion to silenced survivors of sexual assault: “The Anne Franks who survived rape don’t write their stories,” asserts Magyar-Isaacson, recognizing the unreadable in their ordeal (1990: 145). In her literary reconstruction of the visit she undertook to her Hungarian hometown in the late 1970s, accompanied by her grown-up daughter, this is Magyar-Isaacson’s only possible response when her daughter points out that “thousands of women were raped during the war, but no one hears about them” (1990: 145). This fictional dialogue, fragmentary and oblique, is elicited by literary gaps. Through the voice of someone else –her daughter’s persona– the author wants to highlight the actual event of sexual violence in the Holocaust –the fact that it did happen on a regular basis. Yet, when the narration shifts to her own voice, recovering the triple agency of the author-survivor-eyewitness, her statement allows for the condition of

inaccessibility and blankness that the memory, representation, and experience of sexual violence hold at its core.

As non-witness readers, our experience parallels that of her daughter's persona: we may know that sexual violence happened systematically in the Holocaust, but under no circumstances can we fully assimilate what it entailed. Neither can Judit Magyar-Isaacson, who may have witnessed, but did not survive, rape. The difference is that, as a female Holocaust survivor and eyewitness to women's tribulations, Magyar-Isaacson is aware of the unreadable nature of such experience, of that meaning that eludes the reader. The kind of silence she evokes, as it challenges the norms of reading, is itself read, and becomes thus the epitome of that literarily and morally-imbued textual silence proposed by Lang (2017). In another layer of meaning, by simply contrasting the canonical and paradigmatic status of Anne Frank to the forgotten identities of rape victims, Magyar-Isaacson is challenging the hegemonic narrative of the Holocaust, which disregards the essential position of sexual violence in the Shoah. In a way, thus, the author is showing her commitment to a subversive form of activism that significantly equates with our determination as feminist Holocaust scholars in the twenty-first century.

Textual silence emerges when authors anticipate and examine the problematized relation of future readers to their work. Holocaust authors acknowledge the limitations that readers will unavoidably experience. Because of these boundaries, no relation between reader and text can ever be formed. The impossibility of this relation, which lies at the heart of theories of reading, implies that reading cannot be accounted for as an act, because the premise of reader and author coming together through a shared experience of text is absent (Lang, 2017: 37). The question that arises, regarding the availability of what is readable, is essentially how the reader may participate in an act that needs a relationship to be established when this relationship denies its necessary condition. To address this issue, Lang examines the interaction between eyewitness-author and reader, concluding that the author's self-aware literary rendition demonstrates "that reading is an experience transformed by trauma, so much so that what can be read is useful because it demarcates the space containing that which cannot be read" (37-38). Essentially, survivor-authors turn to the readable to discern the presence of the unreadable, and this is achieved through a more or less direct interaction with the reader.

Ruth Klüger has recognized the unreadable in her writing: "the familiar words, black ink on dry white paper, interfere with the mute and essentially wordless suffering –the ooze of pain, if I may so call it– they aim to communicate" (2001: 18), and has also significantly gendered her readership, acknowledging that she is writing for women (2001: 71). Klüger explicitly warns these readers that she, as a survivor, is not a true victim, and advises them to bear this in mind through their reading (2001: 137-138). Aware of the boundaries that define textuality, Klüger provides an enlightening reflection on the literary representation of trauma



that not only remarkably genders the act of remembrance itself, but also asserts that it is only possible through the interaction with her female readers:

Remembering is a branch of witchcraft; its tool is incantation. [...] You have to grate and scrape the old roots with tools from the shelves of ancient kitchens. Use your best wooden spoons with the longest handles to whisk into the broth of our fathers the herbs our daughters have grown in their gardens. If I succeed, together with my readers –and perhaps a few men will join us in the kitchen– we could exchange magic formulas like favorite recipes and season to taste the marinade which the old stories and histories offer us, in as much comfort as our witches' kitchen provides. It won't get too cozy, don't worry: where we stir our cauldron, there will be cold and hot currents from half-open windows, unhinged doors, and earthquake-prone walls. (Klüger, 2001: 69)

