Article

Listening to, Reconstructing, and Writing about Stories of Violence: A Research Journey Amidst Personal Loss

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Abstract: This article explores the interplay between my life and research on responsibility in the context of (past) collective violence and state repression in Romania, my country of origin. Reflecting on the five-year research process, I delve into my multiple and shifting positionalities during data collection, analysis, and presentation, pointing to the fluid identities of researchers along a continuum in which their backgrounds, professional roles, as well as dynamic negotiations in 'the field' and personal experiences intertwine and affect research at every stage. In particular, I explore the impact of my personal experience of loss and grief after the sudden death of my mother on my research, revealing its influence on reconstructing and writing about stories of violence. In doing so, research unfolds as a journey where personal and professional lives merge, showcasing knowledge production as an inherently subjective endeavor. Building on this, I advocate for recognizing the influence of emotions and personal experiences on narrative interpretations as well as for considering the intertwining between research and personal life's as central facets of positionality and reflexivity.

Keywords: positionality; subjectivity; emotions; loss and grief; knowledge production

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1. Introduction

"I want people to know—especially the young generation. They should know what has happened to us in the prisons and lager. It should become part of their consciousness. Not because I think indiscriminate violence and repression will disappear when people know. No. But to show that . . . that they learn that you can overcome many hard situations, and that things do change, you know". This is the abridged, translated response of Aurelia[1], who was incarcerated at a young age in one of Romania's infamous political prisons during the 1950s, to my question about why she would share her story with me. By this time, our four-hour interview had come to an end, and my 83-year-old interviewee was visibly exhausted but also satisfied to have shared her story and message. I, too, was mentally and emotionally exhausted due to the length and intensity of the interview. Her story touched me deeply, and when she talked about the deaths of her best friend and her father, we cried together. At the same time, I was euphoric and grateful for the efficacious conversation and deeply impressed by her life story and her way of dealing with traumatic events. The quote mentioned above is an expression of her strength and ability to *"overcome many hard situations"*.

My interview with the former political prisoner on 18 June 2018 was part of a five-year research process on responsibility ascriptions in the context of (past) collective violence and state repression, in which I studied the narratives and responsibility ascriptions of five actor groups with varying proximity to violence in Romania. Aurelia is thus one of 59 interviewees who shared with me "multiple and complex narratives of violence, victimhood and responsibility" ([Jankowitz 2017](#), p. 305) in 'the field'. As Romania is my country of origin, fieldwork meant constantly navigating between Romania as my home and the field, between my research goals and the expectations of my interviewees, between my personal and professional lives, and between my multiple roles and shifting identities.

Before this research, I saw myself as a young researcher living and working in Germany but coming from Romania and thus having a kind of insider's perspective. This self-positioning quickly expanded through different roles assigned to me by interlocutors, confidants, or myself (Lavis 2010; Göğüş 2020), pointing to negotiations in 'the field' and the fluidity of researcher identities. Thomson and Gunter (2011) use the term 'fluid identity' to emphasize that insider/outsider positioning is context-dependent and fluid on a continuum, with researchers taking on multiple roles. My dynamic positioning in 'the field', navigating roles as both insider and outsider, can be metaphorically framed as the return of the "*lost daughter*", influencing research relationships, data quality, and knowledge production. This role, shaped by expectations and trust, persisted through analysis and writing, evolving in meaning amid personal loss and grief.

Less than a year following my encounter with Aurelia, the unexpected death of my mother at the age of 51 disrupted the trajectory of my life and induced an existential crisis. Denzin (1989) aptly categorizes such transformative events as epiphanies, leaving lasting imprints on individuals and fundamentally reshaping their perceptions. With the profound loss, I experienced both alienation from the world and an uncanny shift, transforming my roles from a returning lost daughter to one who had lost 'everything' at home. As a grieving daughter, my research identity momentarily faded, and contemplations of abandoning the search for narrative meaning in data arose due to doublings between my life and research. Hence, the questions that made up a significant part of my research about how people interpret and integrate traumatic experiences into their life stories and how they deal with issues of responsibility in the process were now questions I was living with. These doublings, initially burdensome, eventually became a lens, enhancing my understanding of research themes and broadening analytical perspectives.

Against this background, the article addresses the entanglements of my life and research through a personal reflection of my five-year research process and reveals "knowledge that was subjectively constructed" (Simić 2016, p. 108). As I show through my own example, subjectivity is determined by the "fluidity of multi-positionalities negotiated by researcher and participant during this research process" (Ryan 2015, p. 2), as well as by personal experience of death and loss 'at home'. By retrospectively analyzing personal as well as professional experiences, I aim to bridge the false dichotomy of insider/outsider or subjective/objective and encourage a holistic understanding of researchers. For they are not objective, neutral, or detached observers and analysts (e.g., Haraway 1988; Behar 1997); rather, researchers are individuals with diverse and shifting positions, feelings and emotions, and subjective experiences such as loss and grief.

