# RECONSTRUCTING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY THROUGH ART PRACTICE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF SILENT FAMILY NARRATIVES

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# ABSTRACT

## RECONSTRUCTING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY THROUGH ART PRACTICE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF SILENT FAMILY NARRATIVES

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Keywords: memory, autobiographical art, family narrative, generational trauma, reconstruction

Derived from the author's personal past, this thesis is an effort to heal unresolved generational traumas by reconstructing alternatives to silenced family narratives through art. Drawing from Sir Frederic Bartlett's reconstructive approach towards autobiographical memory and the literary concept of the "unreliable narrator," the thesis establishes a framework supported with four examples of artworks: *Memoria*, *Neriman Hanım*, *Stories We Tell*, and *Between Delicate and Violent*. The thesis complements the project, *Mute-*, which is centered around a long-lost family member. It is an attempt to creatively investigate the possibilities of the family past from the perspective of the present, utilizing photography, found image, video and sound.

# ÖZET

## SESSİZ AİLE ANLATILARI BAĞLAMINDA OTOBİYOGRAFİK HAFIZAYI SANATLA YENİDEN KURMAK

ÖYKÜ ÖNAL

GÖRSEL SANATLAR VE GÖRSEL İLETİŞİM TASARIMI YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, HAZİRAN 2024

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Anahtar Kelimeler: hafıza, otobiyografik sanat, aile anlatısı, nesiller arası travma, kurgu

Yazarın kişisel geçmişinden yola çıkan bu tez, susturulmuş aile anlatılarına sanat yoluyla alternatifler inşa ederek çözümlenmemiş ve nesilden nesile aktarılan travmaları iyileştirme çabasıdır. Sir Frederic Bartlett'in otobiyografik belleğin yeniden kurgulanabilir nitelikte olduğuna dair yaklaşımından ve edebiyattaki "güvenilmez anlatıcı" kavramından yola çıkan bu tez, teorik çerçevesini dört sanat eseri örneğiyle destekler: *Memoria, Neriman Hanım, Anlattığımız Hikayeler* ve *Zarafet ve Şiddet Arasında.* Tez, uzun süredir üzerine konuşulmayan bir aile üyesinin etrafında dönen *Mute-* projesini tamamlar niteliktedir. Bu proje, fotoğraf, buluntu görüntü, video ve sesten yararlanarak, aile geçmişine ait hikâyelerin potansiyellerini bugünün perspektifinden yaratıcı bir şekilde araştırma girişimidir.

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Also, I would like to thank every family member or relative who wanted to talk about Muteber, especially my father, Kubilay Önal, who accompanied me on numerous family trips for the project.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude for Nazlı Mutlu, for bearing with me in every second I am swamped with this project. She has been a fantastic support emotionally, physically, and intellectually, accompanying me in every step of this process.

I dedicate this thesis to Muteber Önal, my great-grandmother, and all the people who are untold in family narratives.

*To the silence of "her" and "me"*

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# 1.  INTRODUCTION

This thesis complementing the project *Mute-*, is an effort to explore the creative and artistic possibilities of visual arts and sound to reconstruct a memory that is not lived but felt– a memory in silence. Derived from a "family secret", a traumatic memory that is kept veiled for years, this thesis aims to look at family narratives from the perspective of the present.

Throughout my master's degree, I found myself wandering around various subjects yet came to realize that my subject was already there with me, and the core of my motivation that led me to art. Looking at my works, I see that the concepts of memory and subjectivity have always been of interest to me. This has been the case since the moment I started to work on my photobook, *Apaçık Saklı*[1], a compilation of my photographs consisting primarily of self-portraits, and dedicated to my memory of growing up. I realize now that I've been intrigued by the concept of "autobiographical memory". I remember that memory that led me to make that photobook and write these words: "Distress, I'm looking for a story far away. The rest is silence, missing. My grandmother is sitting in the chair I am sitting in right now. She says, 'Huh, say it out loud'. I don't know what I'm murmuring. There is no such song. Boredom. My silence is mine.". This memory juxtaposed with my grandmother's Alzheimer's disease, her speaking less and less, yet still communicating with her reminiscences of words, wrinkled and scarred skin, gestures of her hands, and the tired curves of her mouth.

Thinking of these wordless moments, I started to question what/how we remember, what we forget, and which stories we tell about ourselves, our family, and our history. To remember is a performance of reconstruction, creating a narrative that we choose to remember, as declared by a line in the film *Sans Soleil*: "I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember; we rewrite memory much as

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[1] Öykü Önal, Apaçık Saklı, İstanbul: Onagöre, 2021.

history is rewritten." (Marker 1983). And when there is a traumatic memory, silence goes into play. However, it is essential to ask whose silence is this as it may come in the name of protection out of love or basically a lack of confrontation. However, memories can be felt despite not being told. Thus, I had an unexpected encounter with Muteber, my great-grandmother, whom I have only known for the last two years.

Her silence spoke to me more than the words that I heard about her, the words that reduced her to "a woman going mad and left to her fate". There were many gaps in the story, and a lot was missing. How can one remember a memory that is completely erased? Therefore, I try to reconstruct the memory of her from where I connect with her as another person who is criticized for not conforming, while visiting places (the only constants of the narrative) she had been to. More than the one and only truth, I am after a story that I prefer to tell or listen to as I know that her story echoes in many others.

All in all, rooted in my personal past, the thesis embarks on a journey to communicate silenced memories through the transformative power of visual arts and sound by bringing artistic research and practice together. By intertwining the creative potential of arts and narrative exploration, the thesis endeavors to illuminate hidden family narratives, offering a fresh perspective on the past through the lens of today.

As the theoretical chapter of the thesis, "Chapter 1" is centered around a reconstructive approach to autobiographical memory, mainly benefiting the ideas of Sir Frederic Bartlett while concerning silenced family traumas transmitted between generations. By introducing the concept of "unreliable narrator", how creativity might take a role in autobiographical narratives and the possibility of healing futures through the act of reconstructing are analyzed.

In "Chapter 2", four works that inspired the thesis project, *Memoria*, *Neriman Hanım*, *Stories We Tell*, *Between Delicate and Violent* are examined in relation to the perspective of this thesis, with focus on how they convey memory. While *Memoria* utilizes environmental sounds and silence, *Stories We Tell* explores subjectivity in our family stories and builds an unharmonious chorus. Besides embracing the reconstructive approach towards memory and celebrating creativity, *Neriman Hanım* strongly emphasizes the fictional character of biography, and *Between Delicate and Violent* tries to communicate a silenced intergenerational trauma.

In the final chapter, "Chapter 3", the aim, the method, the context, and the works of the project *Mute-* which is based on my great-grandmother Muteber, are explained, and analyzed.

## 2. CHAPTER 1: MEMORY OF SELF: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

### 2.1 Definitions of Autobiographical Memory

Memory has been a popular and complex subject discussed, defined, and categorized in various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, cultural studies, and literature. Although the word "memory" is often used as in "autobiographical memory" in everyday life, there are definitions of memory within the field of memory studies that are focused particularly on the autobiographical. Within this context, understandings of what remembering or forgetting mean are of primary importance. Since the perspective of my artistic work and my thesis is based on autobiographical memory as a reconstructive narrative, I will try to address various definitions of memory, and discuss if one definitive framework is even possible. This paper aims to look at various frameworks and put forth an understanding of autobiographical memory as it relates to the various definitions framing the subject.

Attempts to define memory mainly depend on the taxonomy built around it. Autobiographical memory is one of the categorizations among many others such as "semantic, motor skill, linguistic skill or perceptual which may be further divided into visual, auditory, olfactory, or gustatory memory." (Anastasio 2012, 37). There are two main taxonomies to define memory: scalar and hierarchical. Scalar taxonomy, introduced by Atkinson and Shiffrin in 1968, categorizes memory according to a "linear" time span and proposes segments such as short-term and long-term memory (Yaşayanlar 2023, 16). This taxonomy accepts memory as a static recollection and time as a linear entity. In this sense, autobiographical memory is described as long-term memory, as in long time remembrance of the past that has "long gone".

Another taxonomy suggested for memory is the hierarchical taxonomy built around "long-term memory" which is divided into categories of declarative (explicit) and non-declarative (implicit). While declarative memory requires "declared" events and

facts, non-declarative memory is formed with practiced skills, for example like riding a bike. Neurobiologist Yadin Dudai defines declarative memory as "the internal representations of facts and episodes that are accessible to conscious recollection" (Dudai 2008, 73).

According to the dependence on a specific time and place, there is a distinction proposed in 1972 by experimental psychologist Endel Tulving, who makes a distinction within declarative memory systems and branches them into semantic and episodic memory. According to Tulving, if an experience is abstracted and remains as a knowledge detached from time and space, it is called "semantic memory". On the other hand, "episodic memory" pertains to the recollection of a particular event situated in a distinct location and time frame (Fivush 2019, 10). When Tulving initially made such a distinction, he suggested that episodic memories are the same as autobiographical memories because both are situated in a specific time and place and characterized by a phenomenon he presented as "autonoetic consciousness" which is the feeling of reliving the event (Fivush 2019, 10). Likewise, Dudai's research mentioned in the book "Memory from A to Z: Keywords, Concepts and Beyond" delves into the role of episodic memory in the formation of personal history by defining episodic memories as "most sophisticated faculty, and the one most characteristic of humans" and "the conscious mental re-enactment of personally experienced past events" while describing remembrances of personal past as "conscious time travels" (Dudai 2008, 91). However, Tulving's and Dudai's arguments are problematic because the fact that without self-awareness nonhuman animals and infants can recollect specific episodes from their past suggests that not all episodic memories qualify as autobiographical and since there is a consciousness factor, all episodic memories cannot qualify as autobiographical (Fivush 2019, 12).

Apart from taxonomies there are two main approaches towards memory: a recollective approach which is more traditional, familiar, and supports the taxonomic perspective as in former paragraphs; and a reconstructive approach which is more contemporary and erodes the definitions of recollection. In the 14th century, the word memory was defined as "faculty of remembering; the mental capacity of retaining unconscious traces of conscious impressions or states, and of recalling these to consciousness in relation to the past" (Dictionary N.d.*b*). Centuries later, in the present, the definition of memory in the Cambridge Dictionary, as "the ability to remember information, experiences, and people" with its synonym "recollection" indicates that the conceptualization of memory as recollection or archive is still dominant (Dictionary N.d.*a*). Professor of cultura studies, Wojciech Kalaga, criticizes this "hegemony and persistence of the archival model of memory in Western culture" which leaves no space for interpretation when it comes to remembering (Kalaga 2016,

27). Exhibiting an example of recollective perspective, after initially calling it "personal memory", William Brewer defines autobiographical memory as "a recollection of a particular episode from an individual's past" (Brewer 1986, 34). Recollective perspective considers the life of an individual as a timeline and celebrates memory's ability to position unique experiences along this timeline.

The archival or recollective view of memory posits that memory operates as a passive mechanism that stores and reproduces representations of past experiences (Yaşayanlar 2023, 20). According to this approach, human memory is thought to exhibit a representational and mnemonic character by creating replicas of past experiences. However, there could be undeniable mismatches and inconsistencies between these representations and the experience or information retrieved. These "imperfections" in the process of remembering, as the philosopher David Hume described, still leads discussions about the aspect of truth when it comes to memory (Yaşayanlar 2023, 20). Also, recent discoveries in psychology and neurology challenges and mostly invalidates the idea that memories are pure or mnemonic. Now, by virtue of a "reconstructive approach", autobiographical memory can be viewed as not only "far from being the mere videotape-like replica of the personal past it was often assumed it to be", but instead as "a richly textured, multivocal text, as potentially relevant to the literary critic or the cultural historian as to the psychologist" (Freeman 2010, 263).