By defining the act of remembrance as a branch of witchcraft and elaborating on this extended kitchen metaphor so as to illuminate the nature of traumatic experience, memory and representation, Klüger navigates through a gender-focused layer of meaning. In order that the spells and charms which summon the dead and their stories be casted, Klüger and her female readers need to actively cooperate. Their shared witches' kitchen provides them with a safe haven to interact, *i.e.*, to reflect conjunctly on the fragmentary and inaccessible condition of trauma narratives. The responsibility of remembrance is thus partially transferred to the reader: their duty to inscribe the unreadable within the readable. Klüger's final lines, evoking those invisible yet mighty air currents, generated when her purpose is finally achieved, offer an ekphrastic representation of the meaning that evades the reader. Ultimately, this reflection allows for a gender-based analysis because of the highly symbolic value of the elements framing the allegory: both the kitchen –representing a traditional place of bondage for women– and the practice of witchcraft –embodying embedded social misogyny and historical persecution of women– are repossessed in Klüger's narrative to become empowering epitomes of shared female agency, in connection with textual silence in the legacy and transmission of trauma.

Whereas Klüger addresses her future readers straightforwardly, other authors inscribe the space for the experience that cannot be read beside that which can in writing that engages with their readers implicitly. As a paradigmatic instance, Lang examines Primo Levi's persistent elaboration on shoes in connection to the concentrationary universe. Levi urges his audience to read the word 'shoes' as if it were a foreign term, forgetting its ingrained and expected meaning: in the *Lager*, shoes are not an accessory that offers comfort and protection, but an instrument of torture that deportees have no choice but to wear, making each step a combination of forced and self-inflicted agony. Levi makes every effort to define this word, aware that its normative meaning falls short of the one he wishes to convey, even as he recognizes the limits inherent to the best of his representation (Lang, 2017: 39). In consonance

with Levi, Gisella Perl expands upon concepts such as ‘hunger’ or ‘shoes’: “the great writer who could describe the hunger we had to endure at Auschwitz has yet to be born” (1948: 38); “shoes were a question of life or death. [...] A piece of ordinary string. Anything to keep those shoes on my feet... The thought of string filled my dreams and every minute of my waking hours. I wanted it so much, so desperately that nothing else seemed to matter anymore” (1948: 57).

Like Levi, Perl strives to express certain concepts, knowing that their real meaning will be impossible to access for non-survivor readers, and also aware of the limitations attached to her attempts to define them. More significantly, Perl’s treatment of such words, in writing that addresses the future readers implicitly, provides an opportunity to further this gender-centered reflection by intertwining textual silence with the embodied experience of women. Her memoir portrays the camp as a patriarchal cosmos, grounded in extreme power imbalance, where all female deportees were potential victims of sexual abuse by fellow male prisoners, facing the necessity to trade sex for survival. As a gynecologist, committed to assisting her fellow inmates, she shares her thoughts concerning this situation: “I begged and preached and, when I had my first cases of venereal disease, I even threatened to refuse treatment if they didn’t stop prostitution. But later, when I saw that the pieces of bread thus earned saved lives, when I met a young girl whom a pair of shoes, earned in a week of prostitution, saved from being thrown into the crematory, I began to understand –and to forgive” (1948: 79). Her initial self-righteous aversion to such behaviors transforms into sympathy and understanding when she realizes that sexual bartering is women’s best chance of survival.

Perl’s reflection implies that words like ‘shoes’ and ‘hunger’ not only carry a meaning that is only possible to access for survivors but, even more significantly, that these meanings are strikingly different *for* female survivors. Words like ‘shoes’ and ‘hunger’ constitute unspoken realms which, when uttered or envisioned by women, hold at their core the unparalleled reality of sexual violence against women: textual silence, indeed, may be gendered. Furthermore, Perl’s final deliberation on women’s conditions of death and survival is so ahead of its time that it harmonizes with current feminist reexaminations of the Shoah. Publishing her memoir in the wake of the Nazi defeat, when it was not possible to discuss sexual violence in public, when survivors were considered “whores who had served the Germans” (Dribben, 1970: 272), Perl offers an empowering and agency-reclaiming insight into women’s experiences. As emphasized by Waxman, “if we are to see women in history as active agents –rather than as one-dimensional victims– then we need to take seriously the choices they make, even if they do not accord with our own moral values” (2017: 120). Perl’s open, unapologetic, and empathetic rendition of sex for survival achieves this purpose. Bartered sex seems connected to the reversal of gender roles, as the Nazis inverted the traditional hierarchy of the Jewish family. While men were stripped of their role of protectors, women, exposed and vulnerable, assumed the male responsibility to provide for themselves