To explore my research process as a "hybrid venture between professional and personal lives" (Rehsmann 2019, p. 189), this article offers readers a collage of my experiences in and outside the field, my own voice and that of my interviewees, and my personal insights and contributions by other (feminist) researchers. For this collage, I have supplemented my conventional data material, i.e., interview transcripts and field notes, with retrospective documentation and reflections that bear similarities to autoethnographic texts[2]. This aligns with the observation that researchers' reflections on the blurred boundaries between their personal lives and ethnographic work typically involve, at least implicitly, a processual juxtaposition of "memories and data from the past, present experiences and observations, and visions for future practice" (McLean and Leibing 2007, p. 4).

To orient my reflective inquiry, the article is conceptually organized in several ways. Firstly, this research process is chronologically divided into collecting (3. Listening to Stories of Violence), analyzing (4. Reconstructing Stories of Violence), and presenting (5. Writing about Stories of Violence) narrative data, even though these phases overlapped during this research. By taking into account the entire research process, it is possible to trace my shifting positionalities, oscillating between the roles of the lost daughter and the daughter who has lost everything, and to illustrate the complexity inherent in a researcher's journey, which requires a constant renegotiation of identities. Secondly, the article is organized around metaphors, mostly drawn from my field notes. During fieldwork and analysis,

resorting to metaphors was a way to project my emotions and state of mind onto the outside world. Here, I utilize them to elucidate certain aspects of my experience in terms that are more widely understandable and to encourage fellow researchers to contemplate their own research experiences through the lens of (these) metaphors. Thirdly, the article makes use of snapshots, taking the form of short stories, inner dialogues, or situational descriptions. In this regard, I draw on Göle (2000, p. 94), who, inspired by Simmel, suggests that with such "Augenblicksbilder" we portray fragments of social reality from which we can glimpse the meaning of the whole. These snapshots illustrate my research experience with stories of violence as a journey in which personal and professional spheres intersect. They also aim at encouraging readers to immerse themselves in my research process as a story. As Ellis (1999, p. 676) points out, "Thinking with a story means to allow yourself to resonate with the story, reflect on it, become a part of it".

Disclosing my research and personal experiences in this article not only "humanizes the field" (Simić 2016, p. 109), but is also an attempt to resonate with other researchers working in the field of violence and inspire them to reflect on the broad connections between their lives and their research in the role of a "vulnerable observer" (Behar 1997) who acknowledges knowledge as situated and fluid over time. As I show in this article, our interpretations of stories of violence can gain depth and complexity when we illuminate the shifting influence of feelings and emotions (Campbell 2001; Blakely 2007; Jewkes 2012; Reed and Towers 2023) and personal experiences (Ellis 1993; Ellis 1999; McLean 2007; Rehsmann 2019) on the research process and knowledge production.

2. A Story about These Stories

In early 2016, I started my PhD project on the question of responsibility in the context of (past) collective violence and repression. While in these contexts, the individualization of responsibility through criminal proceedings is a common practice, this is a poor fit with the social realities after conflicts and/or dictatorships. The discrepancy is underpinned by anecdotal evidence that individuals and groups do not readily comply with the legal allocation of individual responsibility, raising the question of how societies then deal with the issue of responsibility. To explore how people, groups, and institutions ascribe responsibility, I developed a conceptualization of responsibility as a narrative-driven practice that foregrounds narratives as a means of both making sense of the past and ascribing responsibility (Avram 2022). This conceptualization is based on the premise that individuals, groups, and institutions process and/or communicate (traumatic) experiences and situations of (past) collective violence and repression in and through narratives as "a form not only of representing, but of constituting reality" (Bruner 1991, p. 5). Narratives, accordingly, are the means of constructing a coherent and plausible story that makes violent events or traumatic experiences understandable and that enables or produces certain responsibility ascriptions.

To research responsibility attributions as a narrative-driven practice, I first planned to conduct in-depth case studies in Ethiopia and Kenya[3]. However, during the planning phase, my supervisor constantly encouraged me to consider Romania as a case study, as it was (and still is) relatively under-researched, but with my knowledge of the country and the language, I would have relatively easy access to research participants. Initially, it did not seem like an option to me, as it felt too personal. Romania was the country where I was born, where my father and most of my family live, which I visit regularly and call my 'home'. In my mind, it was never 'the field'. The fact that it turned out this way nevertheless is due to the persuasion of my supervisor, political developments in Ethiopia and Kenya at that time, and strategic decisions when applying for a research project[4].