## 2.2 A Reconstructive Approach Towards Memory

British psychologist Sir Frederic Charles Bartlett who was the first professor of the field of experimental psychology at Cambridge University made significant contributions to memory studies, challenging the traditionally accepted recollective and reproductive models. In his influential book *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932) he introduced the "reconstructive" approach, and suggested that every recalling has its own characteristics each time, and "in a world of constantly changing environment, literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant" (Bartlett 1995, 204). In the light of his case studies, he precipitated that the past works as "an organized mass rather than as a group of elements each of which retains its specific character" (Bartlett 1995, 199). Given that memories are inherently connected and operate within a single organism, leading to the associative nature that characterizes the process of recall (Bartlett 1995, 199).

To build his theory on memory further, Bartlett introduces the terms "schema" and

"attitude". Schema is an evolving framework where past experiences are integrated. Each new memory that enters this framework interacts with existing memories, leading to a constant interplay between past and present experiences. Consequently, each recollection of an event is a unique recreation, shaped by the memory system that undergoes a constant rearrangement, resulting in the reassembly of memories themselves. "This living mnemonic schema" integrates emotional and intellectual information, constructing narratives and stories that reinterpret our past experiences from our current perspective (Mindlich 2016). And this current state is called "attitude":

> "Here is the significance of the fact, often reported in the preceding pages, that when a subject is being asked to remember, very often the first thing that emerges is something of the nature of attitude. The recall is then a construction, made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude." (Bartlett 1995, 207).

Hence, contrasting to the view that the mechanism of memory work as a static and passive system for preserving, reproducing, and stimulating experiences; remembrance is "an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language form." (Bartlett 1995, 214).

Decades before Bartlett's conceptualization of memory as "reconstruction", in 1896, French philosopher Henri Bergson published *The Matter and Memory* in which he opposed the traditional view on memory as an archive and built a new theory on the subject. First, he proposed that the assumption that memories are stored as "fundamentally ill-posed" (Kalaga 2016, 27). He challenged the commonly accepted conceptualization of time by suggesting that the present does not exist, that there is only the past, and recollections are preserved in themselves-as they belong in the past (Kalaga 2016, 27). According to Bergson, the past and the present coexist together, in contrast to the idea that they have a successive relationship, and the past no longer exists. Another French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, reflects on the Bergsonian idea of time in this way: "The past does not follow the present, but on the contrary, is presupposed by it as the pure condition without which it would not pass." (Deleuze 1988, 58). In this framework, all present moments pass through a past that continuously exists (Kalaga 2016, 28). The present is not a static entity but a continuous state of becoming, always transcending itself. While the present is

constantly transitioning into the past, the past remains eternal and timeless, existing indefinitely. In parallel, "Memory is the present of the past" as Paul Ricoeur quotes St. Augustine (Ricoeur 1999, 10).

Today, we can think of human experience and perception as subjective, multiple, and ambiguous. "As a problematizing force" in contemporary philosophical and cultural discourse, there is an undeniable influence of postmodernist thought when it comes to understanding of memory and time (Hutcheon 1988, xi). Put forward in the 1980s and still echoing today, postmodernism is a philosophical and cultural phenomenon that critiques modernity and widely accepted modes of thinking. Embracing self-reflexivity, postmodernism refuses to bring out solutions to the contradictions of the modern world because it contests, in the words of the philosopher Lyotard, "the totalizing master narratives of our culture" (Hutcheon 1988, x). Postmodernism questions from within, challenges but not denies. It exhibits paradoxical nature by subverting what it affirms. Therefore, it exposes underlying power dynamics and ideological influences that shape human experiences and perceptions. While the problematization of "the common sense" and "the natural" is its primary focus, postmodernism undermines the definitions and formations of modernity such as knowledge, reality, meaning and identity which are introduced as fixed, stable and continuous entities. Therefore, it rejects the notion of a universal or absolute truth and instead foregrounds the constructed nature of narratives that shape our perceptions of reality. In Hutcheon's words, "No single narrative can be considered a natural "master" narrative, as hierarchies are constructed rather than inherent" (Hutcheon 1988, 12).

Mainly based upon the absence and destruction of it, postmodernism that is characterized as the repercussion of "the times in which we live is a social amnesia, in which we, as modern subjects, are cut off from the pasts that have created us" attach a great significance on memory (Radstone and Schwarz 2010, 1). This perspective underlines the detachment toward historical consciousness and suggests that "organic memory" is no longer attainable because media and modern technologies have distorted the perception of truth, and so the idea of "authentic memory". In our time, memory is subjected to manipulation and reinterpretation under the influence of culture and politics. In accordance with Lyotard, postmodernism highlights the limitations of the current reality and the yearning for a past that validates human existence (Lyotard 2010, 248). Hence, utilizing the postmodern views on truth and meaning making; and subverting constructed nature of common definitions; memory is not a static entity, in fact it can be thought as fictional.

According to theorist Paul Ricoeur, in his groundbreaking book "Time and Narra-

tive", telling stories is the way to remembering and identifying ourselves. Therefore, memory is a process of constantly rewriting these narratives, and identity is the fluctuating outcome of this process. In fact, constructing these life narratives are essential to make meaning out of individual experiences by interpretation. Hence, the concept of memory has a subjective characteristic, and it erodes the assumption of static, objective, and singular understanding of memory. As Kalaga has pointed out, "there is nothing like objective memory, a recollection fossilized into an ideal, objective form. Memory always wears the clothes of interpretation." (Kalaga 2016, 24). Aligned with the perspective of this paper, Ricoeur suggests a hopeful and creative approach that argues "we poetically reimagine scenarios so that we may lend coherence to our disjointed lives." (Mindlich 2016). In this way, it is possible to view autobiographical memory as a creative composition or assemblages of the past from the perspective of the present. "Autobiography is hopelessly inventive." as Mark Freeman declares in Michael Gazzaniga's words (Freeman 2010, 267).

When it comes to understanding the narrative side of autobiographical memory, autobiographies (written or oral) as in "life stories we tell", implies a great significance. Although in the era of post-truth, the concept of truth is under examination leading to a deferral of meaning, one might still worry about the "truth" factor. However, as mentioned, memory has its "imperfections" and as constructivist theorists Elizabeth Loftus and Daniel Bernstein state, "[a]ll memory is false to some degree. Memory is inherently a reconstructive process, whereby we piece together the past to form a coherent narrative that becomes our autobiography." (Yaşayanlar 2023, 21). This intricate relationship between reality, memory and fiction has been reflected in the employment of literary devices such as deconstruction, intertextuality, and irony in postmodern literature to expose the artificiality of memory. There is also another literary term called "unreliable narration", introduced by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. In her book *Voice, Vitrine, Tar: Unreliable Narrators from Archive to Memoir, Fiction to the Visual Arts*, writer, and researcher Çağla Özbek extends the reach of the term beyond literature, and follows "unreliable narration" as a base for creative, constructive, and critical method in archival tendencies and visual arts to bridge the gaps between history, memory and lived reality. Drawing from the rich tradition of first-person narratives rooted in oral traditions and epic poetry, which have historically served as vehicles for conveying truth, Özbek argues that the utilization of the "I" in the novel tradition signifies a departure from an objective and concrete understanding of reality (Özbek 2023, 19). In addition, she raises a question drawing attention to the context of the narrator, in other words, the "I" in autobiographical memory:

> "Therefore, is a subject who does not feel safe –moreover, is not safe–
> inside an already unreliable set of dynamics, obliged to inspire reliability
> in the process of meaning-making? Can't a subject who searches for their
> own voice in the margins of the page priorities survival, or producing a
> kind of speech that echoes and dissipates (and multiplies) instead of
> sounding reliable by producing a smooth, linear and calm narrative?"
> (Özbek 2023, 14).

Isn't it also subjective to evaluate trust in a narrative? The notion of a "true story"
is only a construct, reflecting a culturally accepted and conventionalized portrayal
of reality. Thus, the act of telling and reconstructing stories about the personal past
could be a way of claiming power due to challenging the dominance of established
truths to explore other realities (Yaşayanlar 2023, 73). In this way, "unreliable
narrative" offers the opportunity for subjects of disadvantaged and marginalized
groups to construct their own memories and voice their own narratives among many
voices they deal with. The idea that we fall back on the most speculative and
nebulous forms of subjectivity when under pressure can be liberating in that sense
rather than restrictive. This attitude, which negotiates fiction and non-fiction on
the same plane, allows us to constantly cover the distances between mnemonic and
traumatic memory (Özbek 2023, 55). Indeed, it is important to differentiate "a
static and an unchangeable delusion" from an imaginative force to tell "one's own
truth" which is close to the emotion of the actual lived experience. Opening space
to many "other" or "alternative" truths, many personal memories, thus many voices
could be a way to heal the wounds. And as psychologist Jerome Bruner points out,
"we eventually become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our
lives", supporting the role of narrative constituting memory. (Bruner 1987, 15).

The assumption of autobiographical memory being only but only about the indi-
vidual could misguide us because "the personal past is suffused with others' mem-
ories–which are themselves suffused with other others' memories" (Freeman 2010,
263). People incorporate narratives shared by others into their own memory recol-
lection process, blending external accounts with their personal experiences. Özbek
strongly emphasizes that we are exposed to more subjectivity than ever before in
recorded history (Özbek 2023, 9). Aside from other people, today even the data on
our smartphones and computers exhibits an external kind of "suffusion" to our re-
membering. French philosopher and sociologist, the inventor of the term "collective
memory", Maurice Halbwachs raises a vital question emphasizing the social aspect
of the personal memory in his book *The Collective Memory*: "Don't we believe that
we relive the past more fully because we no longer represent it alone, because we
see it now as we saw it then, but through the eyes of another as well?" (Halbwachs

1992, 23). And he adds that we are never alone. There is an undeniable social aspect of the memory that takes part both in the act of "remembering" or "recalling", "forgetting", and the experience itself. The memories we have are the formations of our consciousness not only affected by the people that surround us, but also by the "social frameworks" that we live in such as culture, education, and politics. Hence, autobiographical memory is undeniably intertangled with collective memory.

## 2.3 Absence and Silence: Amnesia over Generational Trauma in Family Narratives

"Family" is a multifaceted construct that can come forward in various structures like chosen families, biological families, and families formed through adoption or other non-biological means. Whether it is a matter of choice or blood, family is a fundamental "collective" playing a crucial role in the formation of "autobiographical" memory, sense of belonging and identity for individuals. Except for the chosen families later in life, one's first encounter with the other and broader world happens in the family environment which provides a foundation to experience and learn. In the meaning-making process of an individual, familial bounds that are formed with genetic connections, heritage, shared values, emotions, experiences, and especially "family memory" built around "family narratives" are understood to be significant.

Family memory has an intermediary position "between the individual remembering and collective remembering, between private and public, between local and national/transnational" (Švaríčková Slabáková 2022, 2). The conceptualization of "family memory" originate from Maurice Halbwachs's ideas revolved around his theories of "social frameworks of memory" and "collective memory":

> "In fact, from the moment that the family is the group within which we pass the major part of our life, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our thoughts. Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things. [. . . ] family has its own peculiar memory, just as do other kinds of communities. Foremost in this memory are relations of kinship." (Halbwachs 1992, 153 and 155,156).