and their children. Sex for survival responded to this paradigm, in which the woman, though a victim, exercised “the choice of using her body to save herself and thereby become an agent of her own survival” (Goldenberg, 2013: 113-115). The unreadable side of Perl’s ‘shoes’ and ‘bread’ somehow resonates with this agency.

Though silence is conceived as an aural phenomenon, its physical and visual counterparts are central to Holocaust literature, and reverberate with this unreadability as well. Physical gaps and blanks may be extremely active, unexpected, and triggering, identified by readers as remarkable spaces which are as contributive to the meaning as the words (Grant-Davies, 2013: 5-6). In the reconstruction of her distressing arrival in Auschwitz, Magyar-Isaacson significantly turns to such spatial equivalents of silence to embed the unreadable quality of the experience, touching on broken motherhood in the *Lager*. Her rendition of the dehumanizing initiation ritual achieves a frenetic rhythm; events are hectic, disjointed, incomplete. Traumatic memory lacks verbal narrative and is rather encoded in the form of vivid imagery and bodily perceptions. The intense emphasis on fragmentary sensation gives the memory a heightened reality (Herman, 1997: 38). In Magyar-Isaacson’s passage, this sense of incompleteness is highly evocative. Among the victims, the narrator identifies a woman from her hometown, “washing her swollen breasts, her eyes dazed, her scalp welted. I recognized her by her almond shaped eyes. She had given birth not long ago, I remembered. Where was her baby?” (1990: 72). While the author evokes the victims’ disorientation upon arrival and inability to comprehend the events as they unfold, the unanswered question creates a substantial narrative interruption. Not only does it physically bring the episode to an end, but it transfers the responsibility to envision and fill the void to the reader. The question mark signals a tangible absence on the page, carving out a poignant, double-edged space of textual silence: that of the question that remains both unanswered and unanswerable; that of the mother and her baby’s unspoken and unspeakable fates.

Also ingraining womanhood in the realm of the ineffable, Klüger self-consciously addresses a different form of sexual violence: “Before we left Auschwitz there had been a gynecological exam [which] served the purpose of discovering whether we hid any precious items in intimate parts of the body. I find it difficult to write this down and notice that I have done so in a rather circuitous way” (2001: 119). Klüger exposes the barrier encountered when attempting to transform the memory of sexual violence into words, but simultaneously acknowledges the potential of writing to help assimilate such experiences: “any event you can turn into literature becomes, as it were, speakable” (2001: 119). In Holocaust literature, unreadability prevails as a paradoxical site of perpetual connection and disconnection, where the boundaries of representation are redrawn. Episodes of textual silence are generated through the language that, as emphasized by Caruth, resists and demands, defies but claims, our understanding (1996: 5). Examining Lang’s notion of textual silence (2017) through the lens of a gender-sensitive approach provides new opportunities to theorize the transformative

potential of silence in Holocaust literature. When authors use the legibility of language –the literal word on the page– to engrain the illegibility of the experience –the ineffable meaning engraved in their minds,– the tension between the two structures generates a mode of unreading that is more important to identify than the reading accomplished (Lang, 2017: 39). Using gender as a tool of analysis to unread female-authored texts, I have been able to recognize that in their blankness, in the silences resisting our interpretation, lie the traces of a gender-specific trauma connected to the constant attacks on women’s bodies.