The shift or expansion from Romania as 'home' to (also) the 'field' during my research brought both enrichments and challenges in data collection and analysis and (re)positioned me to the country as "a halfie—or bicultural, positioning myself in two communities (or maybe more)" (Göğüş 2020, p. 30). Because I was born in Romania, speak the language, still have close relatives there, and visit the country regularly, I have an insider's perspective.

At the same time, I grew up in Germany, live and work there, and have a "passport that crosses borders much more easily than" (Kušić 2020, p. 154) that of my interviewees. Like Kušić (ibid.) during her fieldwork in Serbia, "I found myself in the peculiar situation of 'going home' to do fieldwork in a place where I understand the language and laugh at the jokes but a place that is not 'my country'". Towards certain interviewees or specific social circles (e.g., individuals without formal education or involved in the field of intelligence services), I have been an outsider on additional levels[5]. As the following sections show, this positioning gives way to multiple and shifting roles depending on this research participants, revealing a dynamic research landscape characterized by fluid boundaries and compound negotiations. My reflexive inquiry further illuminates the intertwining between personal and professional spheres in this research process and knowledge production, i.e., the entanglements between life and research. This interplay challenges the notion of a clear separation between 'the field' and 'home' and similar dichotomies, highlighting the need for reflexivity to acknowledge and navigate these fluid boundaries (Amit 2000; Ryan 2015; Kanafani and Sawaf 2017; Bilgen and Fábos 2023).

Given my interest in how Romanian society deals with the issue of responsibility in the context of (past) collective violence and repression, I decided to conduct a multi-perspectival study. In addition to the *criminal courts* as the most visible arena for the public negotiation of responsibility, I included four groups of actors, each differently positioned in relation to past violent events and in the present, namely *survivors and descendants* (e.g., former political prisoners, participants in the revolution), *former regime members and state agents* (e.g., former Securitate or army officers), *experts and public figures* (e.g., journalists, politicians), and *university students* representing the younger generation. To gain access to these groups, between October 2016 and September 2020, I spent over seven months in Romania. Most of the field work, i.e., archival research and the recording of narrative and semi-structured interviews, took place between May 2017 and December 2018. In total, I collected over 100 h of recorded interviews and 70 pages of entries in my field diary.

As is common in anthropology and other disciplines, I kept this field diary to "capture the effects of intersubjectivity" (Jessee 2017, p. 18), which Jennie Burnet (2012, p. 35) has described as "the dialogue and interactions between the anthropologist, her research subject, and her research participants". These field notes "filled with accounts of emotions" (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017, p. 134) are a tool to track my own positioning and thoughts during data collection and analysis (Punch 2012) and to recognize the situatedness of knowledge production (Haraway 1988). The remaining sections of this article blend these field notes with interview excerpts, personal reflections in the form of snapshots, and insights shared by fellow researchers. I employ metaphors that emerged during my research as section titles to shed light on my various and evolving roles and fluid identities.

3. Listening to Stories of Violence

This section addresses my multi-layered experiences during fieldwork and emphasizes the interplay of my various roles and emotions in the data collection process. It traces the "dynamic rhythms of multi-positionalities" (Ryan 2015, p. 2) and highlights the profound impact that researchers have on 'the field' and the reciprocal effects of fieldwork on researchers (Reed and Towers 2023). In doing so, 'the field' is revealed as a dynamic research context with blurry boundaries in which the "personal, professional, and fieldwork involvements of ethnographers are mutually constitutive" (Amit 2000, p. 11).

The first part sheds light on my complex positioning in 'the field', oscillating between the roles of insider and outsider, symbolized by the metaphorical return of the "*lost daughter*". This role, which is linked to trust but also expectations, influenced access to and quality of the data and shaped relationships with research participants. Following on from this, the second part takes a closer look at the dynamic shaping of relationships during research encounters with regard to identity negotiations. Here, I show how my identity as a young woman held different meanings for each research participant and how this influenced interview dynamics and my field experience. In the final section, I address the

challenges of navigating multiple roles in and outside 'the field', which made me feel like an "*emotional chameleon*", as well as the impact that the stories of violence had on myself. In doing so, I emphasize the complex interplay between fieldwork experiences and their resonance in self-perception and emotions, which in turn points to the intertwining of personal and professional spheres during data collection.