The studies of family memory took a remarkable turn when "conversational remembering" has been brought to the table. The research conducted by sociologist Angela Keppler explores the intricacies of how memories are formed and passed on

during everyday family conversations, explicitly focusing on interactions that take place around the dinner table, known as "table talks" (Keppler 1994). Aligned with Halbwachs' views, Keppler points out that family memories are created in the "acts of communication" about past between family members rather "as a stock list of events" (Švaříčková Slabáková 2022, 7). In this way, instead of a unified narrative, family memories exhibit conflicted, fragmented, and inconsistent character. Aside from the contribution of this view to the narrative structure of family memory, it may lead to the exclusion of "unspoken" past events from family memory. So, what about the past that remained untold and covered by silence? Can we talk about "uncommunicated memories" in family narratives, or in other words "family secrets"?

These acts of communication between family members indicate that families are "narrative formations and imagined communities" and it is possible to look at it from a performative perspective as Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson argue (Siim 2016, 74). Introducing the term "doing family", they suggest that family storytelling surfaces during a set of everyday activities that constitute the essence of familial life, often invisible to both family members and outsiders (Langellier and Peterson 2004, 33-39). These acts, narratives and rituals are the elements that create and maintain familial bounds, in short, make a family.

The inclusion of past events into the family narrative and the extension of people with whom these events are shared depend on whether these events are accepted as positive or negative according to "family values". Family members build an outer layer to maintain an appearance aligned with how they want their family to be perceived. Our role within the family is dictated by preexisting rules and traditions, not by personal sentiments regardless of our entry into a family – through birth, marriage, or other means (Halbwachs 1992, 147). "Positive" narratives of the past evoke laughter and joy as shared among a large scope of the relatives and even individuals outside of the family. Some family narratives turn into myths to be learnt from for younger members of the family, cultivating "positive" moral behaviors and choices. And "negative" experiences or events of the family past turn into discreet narratives that are only shared in inner circles of family, mostly one-on-one- and limited in content-wise. Some narratives are acknowledged by family members only once and not explicitly shared again. And some remain untold. Such stories are often sorrowful, or traumatic in content, perceived as harmful to the ideal portrayal of the family and thought to be better kept as secrets by family members, yet they are not forgotten. John Gillis differentiates this idealized, mythical image of "loving family" derived from societal fantasies as the family we live "by"; from the reality of the family, we live "with" (Gillis 2002, 2). In between them, there exist the gaps

of memory covering potential unhappiness, conflicts, and imperfections.

Mostly out of fear or shame, there, this intentional and purposeful act of silence enters: "Silence is a social process, involving different actions and agencies. It is not equal to forgetting, but rather refers to the absence of narration" (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2012, 113). It is stated that this silence is not only a failure of communication devoid of meaning, this "non-communication" can also be seen as a different act of narrating, omission more than absence, carrying a meaning of its own (Siim 2016, 75). Silence implies that there is a story there stands with a lack of words to narrate it. In contrast to being perceived as falsehoods or historical curiosities, family secrets are an important part of the fabric of daily life of the family and serve as an essential tool for unveiling hidden family history (Smart 2011, 551). Also, the common acceptance of the idea that every family harbors secrets inherently, indicates how the structure of family is infused with further cultural and societal norms.

As rooted in shared family narratives and rituals passed down across generations, family memory is inherently intergenerational or transgenerational (Švaríčková Slabáková 2022, 12). Based on intergenerational ties, family memories are continuously shaped and adapted for reinforcing family identity. Hence, the unresolved traumas of the past remain as family secrets passed down to current generations. Focusing on the Holocaust, feminist literary scholar Marianne Hirsch introduced the term "postmemory" in 1992, and drew attention to the transmission of memory between generations and substantial impact of historical events on later generations who did not directly experience them (Hirsch 2008, 103). Despite not experiencing these events firsthand, this intimate transmission of traumas ingrains so profoundly and emotionally that it can be perceived as genuine memories by the subsequent generation due to the stories, images, and behaviors that surrounded their upbringing (Hirsch 2008, 106). Therefore, an individual of the family came across another dimension of their identity as "intergenerational self" that means the self, intertwined with a broader familial narrative (Fivush, Bohanek, and Duke 2008). In that sense, understanding the familial history is essential for psychosocial well-being of adolescents and the advancement of their identity formation (Fivush, Bohanek, and Zaman 2011).

While the studies of intergenerational transmission of trauma often concerns silence and unspoken stories, clinical psychologist Jill Salberg draws attention to the mode of how transmission occurs. According to her, transgenerational passing down of family memories is intricately related with disorganized attachment patterns derived from "the child's empathic attunement and search for a parental bond" (Sal-

berg 2015, 21). This leads to the concept of "traumatic attachment" between the children and their previous generations, and later shapes their perception of love, security, and trust in relationships. Beginning from birth, children persistently seek attachment. As a result, they try to "adjust and adapt to the emotional presence and absence of their caregivers/parents" in a constant state of observation (Salberg 2015, 23). This search goes beyond spoken words, through nonverbal and preverbal realms, gazes, sounds, and touch-or the absence of those, weaving a narrative often at an implicit level (Salberg 2015, 24). In the presence of a parent who is physically or emotionally unavailable, the child develops attachment not only to the present attributes but also to the void derived from what is absent (Salberg 2015, 30). The child unconsciously internalizes an undesirable aspect of the caregiver, resulting in disassociation from oneself while this "alienated identification" serves as a bridge connecting generations (Faimberg 2005, 15).

> "Once you begin to think this way about the shadowy line between the living and the dead, about the active absence and presence of spectral figures in our consulting rooms, in our dream lives, and in our lives, a rich experience of self and others opens up." (Harris 2007, 663)

The attachment formed by the child is inevitably influenced by the unmetabolized trauma of the parent. When a parent fails to recognize and respond to significant aspects of their experience, and these elements cannot be communicated with the child, it may cause "dissociative lack of integration" (Lyons-Ruth 2003). This fragmentation stems from the parent's neglect of the child's feelings and "incapacity that is transmitted to the child, who must not know what he/she actually does know" (Salberg 2015, 33). As a result of this neglect, unresolved inner conflicts of the parents are transferred to their children, exposing their anger and restlessness towards them. Therefore, the person of safety for the child has the capacity to turn into the cause of stress, anxiety, and even fear. Referencing psychiatrist George Halasz's ideas, Salberg claims that children are required to engage empathetically to subtle cues related to the trauma narrative to form and sustain attachment bonds (Salberg 2015, 37).

The etymological roots of the Greek term "trauma," means "wound," which initially referred to physical injuries but later evolved to encompass psychological wounds inflicted on the mind. Trauma, as explored in medical and psychiatric literature, particularly by Freud, extends beyond a mere violent event in one's past, rather it is depicted as an unassimilated experience that resurfaces to haunt individuals. The narrative of trauma is portrayed as a belated revelation, emphasizing its enduring

impact on an individual's life rather than an escape from reality as in Cathy Caruth's words: "The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality–the escape from a death, or from its referential force–rather attests to its endless impact on a life." (Caruth 1996, 7). This portrayal suggests that trauma is not solely a psychological ailment but a profound narrative of a wound that cries out, attempting to convey a reality or truth that was previously inaccessible, concealed within some acts. Residuals of transgenerational trauma ingrain as "unthought known" that haunt the individual through mostly unsettling emotions so that they are likened to "ghosts", shadowing "unresolved grief without mourning" (Salberg 2015, 38).

## 2.4 Nostalgia, Voicing and Healing Futures

The word "nostalgia" which originated from Greek words nostos meaning to return home, and algia longing, has been transformed in its unique journey over time with different interpretations. First introduced by Homer as a bittersweet emotion in the Odyssey (ca. 800 B.C.), later in the 17th century it was put forward as a treatable disease by a Swiss medical student. Besides the fact that we don't think of it as a psychological disease anymore, cultural theorist Svetlana Boym claims that nostalgia turned into "an incurable modern condition" in the 21st century (Boym 2001, xiii-xiv). In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym describes nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" and continues:

> "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface." (Boym 2001, xiii-xiv).

Overused as it is in our time, nostalgia may mean a lot of things depending on the context. In this paper, the focus on nostalgia is associated with the lack of the sense of belonging, yearning for something or somewhere that doesn't even exist. Whether physical or in mind, it implies a "departure". Nostalgia is an emotion of "not knowing" what the yearning is about, a search for meaning. Being a fantasy and having a utopian characteristic, Boym suggests that nostalgia is not necessarily

directed towards the past, but towards the future, too. Now, extending sideways, it is more a feeling of suffocation "in the conventional confines of time and space" (Boym 2001, xiv). Nostalgia can be a triggering emotion that motivates individuals to create meaning in their lives by transcending the limitations due to irreversible nature of time in "a world marked by fragmentation and rapid change" (Boym 2001, xiv). It embodies a cycle of remembrance that mourns "the inauthenticity of all repetitions and denies the repetition's capacity to define identity." (Stewart 1993). However, a nostalgic is in danger of getting stuck in an idealized setting she/he/they created. Creating idealistic belongings to cure longings may result in problematic personal or collective ideologies. Rather, how does it sound to look right in the eye to the past for our "not knowings"; all the attempts of connection left us with absence, and all the possibilities of the past that are unfulfilled? The past haunts us with traumas of what happened but also traumas of "what could have been" which Ernst Bloch calls "undischarged future in the past" (Bloch 1995, 200). A sense of future carried with desire, hope, and expectation is innate to the act of remembering (Geoghegan 1990, 54). Intergenerational trauma is undeniably a trauma of "what could have been" due to the holes in the familial narratives. According to Özbek, sometimes it is the negative space –in other words silence– itself that outlines the invisible confession at the center of the narration (Özbek 2023, 121). Silence can be the tool of both confession and denial. "Isn't imagining a sound you are not allowed to hear also a form of hearing?" (Özbek 2023, 121). The weight of past generations' instilled the idea that history is something shelved after experienced for better or worse, shapes our perception of the memory, making it challenging to reconcile with past traumas, as Emrah Serdan further comments: "We have been deprived of tools such as contextualizing events historically, and relieving our loneliness by commiserating with our past counterparts, and therefore are burdened with the Sisyphus-like act of endless punishment or redemption." (Özbek 2023, 120). Insisting on remembering, Ricoeur posits that the obligation to remember presents itself as an "ethicopolitical" issue, intertwining with the shaping of the future. It encompasses not only a reverence for the past but also the transmission of the essence and importance of historical occurrences to future generations (Ricoeur 1999, 10-11). This form of remembrance plays a vital role in fostering a sense of accountability within relationships, where the act of remembering serves as a "manifestation of caring" (Yaşayanlar 2023, 33).

Returning to the concept of unreliable narration, it can be a strong tool to overcome the power that is given to "knowledge" and "factual reality" and liberate ourselves from the limitations of them, concentrating on the possibilities implied by silences. As Hannah Black points out: "Maybe every bad thing ever said about us is true,

and the bad things that are said of us are not said by the private gossip, but by the public state. But we still want to live in sunlight or salt water, and this is as factual as the airport border where the interior of the head feels clean and dry, exhausted." (Black 2017). Many trauma theorists emphasize that the way of healing trauma is narrating it, making a story out of it. But what if silence is not a preference but something forced? We have to search for alternative ways to diversify narratives; voicings and hearings. Unreliable narration allows for communication through omissions and indirect cues, fostering understanding when accountability wanes. Under repressive conditions, embracing speculative subjectivity and strolling between fiction and non-fiction amid repression can bridge mnemonic and traumatic memory, not being restrictive as one might think, but rather liberating (Özbek 2023, 56):

> "Refuting authority by embracing stubborn multiplicity against divisive, limiting and colonizing structures, these written and visual narratives remain a particularly effective means of solidarity in times like ours–so unreliable narration, traversing the domain of literature to the frontiers of contemporary art and pluralist archival work, makes it possible to penetrate between the lines of official historiography and bore strategic holes in it, and perhaps imagine the future as a kind of gift rather than a disaster unfolding in slow motion before our eyes." (Özbek 2023, 56)

# 3.   CHAPTER 2: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY AS THE SUBJECT OF ART

## 3.1 Memory as Ghost Sound: *Memoria* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Figure 3.1: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Memoria*, 2021. Match Factory Productions.