#### 4.2. Figurative silence

If the unique struggle of women echoes in textual silence, the possibility emerges that other forms of silence reflect this reality as well. A space of metaphorical silence is essential in the recreated concentrationary experience, emerging when survivor-eyewitnesses evoke the fate of the victimized women and defining silence as inherent to the gender-specific trauma. Perl witnesses pregnant deportees being “beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by the hair and kicked in the stomach with heavy German boots. Then, when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory –alive” (1948: 80). These lines show gender functioning as the arbiter of experience which leads to women being murdered (Waxman, 2017). By bearing witness to their annihilation, Perl somehow counters the victims’ silence, but, more significantly, her intervention transcends literature. Perl’s agency is ignited by this terrible sight: “the horror turned into revolt and this revolt shook me out of my lethargy and gave me a new incentive to live. I had to remain alive. It was up to me to save all the pregnant women from this infernal fate” (1948: 80). From that moment on, the gynecologist is devoted to performing countless clandestine abortions, risking her life, in order to save the mothers. Thus, not only does Perl resist the space of silence gravitating around women’s ordeal by writing their murder, but also by exerting an effect on the real world –saving them and, hence, allowing survivors to keep their voice. Perl’s memoir is significant because it renders the woman as an active agent, disputing traditionally assumed discourses on women’s passive victimhood.

In the literary rendition of deportation, the dynamics of silence may be connected to issues of female agency. Dribben’s memoir offers an illuminating episode in this regard. She evokes the camp commander entering their block to find *volunteers* among the prisoners for the brothel in Auschwitz, promising that their living conditions would be improved. When a Russian deportee is asked to interpret this message for her fellow countrywomen, she vacillates, she struggles, she conspicuously “finds it difficult to translate this disgusting proposal” (Dribben, 1970: 201). Abruptly, all Russian girls unanimously decline the Nazi’s proposition. Embodied and oral agency is intrinsic to interpreting activities: the mediator’s body tends to express their personal worldview; at the same time, the agency which makes them uniquely vulnerable to physical damage also explains their power to effect change at a

decisive moment (Cronin, 2006: 79-81). The episode narrated by Dribben inscribes a space of silence that is strategically exploited by this *ad hoc* interpreter to negotiate the relations of power. What she may or may have not translated into Russian remains inaccessible to the German-speaking perpetrator. This linguistic void, along with the interpreter's reluctance and silent refusal, all enacted by her physical body, are deliberately used to resist, in front of the oppressor, an institutionalized form of sexual abuse to which only women were subjected.

The passages examined above illustrate that, beyond the concept of unreadability, silence is a ubiquitous trope in Holocaust literature. Both Perl and Dribben delineate symbolic, multifaceted spaces of silence, inextricably intertwined with gender-specific traumata, which surface in relation to manifestations of power and agency, allowing certain forms of strategic engagement and resistance to oppression. Examining silence as a multilayered, complex leitmotiv in female survivors' texts is fundamental to broaden our understanding of the Shoah as a gendered process. The evidence that authors themselves not only recognize the underlying nature of silence, but also reappropriate it to restore their agency is manifest in their measured, strategic use of figurative silences working rhetorically. Whereas textual silence acknowledges those spheres of suffering that unavoidably escape our understanding, figurative silences force the reader instead to interpret and actively construct meaning. This notion is paradigmatically mirrored on the rhetorical force that narrative ellipsis assumes in the narrative representation of sexual violence, which "exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety" (Higgins & Silver, 1991: 3). For instance, in Ettinger's novel, *Kindergarten* (1986), which explores the Holocaust through fictionalized female characters, Ruth is harassed by a Nazi officer:

‘So jung... so schön... schade... oben ist es warm und gemütlich...’ [so young... so pretty... what a pity... it's warm and cozy upstairs], he hissed silently.