3.1. (Re) Turning to the "Field" as a "Lost Daughter"

Parallel access to the different groups, some diametrically opposed to each other, proved to be time-consuming and challenging but was facilitated by personal networks for initial contacts and ultimately successful. The fact that I was able to conduct interviews with these groups was considered remarkable by contacts on the ground, given the polarization and politicization in present-day Romania and the continuous silence about past violence and repression in public space (Avram 2024). I credit the success of my data collection to my intricate positioning in 'the field', shaped by my diverse identities encompassing unique personal histories, characteristics, and capacities (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) that held different meanings for the individuals I engaged with during research. Fieldwork thus embodies a reciprocal process of meaning-making in which participants and I have strived to comprehend each other (Göğüş 2020). This shared sense-making entails identity negotiations, as reflected in designations like the "*lost daughter*" role. I now elaborate on how this role shaped both my access to data and the characteristics of the collected data.

During my first longer field stay in May and June 2017, I visited four different archives in Bucharest several times over a period of four weeks to obtain the indictments and final judgments of the five trials under consideration for my research[6]. In my field diary, I noted that my "*archive marathon*" resembled the "*journey of Asterix and Obelix in the 'The House That Sends You Mad'*"[7] as each institution had a different procedure for requesting documents, at times sending me back and forth between institutions and once between six offices in one institution. In one case, an exception was made in that I was allowed to secretly yet obviously take pictures with my mobile phone instead of being obliged to copy the texts by hand in situ. This rule-breaking was offered to me by the staff themselves, and I believe that my female gender, relatively young age, and Romanian heritage all had an influence on my access there (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). My field diary of that day mentions that the two female staff members in their early fifties seemed to have developed sympathy for me over the course of my regular visits, with one of them asking me if I would not consider "*to move back home*". In this entry, I noted for the first time that people would presumably attribute the "*role of a lost daughter*" to me.

During field research, I encountered this role attribution sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly, when making personal contact and especially in the conversations before or after the interviews. To establish trust and create a conversational atmosphere (Czarniawska 2004), I briefly introduced my research as well as myself in the preliminary talks or interviews, touching on key points of my biography: Birth in Romania, migration with a mother to Germany, father and family in Romania, work and research at a German university Many of my interview partners asked me what I thought of Germany, how I saw the two countries in comparison, whether it was not nicer 'here', what I thought of the food and the traditions, or what I lived out of them and how. These conversations were, as Göğüş (2020, p. 28) has noted, moments of negotiation in the field, in which researchers and interviewees "would try to estimate how much and in what way they would/could fit in with others". My interviewees tried to find out who I was and whether I was a threat (Fujii 2010); in short, they tried to relate to me.

In these situations, I was also often asked whether I had ever thought of moving back to Romania or could imagine returning. Emigration, which shapes Romania's social structure, came up frequently as a topic in the interviews, especially when the interviewees recalled the transition period after 1989 or reflected on the current situation in their country. Using the optimistic UN estimate (2017) of 3.58 million, emigration represents 18.2 percent of the total population, making it one of the largest waves of migration in peacetime

(Dospinescu and Russo 2018). Many of these workers support their families at home and also return and build houses, but otherwise take little part in political development. In contrast, my research could be seen as an engagement not only with the past but also with the current situation in Romania. Against this background, I was a young woman who leads a life in the West, where the young population of Romania gravitates, and yet still places the focus of her work and, to some extent, the center of her life on the country. I represented a young woman who did not turn away but towards her country of origin; a "*lost daughter*" returning to her 'home', even when not compelled to do so.

The notion of the "*lost daughter*" inherently carries positive undertones, evoking sentiments of warmth and closeness, entwined with notions of affection and a sense of familiarity. It embodies the figure one eagerly anticipates, warmly embraces, and invites into their personal space—a companion with whom personal anecdotes and emotional narratives are exchanged. This imagery resonates with cultural narratives surrounding the prodigal son returning home, like the biblical parable appearing in Luke 15: 11–32 or Rembrandt's masterpiece "The Return of the Prodigal Son", which addresses reunion, forgiveness, and reconnection as central themes (Nouwen 1992). This symbolic role modeling not only influenced the extent or level of access (Fujii 2010), as illustrated in the above snapshot from my archival research, but also shaped the depth of knowledge shared with me and the emotional exchange during the interviews. I exemplify this emotional closeness below with a snapshot of the first out of three meetings with Ana, the daughter and granddaughter of former political prisoners.

After the interview in November 2017, I wrote the following entry in my field diary: "*I originally thought I would meet her alone, but instead she picked me up and took me to her home, where she introduced me to her mother, sister, later her husband and eventually their nine cats. The family trusted me, just as all the interviewees put their trust in me, which I really appreciate. At the end of the interview, the mother had a small silver box brought to us containing her memorabilia and most prized belongings, including an embroidered letter from her husband and a wooden spoon from prison, as well as a self-made angel figurine that she once gave to her mother Christmas gifts when they were incarcerated two cells apart*".