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Thai director/artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul's latest work released in 2021, *Memoria* (e.g. Figure 3.1), interacts with its audience with the unique utilization of sound, going beyond canonic narrative structures of cinema. Sound becomes more like a character centered around in the plot of the movie rather than just a supportive element to the visual narrative. It creates a realm for the audience to get in touch with the emotional aspect of time and memory-a subtle but powerful feeling of remembering.

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The narrative of the movie revolves around Jessica's-the protagonist of the movie who is played by Tilda Swinton- journey in the search for the source of "loud booming sound" she hears from time to time. Following the hints mostly dropped in the first part of the film, Jessica is understood to be a foreigner running a kind of flower-selling business; and she happens to be in Bogotá to visit her sister who is in hospital because of an unknown disease. Jessica initially encounters the mysterious noise when it awakes her one night, yet she finds no apparent source for the sound. Subsequently, she distinctly hears it while dining with her sister and brother-in-law, only to understand that she is the only one hearing the noise: A noise that acts like a magnet that not only pulls the object towards itself, but also gives the object the ability to pull (Saybaşılı 2020).

A feeling of engagement is awoken in the scene (Image 1) where Jessica visits Hernán, a sound engineer, for him to recreate the booming sound digitally. She tries to depict the sound with words; and tries to mimic and gesture it while showing a kind of linguistic struggle to define the sound: "It's like a big ball of concrete that falls into a metal well which is surrounded by seawater." (Weerasethakul 2021). Along with the questions of relative measurements, Hernán transcribes her verbal descriptions to a visual representation of the sound, a spectrograph, and they work together like this until they find "the one". This scene exposes the interdisciplinary nature of sound, as described in the words of the sound designer of the movie, Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr (*Rin* in short), "Witnessing it, we experience the permeability of the sound: its verbal, sonic, and visual layer; lost in translation between the senses and perspectives, we engage, and the body of the film is thus linked to the body of ours." (Mankowski 2022). However, without its meaning –or reasoning– this recreation does not bring satisfaction to both Jessica and the audience. Because sound has fickle, volatile, and intangible quality, transformative power and ability to expand beyond its source creating a magnetic/metaphorical space (Saybaşılı 2020).

Jessica sees Hernán again and at the point where they seem to develop a relationship, and his character starts to be revealed further, he disappears. In fact, he may never exist as understood from Jessica's visit to Hernán's workplace where the workers say there is no one named Hernán working there. Later in the film, Jessica encounters another character-probably his double/doppelgänger also named Hernán, a fisherman, but this time in a rural setting (e.g. Figure 3.2). Like in Jorge Luis Borges's story, *Funes the Memorious*, this man suffers from remembering everything he has experienced, therefore he never watches television or movies, and never gets out of the village to ease his overwhelm. Despite seeming inattentive to his surroundings due to "his excessive knowledge", at the ending sequence, he cries showing deep pain through his facial expressions.

Often at interplay with the concept of memory, the director acknowledges that although his other films like *Tropical Malady* "was really personal and full of his own memories", being the director's first feature outside of Thailand with a non-Thai cast, *Memoria* is about "an absorption of other memories." (Chen 2022). However, the booming sound drives from his personal experience of the Exploding Head Syndrome, a condition characterized by the perception of loud, non-existent noises during sleep or upon awakening, before his departure to Colombia to research for the movie (Mankowski 2022):

> "For years I usually woke up after three hours of sleep, fresh. Then I entered a 'drifting' stage in which scenarios came and went. It was not typical dreaming because in it I was doing nothing but being a spectator. A few hours later, at dawn, the 'bang arrived as a second wake-up call. The pleasure of the 'bang' expanded backwards to be included in the 'drifting' terrain which now felt like a subterranean world. The images were dim, as if they were in a stage of decay. Logic was not clearly understood. Time decelerated. Would this feel like tapping into other people's memories, or making a film in a foreign country? Possess/ Possessed – an equilibrium state when the self is removed; when nothingness could mean freedom. Maybe this was the answer to everything, including Jessica/Tilda's migration." (Weerasethakul N.d.).

Contrasting to the sound design distinguishing the dialogue from the background sounds in the mainstream cinema, in Weerasethakul's films, the dominance of the environmental sound arouses another kind of understanding about the narrative: it encourages an embodied involvement with the emotion and sensory richness of the scene by dismantling the verbal which commonly ground our comprehension (Lovatt 2013, 62). Mainly approached as an ocular-centric medium, cinema depends on certain cinematography or editing techniques (for example flashback scenes) to represent memory; however, Weerasethakul embraces the potential of sound in pursuit of "a feeling of remembrance" rather than a mere representation. He probably realizes that visual presence is already there before being seen, however sonorous presence "arrives - it entails an attack." and the human body cannot interrupt this attack like in the saying the ears don't have eyelids (Nancy 2007, 14). Returning to *Memoria*, a sound that Jessica cannot ignore, haunting yet violent, the booming sound becomes the trigger for a journey of remembrance lingering between dream and reality, personal and collective, interiority and exteriority, silence and screaming.

Figure 3.2: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Memoria*, 2021. Match Factory Productions.



According to the director, Jessica is a stranger that "finds herself in Bogota, being drawn by a dream or a trauma that she doesn't remember." (Weerasethakul N.d.). She is haunted by the unresolved traumas or silenced memories of the past which are in disguise of a sound. She hears it but struggles to define it, she feels it but does not have a memory of it; just like a person who experiences (directly or indirectly) a trauma. This is mostly translated as "image of ghost" in Weerasethakul's films. He utilizes the ontological uncertainty –trapped between reality and imagination–of the phenomenon of ghost, mostly, to embody the unspoken histories of violence and oppression in Thailand's past. In *Memoria*, the booming sound that haunts Jessica is closely entangled with the idea of ghost. Also, as emphasized in the movie, hearing a sound in one's head is often accepted as a hallucination and associated with "madness", or it is seen as a supernatural phenomenon like ghosts and spirits. Apart from the sound of bang, "silence" wraps the audience throughout the movie accompanied by sequences happening in real-time. In resemblance with John Cage's idea of silence, silence is not an absolute absence of sound. As he insisted, "there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound." (Sontag 1969). In *Memoria*, silence enables the audience to connect with their own subjective feeling of remembering by creating a space while the director engages them with the repetition and rhythm in both the narrative and the soundscape.

At the home of Hernán, the gaze of Jessica wanders on the architectural elements and the objects, until he touches her hand and there the emotionally elevating sequence begins leading to "the big reveal". Triggered by his touch, she begins to experience memories that do not belong to her only by hearing a cloud of sounds. Overwhelmed with emotions, she cries and encounters a question by Hernán: "Why are you crying?

They are not your memories." (Weerasethakul 2021). It is not a coincidence that the touch between them brings all the memories that are not healed, concealed, and burdened. The success of the film transmitting the feeling of remembering lies on the haptic character of the sound. To feel and to hear is so engaged in meaning that in Turkish *"duymak"* (to hear) means both. According to sound theorist, Brandon LaBelle, sound evokes a feeling of connectedness due to its intimate relationship to body based upon the physiological aspect of sound perception that "a sound wave only becomes a sound when it reaches and vibrates the bones in the inner ear" (Lovatt 2013, 65). The inventor of the term, "haptic hearing", Laura U. Marks clarifies that 'the aural boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct: the rustle of trees may mingle with the sound of my breathing, or conversely the booming music may inhabit my chest cavity and move my body from the inside' (Marks 2000, 183). Haptic hints of the booming sound get completed with this touch and memories flood no matter if they are hers or others. The only truth that matters in the scene is the connectedness, the sharing of the emotion. The scene embraces the cyclicity of time and acknowledges that we are only passengers in this universe, but memory always stays. The sound in Weerasethakul's head disappears while shooting *Memoria* as for the protagonist, too: The noise disappears when she faces the source which is again ambiguous and open to interpretation.

In Memoria, Apichatpong Weerasethakul achieves to show the creative potentials of sound to reflect memory in the sense that I discussed in chapter one. Between reality and fiction, remembering is a subjective act of narrating, however gaps in memories and silenced traumas may require going beyond the linguistic context. At this point, shifting the discourse on memory from an internal and representational perspective to a focus on the "nonrepresentational and extralinguistic aspects of subjective experience", provides an alternative resource for storytelling leaning towards sensory engagement (Callard, Felicity, and Papoulis 2010, 247). Building the narrative through non-verbal sound exemplifies how *Memoria* serves as a compelling illustration of how silent traumas can find healing through artistic expression.

## 3.2 Memory as Fiction: *Neriman Hanım* by Özlem Şimşek

*Neriman Hanım/Portrait of the Artist as a Performative Fiction* (2022), is an interdisciplinary art project by İstanbul based artist/academician Özlem Şimşek (b.1982), consisting of photography and video works revolved around self-portraits, found images, and texts (letters and chronological life story of Neriman Hanım). Over the

years developing her self-portrait photography style derived from "masquerade practices (such as drag, masking etc.)" and "appropriation technique" utilized by various artists (Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, etc.), Özlem Şimşek mainly focuses on performativity of memory, identity and gender, and representations of modernity. In her latest work Neriman Hanım, she has chosen a female character from Peyami Safa's book *Fatih-Harbiye* (1931) written in the early Republican era. The book is an example of literature concerning the cultural crisis in Turkish around the conflict between the West and the East. In the book, Neriman experiences an identity crisis because of this cultural conflict between modernity and tradition, is suffocated with the ideal of the "modern Turkish woman"; and in the end, she becomes satisfied by coming around to her roots by choosing a traditional life. Critiquing individualization, this passively depicted representation of modern women concretizes societal norms around gender. As academician Ezgi Bakçay drops the hints of the main idea of the artwork in the exhibition catalog: "The interweaving of the novel's fictional reality and the fictionality of actuality within the historical context highlights the complex relationship between the constructed narrative and the realities it addresses" (Şimşek 2022, 2). At this point, Şimşek deems the existing narrative about Neriman inadequate and takes it upon herself to reconstruct her story, this time giving her an actual identity, an individuality.

Özlem Şimşek appropriates the character of Neriman Hanım and writes a new ending to the novel and forms an alternative identity while constructing a memory for her, "a fictional archive" consisting of "her album and letters as well as experimental film and photography works" (Şimşek 2023, 2). Unlike Safa's, in Şimşek's fiction Neriman is a three-dimensional identity, an actress and an avant-garde female artist who is trying to assert her own subjectivity having individual interests and desires within the political and cultural context of that time.

Figure 3.3: Özlem Şimşek, *The chronological life story of Neriman Hanım*, 2022, Vision Art Platform.