Back home, Ruth sat on a chair, staring blankly ahead. Then she said, not looking at the girls, ‘last week Doctor Weinstein committed suicide with her two daughters... she turned on the gas at night...’ Lili jumped to her feet. ‘Mama,’ she cried, ‘Mama, dearest, please don't talk like that. How can you? [...] Nothing else matters as long as we are together. We can stand a lot, Mama, it's really not as bad as that.’ (Ettinger, 1986: 34-35)

Ettinger turns to narrative ellipsis to convey the rape of the character. The reader is forced to recognize the episode of sexual abuse in the blankness of the text; its devastating consequences, in the character's contemplation of suicide. The rhetorical force of this silence results in uncertainty, in an anxious sensation in the reader which parallels the effect produced by unreadable textual silences. Indeed, the tension between textual and figurative silence – the fact that, whereas the former resists our understanding, the latter forces us to interpret – does not need to be resolved, but acknowledged. Both kinds of silence seem to be imbued with narrative strategies suggesting the gendered nature of the Holocaust at the edges of

representation. However, figurative silences are of paramount importance inasmuch as they draw explicit attention to the author's command over her text, in a literary context – characterized by female disempowerment, by the silencing of women, by sexual violence against women...– in which the reader may be tempted to forget this authority. Even though the writer's experience is constrained by the boundaries of unreadability, self-translation and embedded misogyny, she still holds power over what to share, what not to share, and how to do so.

Ettinger writes from witness and remembrance, drawing on her confinement in the Warsaw Ghetto, her hiding in Aryan settings, and her commitment to the Polish resistance. *Kindergarten* (1986) is presented from the perspective of a teenager hiding under forged papers with her mother and sister. Ettinger's fictionalized female protagonists assume Christian identities and become actively involved in the underground resistance. Her treatment of women's experiences focuses intensely on "brutality inscribed on the female body, sexual intimidation and trauma, and the assault on motherhood," demonstrating the extent to which women's vulnerability was complicated by combined racism and sexism (Kremer, 2001: 754). Her characters are victims of sexual violence, but are also empowered by virtue of their gender occasionally, in certain episodes in which opportunity presents to benefit from men's lust; in this way, Ettinger significantly "departs from the pattern of female sexual victimization to incorporate women's exploitation of their oppressors' lust to distract and then kill them" (Kremer, 2001: 763).

Dalia Offer has emphasized the courage and agency of Eastern European Jewish women (2011). In the absence of their husbands, or believing their situation to be less vulnerable than that of men's, women were daring in testing the boundaries of illegal activity. They inventively maneuvered to support themselves and their families, assuming previously male roles and taking advantage of their femininity when needed. Inasmuch as this agency clearly crystallizes in Ettinger's characters, the choice to turn to figurative silence should be interpreted as a strategy to convey the empowerment of the author and her fictitious characters. The fact that non-accidental, meaningful narrative ellipses precisely surface in relation to episodes of sexual violence deserves further scrutiny. Crucial to the exploration of Eastern European women's resistance experiences is Dribben's memoir, which dwells on the author's involvement in the partisan underground during the occupation of Lvov, Ukraine. Like Ettinger's characters, Dribben's participation in the resistance involved taking advantage of men's lust and even seducing Nazi officers.

Dribben's work is essential to stimulate the reflection on narrative ellipsis as well. To conclude a very comprehensive account of being tortured during an interrogation, she succinctly writes: "the Gestapo man bent over me several times. I remember vaguely trying to hold my ripped dress together and only answering 'no, no,' when he spoke to me. I woke up fully conscious and lying on the floor of a car" (1970: 156). Once more, the rendition of a man

exercising physical power over a woman is shaped by literary gaps. In this case, narrative ellipsis is prompted by the character's loss of consciousness, which leaves the reader to wonder what happens until she regains it in a different place. Later on, she is assisted by the prison doctor, a young Pole who "asked in a whisper, as he dressed my face, 'How come you don't complain?' 'It wouldn't be dignified. And I have seen other women who got –' 'Excuse me,' the doctor interrupted" (Dribben, 1970: 157). This brief fictional dialogue is not naïve, but profoundly ideologically-charged. When it seems that the character is ready to provide the explicit details omitted before, she is ignored and disrupted by a man who is supposed to be an ally. This passage exemplifies Ringelheim's theory of the split memory between gender and genocidal violence, which explains the "dividing line between what is considered personal and private to women, and what has been designated as the proper collective memory of the Holocaust" (1997: 20). Sexual violence is known to have happened and sometimes mentioned, but is believed to belong to the private realm. It is not deemed as Holocaust-related and hence split from the hegemonic narrative (Ringelheim, 1997: 20-21). While the doctor recognizes the aggression, he refuses to listen to the victim.

At this point, the reader senses the paradoxical tension between the reality of men silencing women and the author's intentional use of such silence to gain agency by governing her literary universe, playing with the reader's expectations in an engaging way. The image of the Nazi bending over her as she struggles to hold her clothes together, and the way she refers to this experience in terms of lack of dignification, hint at an episode of sexual violence –an assault that is significantly disregarded by men, in particular by those who are alleged allies. Dribben's use of narrative ellipsis allows for the construction of a form of agency that stems from the deliberate and remarkable literary decision to remain silent and hold an experience within. "Insisting that the personal is political, a holy truth of the feminist vision," a gender-sensitive analysis calls us to reclaim women's private, secret, and unspoken experiences of trauma (Brown, 1991: 130). Unlike in other genocides, including former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, rape was not part of the Nazi genocidal strategy. This fact leaves the women who were sexually abused unable to find a context to work through their memories, and also complicates endeavors to consistently analyze sexual violence (Waxman, 2010: 120-126). In Dribben's passage, the aggression gravitates over the narration, unspoken but tangible. Silence represents her determined attempt to generate a textual tension that heightens the reality of violence.

Narrative ellipses suggest that conscious, figurative silences may help victims cope with traumatic memory by providing them with the authority that has been long denied. In a way, this trope allows them to process the act and aftermath of sexual violence, engendering a space for (self-)reflection that needs to be examined. Turning to this rhetorical device as well, Perl offers a crucial passage allowing the connection between figurative and textual silence. She

begs a male Polish prisoner to give her a piece of string to tie her shoes in exchange of her bread:

‘You can keep your bread... I will give you a piece of string but first I want you... you...’  
For a second I didn’t understand what he meant. I asked him again, smiling, gently, to give me a piece of string... [...] He wasn’t listening to me. His hand, filthy with the human excrement he was working in, reached out for my womanhood, rudely, insistently. The next moment I was running, running away from that man, away from the indignity that had been inflicted on me, forgetting about the string, about the shoes, about everything but the sudden realization of how deeply I had sunk... (Perl, 1948: 58)

Narrative ellipsis is epitomized in the victim’s instinctive running away from the rapist. Echoing Dribben’s narration (1970: 201), the reader gathers that he has violated her when she goes on to expand upon the devastating effects of such abuse, which unexpectedly force the reader to pause, to reconsider previous lines, to endow absence with meaning. Perl’s figurative silence is a purposeful and an empowering act, showing that the author is in control of her narrative. By forcing the reader to participate in the creation of meaning –to actively recognize and envision the sexual assault– the act of rape itself, which remains wordless, paradoxically acquires much more poignancy than if it had been merely written. As the title of this chapter implies, ‘A piece of string’ revolves around a context of intrinsic unreadability enhanced by the fact that words like ‘string,’ ‘shoes,’ or ‘hunger’ carry a meaning that only female survivors can access –the unfathomable reality of systematic sexual abuse against women. While this space of gendered textual silence unavoidably severs the relationship between the author and the non-witness reader, Perl strives to rebuild this connection by engaging in a form of figurative silence that forces the reader to actively interpret the literary void and to ponder its significance within the narrative.