*Neriman Hanım*, exhibited at the Vision Art Platform in Istanbul in 2022, can be interpreted to be a retrospective of an artist which consists of two main parts: the life story and the work that she produced. In the first part, her chronological life story in Istanbul from 1911 to 1951 is constructed with real (found) and fictional documents demonstrating Neriman Hanım's years at Darülelhan, her childhood, her family, images from theater plays and films in which she took part, and her letters (e.g. Figure 3.3). For instance, the images showcasing Neriman's birth home, her parents, and her early years are studio and vernacular photographs dating back to the late Ottoman and Early Republic periods, originally purchased by the artist from second-hand booksellers (Şimşek 2023, 9). Also, a newspaper page (Cumhuriyet Gazetesi as seen in Figure 3.4) from the 9th of November 1930 has been reconstructed for the project as a fabricated piece of evidence showcasing the beauty pageant in which Neriman participated, featuring a photograph attached that serves as a self-portrait of Özlem Şimşek. By creating an archive for Neriman Hanım, Şimşek pinpoints the potency of photography in affirming one's identity and integrating an identity to society as a part of history (Ulivucci 2014, 7,116).

To give a voice to Neriman Hanım and reflect the emotional and intellectual side of

her, the artist composes six fictional letters (e.g. Figure 3.5) written by Neriman to her confidante, the painter Dürnev Hanım. Besides the fact that the audience observe the hints of what Neriman thinks about the political events surrounding her, in the letter that references the novel, she joyfully declares that she accepts all the cultural and societal conflicts she faces including the polarity of the West and the East, and she has no regrets for actualizing herself by pursuing her desires (Şimşek 2022, 21). Şimşek, releases her from being stuck in the destiny that a man writes for her.

In the second part of the exhibition, there stands the surrealist film (e.g. Figure 3.6) and photographic works in which Özlem Şimşek in Neriman Hanım's persona discusses issues such as identity, gender, and memory. In her imagination, Neriman appropriates the techniques, materials, and visual language that surrealist artists from the post-war era such as Claude Cahun and Maya Deren use (Şimşek 2023, 12). In her photography, she uses double and long exposure techniques to create ghostly images (e.g. Figure 3.7) talking to the subconscious.

Figure 3.4: Özlem Şimşek, *Güzellik Milli Meseledir (Beauty is a National Issue)* 2022, 00:02 min. loop video.

Figure 3.5: Özlem Şimşek, *Neriman's Letter to Dürnev Hanım*, 2022.

İstanbul, 10 Şubat 1932

Neriman,

Hiddetlisin. "Sana itimat edip de gizlilik içinde naklettiğim hadiseleri romanına malzeme etmişsin. Hem de canın nasıl çekmişse beni de öyle çizmişsin" diyorsun. Haklısın Neriman, sonuna kadar da haklısın. Senin hayat hikayeni millete ibret olsun diye romanıma malzeme ettim. Hem de bambaşka biçimlere sokarak. Velakin bu memleket, kısa zamanda bu kadar badire atlatmış olan bu insanlar, hazır mı hakikatleri duymaya? Bana hiddetlenmeden önce bunları da düşün. Mahremiyetine ne kadar ehemmiyet veren bir insan olduğunu biliyorum. Ancak yaşadığın hadiseler bizim şehrimizde cereyan etmiyor mu? Bizim kültümüzün neticeleri değil mi? Alınacak dersler yok mu?

"Batı ve Doğu, Macit ve Şinasi, K ve S. Bunların arasında ben neredeyim? Beni anlatsaydın sana anlattığım korkularımı, çaresizliklerimi, bu memlekette kadın olarak olarak karşılaştığım zorlukları ve gösterdiğim cesareti anlatsaydın keşke... Yine kızardım beni alet ettiğin için ama hiç olmazsa bir hakikat payı olurdu" diye yazmışsın. Haklısın haklısın ama benim de yazar olarak bazı mesuliyetlerim var. Her kadın senin gibi doğru mu değerlendiriyor ülkenin içinde olduğu vaziyeti? Batılı olacağız diye kendi kültürüne sırtını dönen onca insanı sen de tenkit etmiyor musun?

Zaman geçer de davranışımın ardındaki sebepleri anlarsın ve artık bugün olduğu kadar kızgın olmazsın diye bir ümidi hep içimde taşıyacağım Neriman.
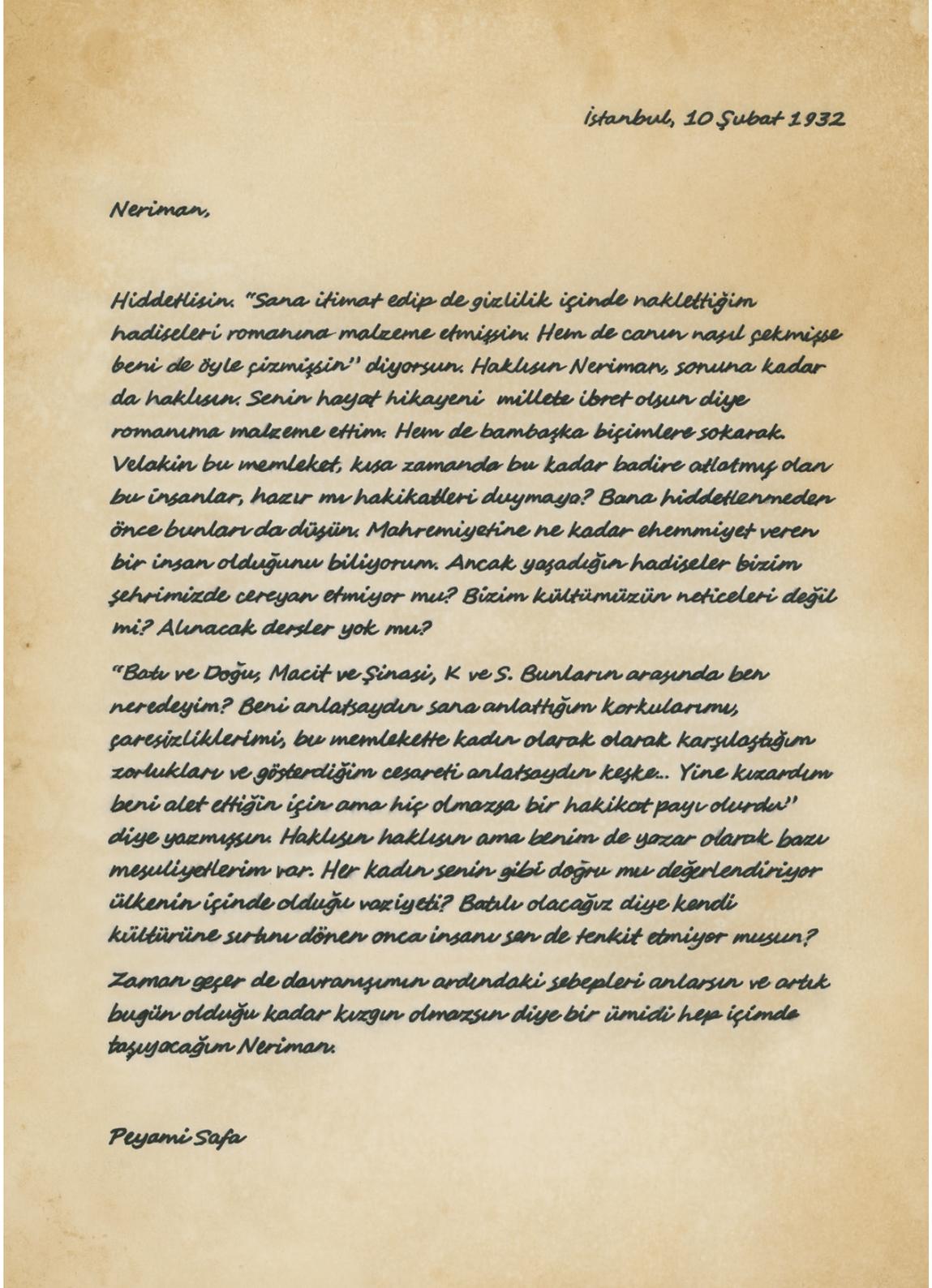
Peyami Safa

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Figure 3.6: Özlem Şimşek, *Veda (Farewell)* 1945-2022, 2:00 min. video.



From the perspective of this thesis, the allure of the artwork is the continuous and intricate interplay between fiction and reality: Özlem Şimşek embodies a fictional character that embodies fictional characters; becomes an artist who impersonates an artist who is in fact a fictional character. In that sense, the artwork *Neriman Hanım* can be thought of as a kind of "unreliable narrative" as discussed in Chapter 1, even though it is given from the beginning that she is not a "real person". Şimşek draws a portrait so believable and consistent that the viewer might forget that she is a fictional character. In fact, she could potentially be an individual who existed outside the realm of recorded history but had a tangible existence. There might be no remnant of Neriman to date, as her personal archive vanished due to various reasons in such a turbulent era. Therefore, Özlem Şimşek draws attention to the experience and "the truth" of a woman seeking to assert her voice amidst male dominance, in a male-dominated society that perceives Westernization as a threat to its authority over women during the early Republican era by embracing an unreliable narration built around Neriman Hanım.

Figure 3.7: Özlem Şimşek, *Tarihin Meleği III (The Angel of The History III)*, 1943-2022, Pigment Print, 140 x 94 cm



As an unreliable narrator, Özlem Şimşek suggests an ambiguous ending enabling the audience to participate in the process of imagining Neriman Hanım. In her letter dated May 10, 1951, which she sent to her close friend, the painter Dürnev Hanım, Neriman states that she is preparing to go on a journey that she does not know the duration and exact route of and asks her to keep the chest containing her archive until she returns (Şimşek 2022, 8). And at that time, she was 40 years old, the same age as Özlem Şimşek when she exhibited the work. This letter becomes the last document left from her, and her later life is unknown.

## 3.3 Memory as Subjectivity: *Stories We Tell* by Sarah Polley

Figure 3.8: Sarah Polley and Micheal Polley, Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell*, 2012. ONF / NFB.



An autobiographical documentary by Canadian filmmaker, Sarah Polley, released in 2012, *Stories We Tell*, is centered around Diane, her mother who died due to cancer when Sarah was eleven, while gradually turning into a journey tracing the hidden stories about her family and herself. Apart from the family footage and photographs, the movie mostly relies on the aural history of the family and brings its dialogical character forward. In an effort to recapture the memory of her mother and collect more knowledge about her, Polley interviews her four siblings, her father, and the friends of her mother.

Slowly uncovering how her parents who are both theater actors first met, get married and their ups and downs in their relationship, Polley learns details that she did not know before, in company with the audience. She learns that their relationship survived a breaking point when her mother had an affair with a producer in Montreal who is revealed to be her biological father later in the film. Interestingly, although this is a story that is only known by her mother, and buried with her, it is a story that is felt among the members of the family. Initially jokes about Sarah's dissimilarity to her father Michael led to speculation when her older brother overheard their mother's uncertainty about the baby's biological father. Her search for potential

candidates ends with a DNA test confirming film producer Harry Sulkin as her biological dad.

The plot, intriguing as it is, is not the real pull of the film. The success of the film actually lies in revealing the director's reflections on the relationship between autobiography and storytelling. Echoing the idea that storytelling is in the core of remembering, the film begins with, her father, Micheal Polley's voice over reading the words from Margaret Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace*: "When you're in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness . . . it's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you're telling it to yourself or to someone else." (Polley 2012). It is clear that throughout the movie, Sarah Polley's pursuit is not centered on a singular, comprehensive truth regarding memory; rather, she seeks to explore the diverse interpretations and experiences of lived memory, acknowledging the subjective nature of individual recollections. She emphasizes the plurality of remembrance while forming a "chorus" bringing together the voices of her family members. In addition to the interviews, the fact that her father, Micheal Polley (e.g. Figure 3.8), narrates the film from his own memoir creates another juxtaposition in the jumble of voices. Hence, the family memory becomes a composed narrative that is relational and composite. During interviews she asks the same questions repeatedly to every individual, and only listens without interrupting even though the narratives contradict with each other or her perspective. Mostly, she acts reserved and keeps her silence while listening to the cloud of voices she is explicitly conducting.