The ellipses that the reader decodes as contributive to the meaning, whether they be embodied in a narrative void (Ettinger, 1986: 34-35), the losing of consciousness (Dribben, 1970: 156-157), or the image of running away (Perl, 1948: 58), demonstrate the author’s struggle to connect with the reader within the boundaries of representation that are inherent to the Shoah, specifically in relation to sexual violence. The constant dynamics of connection and disconnection in Holocaust literature, the fact that what can be read lies alongside that which remains unreadable, become more obvious when an author puzzles the reader by forcing them to endow a literary gap with meaning –signaling that *something* is available to their interpretation, but refusing to express what it is or its magnitude. Immersed in the patriarchal ethos which forbade women to discuss sexual violence in the Holocaust, authors become empowered, precisely, by rendering such episodes through narrative ellipses, repossessing the silence imposed on them to wordlessly enhance the poignancy of the assault. Following Laura Brown, “a feminist analysis, illuminating the realities of women’s lives, turns a spotlight on



the subtle manifestations of trauma, allows us to see the hidden sharp edges and secret leg-hold traps whose scars [women] have borne” (1992: 129). Indeed, further exploration of gendered silence as both a conscious literary trope and an inescapable, unfillable void in women’s writing is necessary to delve into gender-based discrimination and sexual violence in the Shoah.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Spaces of gendered silence are pervasive in female-authored Holocaust literature, inextricably intertwined with manifestations of women’s empowerment and agency. Aware of the limitations that define the experience of writing and reading the Shoah, survivors turn to the literal words on the page to embed the ineffability of their ordeal. As we recognize the tension between these two reading structures and learn to unread their texts, it becomes clear that the inaccessible memory of trauma directly connects with the constant and systematic assault on women’s bodies, shaping the Holocaust as a profoundly gendered process whose full magnitude remains impossible to comprehend. Even though such textual silences disrupt the connection between author and reader, survivors strive to nurture this relationship through their strategic, measured use of figurative silences, which require the reader’s engagement and interpretation. Non-accidental, meaningful narrative ellipses connected to episodes of sexual violence draw explicit attention to the author’s command over her text and paradoxically enhance the pathos of the event that remains unspoken. The rhetorical impact of such silence results in ambiguity and disquiet, an uncertainty that mirrors the effect produced by unreadable textual silences.

The tension between textual and figurative silence cannot be resolved –nor does it need to be– but must be acknowledged: the fact that silences, both when they defy our understanding and when they force us to construct meaning, are infused with narrative strategies illuminating the gendered nature of the Shoah, at the edges of language and sound. Through the aesthetic and moral iconicity that silence adopts in these texts, I am adamant that, in terms of Gestalt principles of perception, the silent woman becomes the central figure in the narrative, thus reversing the mainstream androcentric tradition which has considered her as simply an expendable background. In this way, I believe that authors also imbue their works with a political layer of meaning that proves fundamental to current reexaminations of the Holocaust through the lens of gender. They bend the boundaries of intrinsic unreadability and embedded misogyny so as to repossess the silence that has been imposed on them in order to construct an emancipating form of agency. Furthermore, the strategic nuances, the allegiances and ways of subverting power achieved through the use of silence as a literary trope and leitmotiv demonstrate their talent as writers. Though they struggle with the challenges of self-translation, as they do not write in their mother tongues, their remarkable command of

language proves that their work is also legitimate to promote scholarship on contemporary literature in English.

The title of this article, *Revealing Silences: Voiceless Traces of Gendered Trauma in Female Holocaust Survivors' Writing*, is deliberately ambiguous, echoing the uneasy feeling that the authors' silences inspire in the reader. It is also evocative of the paradoxical relationship between voice and silence, which are not mutually exclusive, nor can they be equated with agency and disempowerment respectively. Unspoken realms are imbued with moral and aesthetic meaning. By interrogating their essence in trauma narratives, we may illuminate the nature of suffering in gendered processes, such as the Shoah. In a way, the literary traces of the gender-specific Holocaust trauma are quiet, wordless. So are its victims, who remain voiceless, silenced by the perpetrator, by the endured trauma, by society's androcentrism, and by a scholarly world that has traditionally overlooked their ordeal. Yet somehow, those same silences are revealing and potentially empowering, both when they resist our understanding and when they force us to interpret them. It is our duty as feminist scholars, using gender as a frame of analysis, to reveal those silences, to claim their place in the fundamental narrative of the Holocaust. Through this discussion, I have sought to foster scholarship on gender and Holocaust literary studies by delving into the relationship between the experience of sexual violence and the challenges of bearing witness to it, into the unresolved but thought-provoking, complex, and multilayered tension between textual and

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