Her interactions with the family members deliberately reveal her authority and control the narrative in the sense that this is always going to be her own autobiography no matter how it exists with multiple subjectivities. Therefore, the film transparently reveals its behind-the-scenes operations: viewers observe the crew and Polley arranging scenes, while interviewees openly challenge and scrutinize her techniques, consistently breaking the fourth wall (Angeli 2021, 76). For example, jokingly, one of Polley's sister asks who cares about their family in one of the interviews adding a cuss word and implying that she is skeptical towards the importance and legitimacy of the project, however she immediately pulls back to check in with her sister if it is okay to swear (Polley 2012). Throughout the film this deliberate push-pull dynamic can be observed to embody the contradictory relationship between autobiography and documentary filmmaking (Anderst 2013).

The narratives about same events sometimes align with each other, however it is exciting to see the times that they do not. The diverse tales of Sarah Polley's mother's reaction upon learning of her pregnancy, exemplify the subjectivity of memory, as

each narrative varies based on individual interpretation and the dynamic between the storyteller and the audience. The filmmaker never opposes or comments on these differences, boldly choosing their coexistence because the plurality of these narratives captures the truth of her mother's complex feelings and experience. In the documentary, her ideas on truth clashes with her biological father Harry's: He strongly opposes her idea of giving everybody's perspective in the film due to his opinion that individuals who were not directly involved in the experience should be granted less authority (Polley 2012). However, *Stories We Tell* choses to form a genuine chorus by assigning equal significance to each voice, question, or discrepancy raised although it may result in a "cacophony", in Polley's words, not necessarily in a harmony that "sounds good" (Anderst 2013). In parallel, the same perspective underpins the artworks of Toronto-based artist Sara Angelluci who mostly works on memory, family archives and immigration. Her single-channel video work (e.g. Figure 3.9) with two separate frames for each twin, *Double Take*, depicts twin sisters recalling a childhood trauma that they witnessed which is derived from her own personal memory (Angelucci 2007). In the same setting, they (the actors) simultaneously perform their monologues about their differing subjective recollections forming a dual chorus and shared narrative, again showing the multifaceted face of the memory.

Figure 3.9: Sara Angelluci, *Double Take*, 2007, video, 5 min 30 sec.

Figure 3.10: Sarah Polley and Harry Sulkin, Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell*, 2012. ONF / NFB.



Another highlight of the film is that Polley creates a multifaceted narrative in five years of making the documentary, feeding the interviews with Super 8 home-made footages shot by her father and new reenacted footages in which actors played, mixed. Notably, these reenactments are also shot in Super 8 format, leading the audience to mistake them for original footage, eliciting confusion and critique (Sperling 2013). Unlike the criticism, she seems to like playing with these "true" and "false" footages and goes further with her decision that the actual subjects should portray themselves in some key scenes of reenactments. One of the fascinating ones, the reenactment scene (e.g. Figure 3.10) of the first meeting of Sarah and Harry, where they play themselves, imitates amateur footage to acknowledge the absence of an actual recording, yet alluding to the documentary genre (Anderst 2013). Within the silent scene, Sarah's family members and Harry take on the role of narrators, conveying what they remember when they first heard the event from Sarah and Harry. In this way, Sarah's story is conveyed in multiple layers through the recollections of others.

## 3.4 Memory as Unearthing: *Between Delicate and Violent* by Şirin Bahar Demirel

Figure 3.11: Şirin Bahar Demirel, *Between Delicate and Violent*, 2023, short film.



*Between Delicate and Violent* is a technically rich and multi-layered experimental documentary (produced in 2023) in which the filmmaker, Şirin Bahar Demirel, endeavors to rediscover and reinterpret her grandmother's repressed and untold tale through her own lens. Because she is after a story that is left out of the family photo albums, she manipulates the archival photographs and footage using stop motion animation technique mixed with staged film, texts, and documents to unearth what is hidden. An artist with a feminist perspective, she delves into narratives spanning from individual to societal realms, drawing inspiration from the untold tales of women which serve as a wellspring of her creativity in her films-such as in Women's Country (2019). While numerous narratives of violence exist, Demirel crafts her works with a poetic and authentic touch, steering clear of slogans. In this documentary, through the involvement of quotes and found family images, she underlines the societal roots of the film's narrative. The artist, who has been interested in the collage technique in recent years, was able to reflect the fragmentation and multi-layered nature of memory with the collage technique, which is also fragmented and multi-layered, thus a nice harmony was achieved between the content and the technique. In Edip Cansever's line from the poem, *Ben Ruhi Bey Nasılım* (I Am Ruhi

How Am I), "How many ways to step through the memories?" she asks repeatedly, eager to connect with her past using her imagination (Demirel 2023).

According to the artist's words, the concept of the film was initially formed when the elegance of a cup passed down from her grandfather attracted her attention (Bilsart 2023). Subsequently, upon discovering certain details over the years, the artist embarked on a contemplation of how hands tainted by violence could meet such a delicate cup and create paintings that are so elegant (Bilsart 2023). This inheritance of a cup initiates the process of thinking about the traumas that are inherited. In the exhibition of this artwork under the same title, the shattered pieces of this cup are displayed alongside visuals from the family archive.

Demirel builds the documentary upon the idea derived from the line of the writer Gospodinov "that which has not been told possesses countless variations on how they could happen or be told" as referenced in the film (Demirel 2023). She utilizes the omissions in the family narratives as an unreliable narrator which silently exposes the reality of the memories, and with creativity and imagination one might reproduce the family memory. After the breathing sequence of the earth representing the rebirth of the memory, the film starts with scientific visuals about how memory is formed in the body with the emphasis on that the brain's activity of remembering and imagining resembles each other.

Bringing together her grandmother's embroidery, and her grandfather's paintings (e.g. Figure 3.11), Demirel builds an analogy between hands and transmission of the memory, by defining hands as "memory places" (Demirel N.d.). "Hand memory" is not retained in the mind but within the body, emerging when engaging in painting, drawing, or knitting etc. Her approach towards the documentary can be seen as a contemplation on this passage of the generational trauma through hands. She goes after the possibility of tracing the aggression on her grandfather's brushstrokes and the aspirations on the embroidery patterns of her grandmother which are not evident in family photographs. Demirel tells without saying that her grandmother endured domestic violence at the hands of her grandfather, a trauma that contributed to her eventual struggle with mental illness diagnosed as schizophrenia.

Demirel works "in the space of contradiction between the myth of ideal family and the lived reality of the family life" that the family photo album ensures (Hirsch 1997). Family albums are curated entities that serve as constitutions concretizing and "protecting" certain family values and gender roles (Ulivucci 2014). In the name of preservation, it can be observed that what is culturally accepted remains and others left outside the album. Apart from the curation, each photograph –much more apparent in the early times of photography– is staged and performed accordingly.

Figure 3.12: Şirin Bahar Demirel, *Between Delicate and Violent*, 2023, short film.



Figure 3.13: Şirin Bahar Demirel, *Between Delicate and Violent*, 2023, short film.
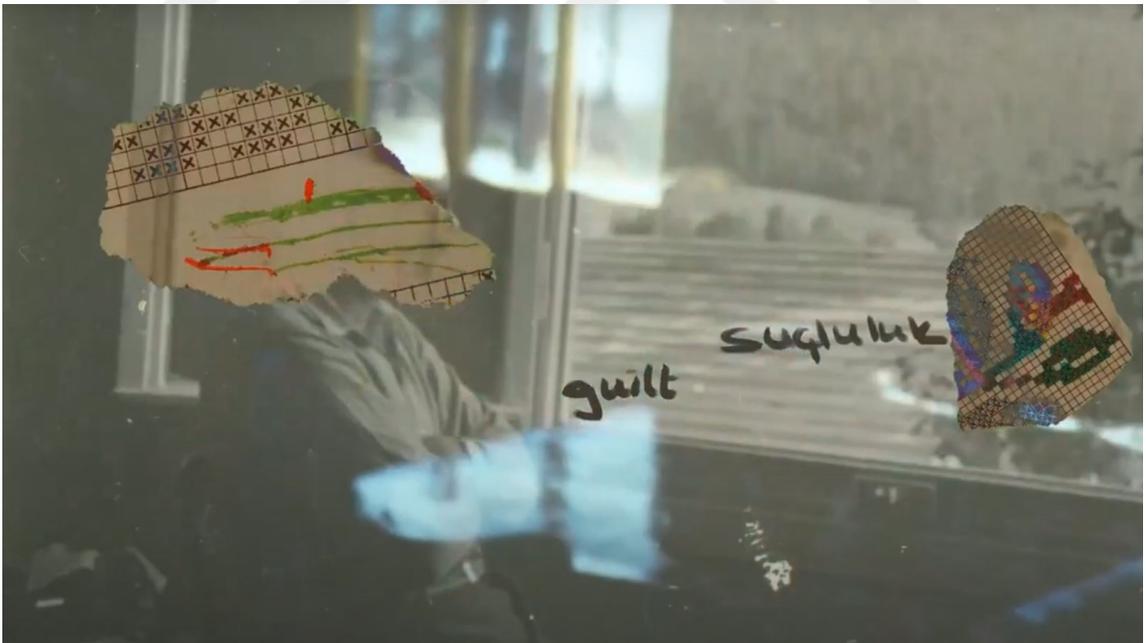


In a pivotal aspect of this thesis, Demirel's endeavor appears to be an attempt to initiate a conversation with the unspoken past and disrupt the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Commencing from the hands, Demirel seeks to convey her emotions and thoughts towards the story through a unique form of expression and interven-

tion involving her own hands. Describing this process, she states that she fills the photographs with emotions that she cannot see in them (Demirel 2023). This intervention serves as a form of excavation, akin to an archaeological exploration of memory apparent in both investigative and creative phases of the artist. Throughout the creative process, she scratches her grandfather's paintings with her hand (e.g. Figure 3.12)) to unveil the hidden violence within them and within the family album. Similarly, she intervenes with her grandmother's embroidery patterns, this time in an effort to comprehend her emotions through delicate touch (e.g. Figure 3.13). Despite lacking direct witnessing, Demirel strives to understand what she inherited from her grandmother's trauma. In this pursuit, rather than reducing her grandmother's story to that of a victim, she finds a way to give her a voice by revealing her resilience and resistance which she reflects in the works she produces with her hands.

# 4. CHAPTER 3: THE PROJECT: *MUTE-*

## 4.1 Context of the Project

"Objectivity is fine; but without the subjective, the personal, there simply is no problem." (Krauss 1999, 165). Therefore, the self, "I", within the subject is so substantial that I decided to continue with a more personal language in this last part of my thesis, as part of the narrative I established. Stories that are left unspoken have always intrigued me because I thought silences tell more than words. Therefore, I was drawn to the fragmented story of Muteber, the unspoken member of our family who is my father's grandmother, because of the silences of the story, although my first encounter with her started with an incidental word two years ago. All I knew about Muteber was that she had died a long time ago, her husband had a second marriage after her, and my aunt is named after Muteber. I first heard the further story about her from my mother: "They don't talk about it much because they get upset, only your grandmother used to talk about it. Grandma Muteber was taken from Giresun to Istanbul and hospitalized in Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital in the 1940s, where she ended up dying. She was said to be schizophrenic, sometimes distracted, and introverted. She was a ginger with curly hair. That's all I know". Thus, I witnessed the entire life story of an individual, my great-grandmother, being trapped within this passive and reductive narrative. From that day on, Muteber haunted me. Every time I tried to capture the rare moments when the subject came up, the story changed and the first clear statements I heard from my mother became increasingly blurry. What I felt in every piece of information I tweezed was always this: Muteber was someone who could not adapt to her environment, or perhaps refused to adapt from the very beginning. And her unspoken life was our family's unresolved trauma trapped in distorted family narratives.

## 4.2 Purpose of the Project

In narratives, I have always been interested in the "mad" woman trope rather than the "strong" woman trope because since I was little, these stories touched me from a place I could relate to. I remember almost crying when I first saw the story of the once famous actress Frances Farmer in the newspaper. The female writers I was drawn to were always said to be mentally challenged like Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, and Nilgün Marmara. I always find myself getting angry at the reductionist attitude in the biographies written about these "incompatible" women which are mostly attempts to victimize them or create moral teachings rather than understand their perspective and legacy. How many people know that Virginia Woolf actually was a lively person? The real question is how many people care about this? From this perspective, Muteber's story echoes larger narratives and represents things that are problematic within the social context. Being an identity that cannot conform to the norms is excluded and pushed away, this story reveals not only our familial but also societal structures. It is possible to observe gender roles, Turkey in the early republican era, institutionalized psychology, village and city dynamics, family dynamics, and many other phenomena.

On my journey with all these discomforts, I wanted to combine artistic research with practice in an effort to heal our family's trauma, analyze the personal bond I had established with Muteber, who I have never met but is perhaps the person I understand the most in my extended family. My aim is to give her a voice through my voice after many years because "restoring one's voice may reclaim what trauma had silenced" (Salberg 2015, 39). I wanted to remember her not as a victim or someone abandoned to her fate, but as a flesh-and-blood individual with desires and thoughts, someone to be remembered and talked about so I positioned her as the subject of my project. I'm trying to mourn after a loss that hasn't been mourned with a responsibility to remember what I have felt from the beginning. Paul Ricoeur put this forward as "an act of caring" while transmitting meaning and significance to future generations with the intention of breaking the cycle of trauma (Ricoeur 1999, 10-11). I know that her story echoes many other stories happening today, including my story.

## 4.3 Conceptual Approach of the Project

The project is centered around the fragmented narratives and silences about my long-dismissed great-grandmother, Muteber, which ironically means "respected, recognized" in Turkish. That's why the project is named after her, omitting one syllable from her name to emphasize the incompleteness and ambiguity of the narratives about her and the "muteness" of her in the stories. Derived from these family narratives, the concept of the project embraces a subjective and reconstructive approach towards autobiographical memory from the perspective of the present.

By positioning myself as the "unreliable narrator", a literary concept mentioned in Chapter 1, I try to create a memory between reality and imagination. While unreliable narrators reconstruct their testimonies, they instrumentalize different definitions such as "picaro", "clown", "crazy" and "naive" within the framework of literary theory, drawing the reader into their subjective reality through the erratic relationship they form with the truth, marked by conflicting impressions (Özbek 2023, 22). In these terms, Muteber may have been an unreliable narrator, too, who was given no chance to be heard. However, as quoted from Clarice Lispector's novel, *The Hour of the Star*, "If this history does not exist, it will come to exist. To think is an act. To feel is a fact... The truth is always some inner power without explanation" (Lispector 2011, 14).

## 4.4 Methodological Description of the Process

The project *Mute-* brings my personal process of research tracing the truth of Muteber, academic research about memory with reconstructive tendencies mostly based on the disciplines of psychology and literature, and my artistic practice and imagination together. My personal research about her includes semi-structured interviews with family members and relatives, visits to the village, Düzköy, in Giresun where she grew up and lived, to Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital in Istanbul, and readings about the hospital and the time period (1940s) and scanning the family albums and old found photographs taken in these places and related time periods. In the process, I visited the hospital three times, and two of them were to see the museum that is seemingly closed. Another reason was to reach out to the admission file of Muteber in the archive because I later learned that no one actually knows her diagnosis, the exact time she was hospitalized, the reason why she died, and where she

was buried. For me, it was the only chance that could give me a piece of "knowledge" about her. With permission from the secretary of the chief physician, I was able to see the museum accompanied by an officer although I could not access her file in both attempts. I observed that when it comes to the archive, the employees are incredibly strict and the reasonings given are vague and inconsistent leaving me hanging. In fact, this feeling of being hung in the clouds of uncertainty is one of the strongest feelings of the process of the project. I've found myself in between the narratives that are told and my imagination in play that I've tried to reflect in my works utilizing different mediums such as sound recordings, photographs, and videos. In the process of creating, I used a reconstructive method utilizing the self-portrait technique to imagine her and communicate with her exposing the fictional character of memory, feeling in between reality and imagination.

## 4.5 The Works

The works can be thought as divided into two parts as follows: The works that represent recollected, replicated, and reconstructed data about Muteber that I have no access to, and placing her in an institutional and familial context; and the works that reflect my conversation with her emphasizing the highly imaginary aspect of my journey (e.g. Figure 4.1).

The first part includes institutional files, her personal photo album, and a replica of her only image. *Access Denied* (e.g. Figure 4.4, Figure 4.5) is the work of reconstructions of the patient file and the admission forms from the Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital, and are made according to actual files from the 1940s that are exhibited in the museum of the hospital (e.g. Figure 4.2, Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.1: Öykü Önal, From the exhibition *Mute-*, 2024, FASS Art Gallery, Sabancı University, İstanbul.

Figure 4.2: A hospital file from the 1940s exhibited in the museum of Bakırköy
Psychiatric Hospital, İstanbul.



Figure 4.3: A hospital file from the 1940s exhibited in the museum of Bakırköy
Psychiatric Hospital, İstanbul.

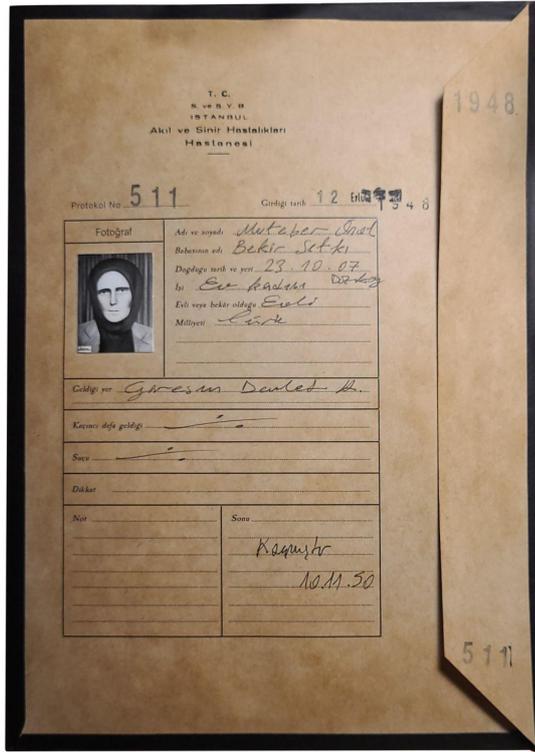Figure 4.4: Öykü Önal, *Access Denied*, 2024, 21x29,7 cm.



Figure 4.5: Öykü Önal, *Access Denied*, 2024, 21x29,7 cm sized 3 reproduced files.

*All My Testimonies* is a photo album made from the collection of the faces, the views, and the objects once Muteber must have witnessed which is formed from found photographs from books, auctions held online, secondhand shops, our family album, and the photographs I took (e.g. Figure 4.6, Figure 4.7, Figure 4.8, Figure 4.9, Figure 4.10, Figure 4.11). This album comprises photographs that she had never owned as a way to embody the potential to fill the narrational gaps and integrate them into her personal story through an alternative reinterpretation (Ulivucci 2014, 29).

Figure 4.6: Öykü Önal, *All My Testimonies*, 2024, 35x22 cm.

Figure 4.7: Öykü Önal, *All My Testimonies*, 2024, 35x22 cm.



Figure 4.8: Öykü Önal, *All My Testimonies*, 2024,35x22 cm.

Figure 4.9: Öykü Önal, *All My Testimonies*, 2024,35x22 cm.



Figure 4.10: Öykü Önal, *All My Testimonies*, 2024,35x22 cm.

Figure 4.11: Öykü Önal, *All My Testimonies*, 2024,35x22 cm.



*The Portrait of Muteber* (e.g. Figure 4.13) is the replica of the only photograph of Muteber, in fact the only thing left of her that I've reached. I saw this photograph during my visit to her only living child, my great-uncle's house. When I asked questions about her, he preferred not to say much and did not mention the photo. I asked one of his sons about the photo, and he brought this overly retouched, odd-looking portrait of her in a flashy gold foiled frame from the depot of the house, as if revealing the subconsciousness of the family. In addition to this contradictory scene, Muteber consistently maintained an ambiguous presence, akin to this image blending painting and photography. This photo is so "un-photographic" that we are prevented from feeling the light that touched her at the moment the photo was taken (Ulivucci 2014, 8). Her enigmatic smile and distinct and gender-neutral facial features, differing from my familiar relatives except for a slender mouth, solidified my sense of being in a state of ambiguity. The other thing that caught my attention was not being able to see her curly hair, which is mentioned in almost all the narratives I have collected so far, and which is a similar feature of ours. Just as her memory, her hair was veiled, too. This photo was so captivating that I wanted to keep it and think of it as a work, but despite my request, the photo was not lent to me or scanned and sent. Eventually, I reproduced this picture using a mobile

phone-captured version. This reality stands like a metaphor for all the insistence to still keep her as a secret, evoking the query: can we talk about ownership when we talk about memory? Sharing her photo can transform Muteber into a public identity (Ulivucci 2014, 7)). After all, preventing others from reproducing family photographs reflects a desire to preserve and control the family story, symbolizing a sense of ownership over familial memories (Ulivucci 2014, 44). To problematize this subject, I placed her reproduced portrait into the photograph of my grandmother's cabinet where the curation of the photographs of family members is exhibited (e.g. Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12: Öykü Önal, *The Portrait of Muteber* above *Showcase*, 2024.

Figure 4.13: Öykü Önal, *The Portrait of Muteber*, 2024, reproduction, 34x37 cm.



Figure 4.14: Öykü Önal, *Self-portrait as Muteber*, 2024, 25x33,34 cm, print on matte poster paper.

*Self-portrait as Muteber* (e.g. Figure 4.14) marks the second part of the project as the appropriation of her only photograph. Apart from the connection and disconnection that I have built with her, I wanted to emphasize the curly hair that is missing in the original and the odd representation between painting and photography. However, I chose to indicate that this is still a photograph that can be touched. Without a frame, this is a photograph of a person that does not belong to anyone.

Figure 4.15: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 1*, 2024, photography, 90x60 cm, print on matte poster paper.



In the exhibiton, there are five self-portrait photographs of imagined scenes of Muteber shot in Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital (e.g. Figure 4.15, Figure 4.16, Figure 4.17, Figure 4.18, Figure 4.20), and one on the coast of Yeşilköy (e.g. Figure 4.19). The scenes in Bakırköy were decided based on the locations estimated to have existed between 1940 and 1950. Generally, Muteber is in a state of hiding and blending in with her surroundings in these photographs. Muteber, who "frequently wanders and disappears" according to the family narratives, is imagined to have escaped from the hospital in my story and her whereabouts are unknown, and that's why we can't find anything about her. To mark this, the last shot was set on Yeşilköy Beach. In fact, her traces are erased by herself, and not by others in this narrative.

Figure 4.16: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 2*, 2024, photography, 90x60 cm, print on matte poster paper.



Figure 4.17: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 3*, 2024, photography, 90x60 cm, print on matte poster paper.

Figure 4.18: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 4*, 2024, photography, 90x60 cm, print on matte poster paper.



Figure 4.19: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 5*, 2024, photography, 90x60 cm, print on matte poster paper.

Figure 4.20: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 6*, 2024, photography, 40x60 cm, print on matte poster paper.

Figure 4.21: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 7*, 2024, photography, 45x30 cm, print on matte poster paper.



Figure 4.22: Öykü Önal, *Mute- 8*, 2024, photography, 45x30 cm, print on matte poster paper.



Marking where the house was burnt once had been, a self-portrait (e.g. Figure 4.24, Figure 4.25) shot with the clothes I imagined she wore there, is placed on top of the panoramic photograph of the village to form the photographic installation *Distant*.

The panorama, which shows the area between the two houses where Muteber lived (the area once the burnt house was on the far right, the house they settled in after the fire on the far left), consists of seven vertical photographs placed side by side (e.g. Figure 4.23). Along with the distance I have felt towards the village, the division of frames highlights the inherent brokenness and fragmentation within the narrative, symbolizing both the fractured nature of the story and my endeavor to bridge the gaps and reunite the scattered pieces.

The installation titled *Desk* comprises a table adorned with postcards from Düzköy (e.g. Figure 4.26, Figure 4.27). This work serves as a visual narrative of my visit to Giresun and the process of working on the project. The photographs I captured in the village are transformed into postcards which are meant to be sent to Muteber. Because the postcards are souvenirs evoking a sense of detachment by nature, they reflect the emotional gap evoked by the village, which is anticipated to be accepted as "home," resonating with both Muteber and me. On the reverse side of some selected postcards, my feelings I experienced in the village and the questions I want to ask her are written in my handwriting (e.g. Figure 4.28, Figure 4.29, Figure 4.30). Also, these postcards, destined to remain unanswered, serve as poignant reminders of an unbridgeable gap between myself and my great-grandmother. To emphasize the intergenerational process of tracking down her story, two books about psychology (one belongs to me, and the other one belongs to my grandfather) placed in the drawer of the desk (e.g. Figure 4.31).

Figure 4.23: Öykü Önal, *Distant*, 2024, photography, seven photographic pieces sized 25x50 cm next-to each other, print on matte poster paper attached to 3 mm foam board.

Figure 4.24: Öykü Önal, Detail from *Distant*, 2024, 3x4,5 cm, print on matte poster paper attached to 3 mm foam board.



Figure 4.25: Öykü Önal, Detail from *Distant*, 2024, 3x4,5 cm, print on matte poster paper attached to 3 mm foam board.

Figure 4.26: Öykü Önal, *Desk*, 2024, mixed media, 15x10 cm sized 49 postcards printed on 350 g matte paper, spread on a desk.



Figure 4.27: Öykü Önal, *Desk*, 2024, mixed media, 15x10 cm sized 49 postcards printed on 350 g matte paper, spread on a desk.

Figure 4.28: Öykü Önal, *Desk*, 2024, mixed media, 15x10 cm sized 49 postcards printed on 350 g matte paper, spread on a desk.
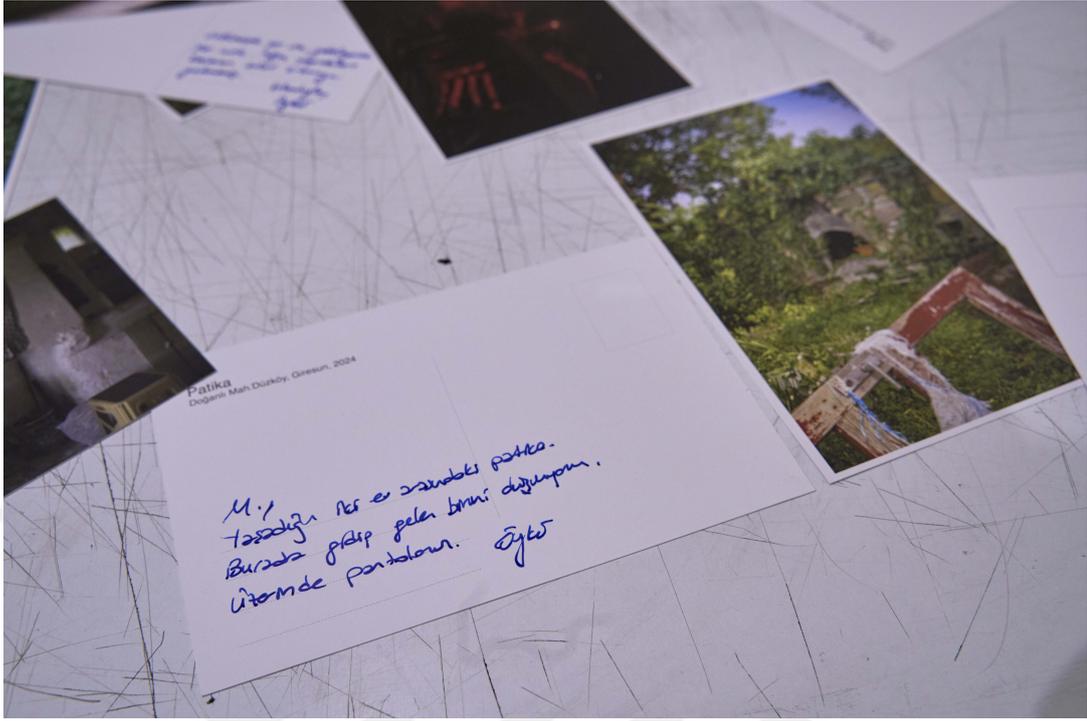


Figure 4.29: Öykü Önal, *Desk*, 2024, mixed media, 15x10 cm sized 49 postcards printed on 350 g matte paper, spread on a desk.

Figure 4.30: Öykü Önal, *Desk*, 2024, mixed media, 15x10 cm sized 49 postcards printed on 350 g matte paper, spread on a desk.
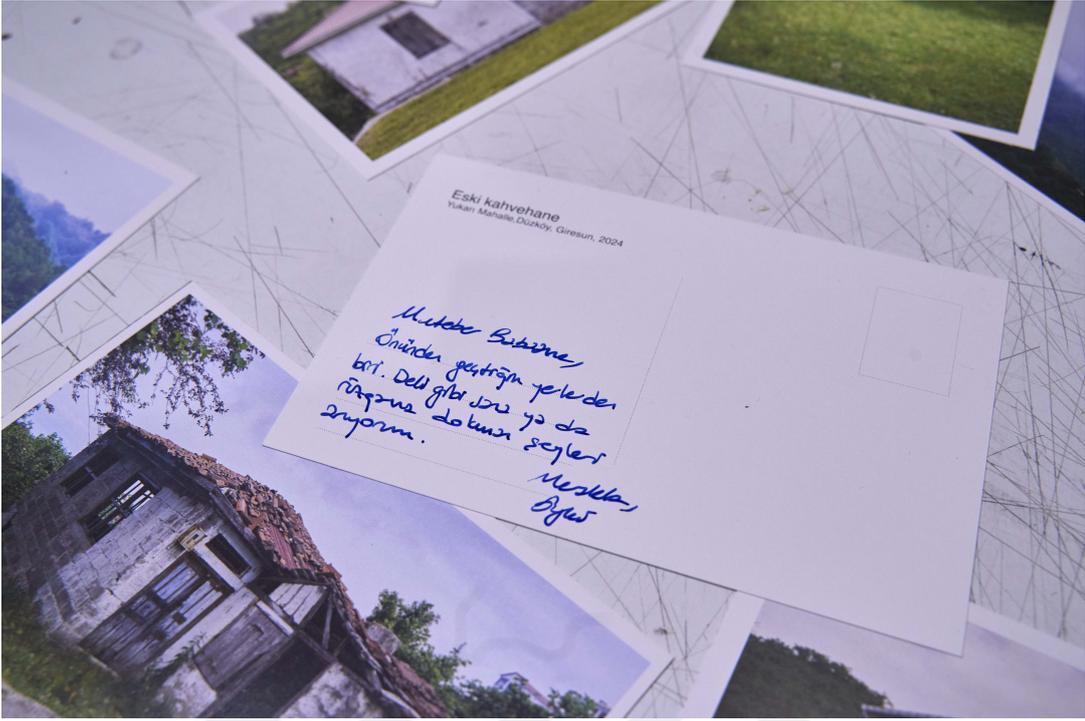


Figure 4.31: Öykü Önal, *Desk*, 2024, mixed media, 15x10 cm sized 49 postcards printed on 350 g matte paper, spread on a desk.



Two video works are planned to be exhibited together as a video installation integrated with the sound installation (e.g. Figure 4.32, Figure 4.33). One is piled from

the shootings of me as Muteber in Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital, and the other is formed with the steady scenes from the village without people and motion. In the first one, I go around the places where she might have been wearing clothes that I imagined she wore. I chose a bit masculine look for her clinging to the narrative of how she was seen differently because she insisted on wearing pants. Muteber's motions in the first video contradict the steadiness of the second video. In the initial video, Muteber's constant movements stand in stark contrast to the subsequent video characterized by static, almost photographic depictions of the village. This juxtaposition accentuates the sense of stillness, underscoring the void left by the absence of the home from which Muteber was displaced.

Lastly, a sound work (2'54") in loop comprising four channels is presented, featuring an inharmonious blend of voices. This includes a chorus composed of family members and distant relatives, incorporating recordings from the interviews conducted by me. Additionally, ambient sounds from the village of Doğanlı Neighborhood in Düzköy, the sample of crackling of fire are interwoven. The humming of Muteber (based on the Giresun folk song *Ben Bir Garip Bülbüm İdim*) articulated through my voice, tries to find a place for itself among other sounds and chases breaks, silences. At the end, we hear her deep breath recalling the writer, Birgül Oğuz's words: "The world was so much. I was so less. And all I had left was the sound of 'uh' on my tongue." (Oğuz 2012, 19).

Figure 4.32: Öykü Önal, *Wandering, Humming, and Silence*, 2024, video and sound installation, 2-channel video and 4-channel sound files, 5 min 40 sec on loop, color, 4K

Figure 4.33: Öykü Önal, *Wandering, Humming, and Silence*, 2024, video and sound installation, 2-channel video and 4-channel sound files, 5 min 40 sec on loop, color, 4K

# 5. CONCLUSION

While this thesis is an operation to reconstruct personal memory that wanders between reality and fiction, its theoretical framework is rooted in psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett's notion of memory reconstruction, complemented by insights from scholars like Robyn Fivush, Christine Ulivucci, Paul Ricoeur, and Çağla Özbek. The thesis draws attention to how stories are constructed in the family, where the collective and the personal are intertwined and argues that the untold stories imply unresolved traumas that are somehow felt despite being hidden. In parallel, the project of the thesis named *Mute-* portrays my attempt as an "unreliable narrator" to reclaim the memory of Muteber, my great-grandmother, who had been absent from my personal memory.

The fact that I carried out the process that combines artistic practice with scholarly research and personal introspection for the first time, allowed me to get out of my comfort zone and brought me closer to myself. Even though I could not reach anything of documentary significance and was left hanging in the air in all my pursuits regarding informational data about Muteber, my feelings inspired the works I produced. I realized that absence could tell many things and that absence can also be remembered. Even if we cannot trace the reality, we can choose the story we want to tell, call on our creativity when our words are blocked, and take steps to heal.

To conclude, I view this process as an initial step to communicate the memory of Muteber and I want to pursue the possibilities of how far the relationship between memory and fiction can go. My aspiration is to continue talking about stories like Muteber's and conveying memories around the narratives reflecting our own truth, rather than fictions dictated by power.

"Remember me but ah! forget my fate" (Purcell N.d.).

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