Ana's mother, Irina, was detained in various prisons during the 1950s and 1960s, along with her parents and parts of the family, as well as her then fiancé and later husband, sharing her fate as political prisoners. While she took the objects out of the box and presented them one by one, Irina evoked intimate, painful, but also hopeful moments and emotive stories from that time in her memory, but also in my imagination. Eventually, she pressed into my hand the angel figurine she had made for her mother, which was two cells away. With this almost 60-year-old object in my hand, my interviewee let me share her memory very closely. I was overcome by an "euphoria of connection" (Nelson 2020) and felt admiration for this woman's strength and steadfastness[8]. When both sisters emphasized that Irina does not show this box to everyone and certainly not at a first meeting, I felt being in on a 'secret' or being welcomed at home. In this regard, the role of the "*lost daughter*" I encountered in the field intersects with Evans-Winters' (2019) conceptualization of daughterhood, which illuminates the role of Black girls in their families, communities, and society. Daughterhood, accordingly, manifests itself in supporting households, advocating for the most vulnerable, bearing witness, keeping secrets, and passing on the stories of elders.

During data collection, i.e., when I turned to Romania as 'the field', the role of the "*lost daughter*" proved crucial as it shaped relationships with respondents, facilitated access to rich data, and influenced knowledge generation. At the same time, it also posed a significant challenge, as the expectations of those who had entrusted me with their stories created a sense of overwhelming responsibility and uncertainty (see Section 5.1). This role, interwoven with expectations and trust, remained present throughout the analysis and writing but changed its meaning as this research progressed, particularly in light of my personal loss and grief. The unexpected death of my mother and the experience of profound loss provoked an uncanny shift in my roles and identities, transitioning from the lost daughter returning to Romania to the daughter who had lost 'everything' at

home. Before exploring this repositioning in more detail, I discuss identity negotiations during fieldwork (Section 3.2) and the inner conflicts resulting from shifting positionalities (Section 3.3) below.

3.2. Gendered Dynamics in Storytelling: "Now I Have Opened up a Little"

In 'the field', the role of the "*lost daughter*" did not carry the same weight across all contexts. While some welcomed and valued my interest, I appeared as a threat to others, leading to restricted access, notably evident in my inability to connect with former judges and prosecutors—a circumstance I have captured as data (Fujii 2010; Kušić and Záhora 2020). Moreover, my identity as a young woman evoked diverse reactions from interviewees, shaping my ability to connect with them, altering the interview dynamics, and influencing my overall experience in 'the field'. Poets (2020, p. 109) similarly concludes in her reflections on working with indigenous and Black communities in Brazilian cities that "gendered, racialized, and sexualized relations can therefore both enable and hinder one's research and have divergent effects on the researcher's 'access' and safety, depending on their positionality". In this vein, I now illustrate the possibility or impossibility of field research concerning my gender (and that of my interviewees) through three field situations involving a case of sexual harassment.

In sharing these experiences, I bring to light what Hanson and Richards (2019, pp. 2–3) describe as the "awkward surplus" of my fieldwork—the stories that may be challenging to integrate into findings and theories, often deemed unnecessary to reach the presumed 'real' data. The incorporation of this "awkward surplus" seeks, on one hand, to confront the taboo surrounding sexual violence within research, a taboo deeply rooted in societal gender dynamics, thus influencing my response to such incidents. On the other hand, this aims to acknowledge the entirety of my research reality. As underscored by French sociologist Cuny (2021, pp. 2–5), the systematic exclusion of female perspectives in field studies, particularly outside feminist contexts, introduces a 'source of error', resulting in skewed outcomes and impeding a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics.

Recognizing the entirety of my research reality, this acknowledgement captures the intricate and dynamic relationships within 'the field' (Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004), where my identities held diverse meanings for the interviewees and my positioning evolved in tandem with theirs. In interactions with female interviewees, my identity as a young woman proved advantageous in accessing and delving into stories of violence. Noteworthy were instances like my conversation with Irina, who shared her memory box, fostering an emotional connection. The perception of me as an ally or confidante, especially among female *survivors and descendants*, encouraging them to open up and share deeply personal experiences, is also evident in the following example from my interview with Elena, a former political prisoner.

Shortly after meeting Aurelia at her home, Elena invited me to her apartment in the north of Bucharest in June 2018. A minor at the time of her arrest and detention, Elena was one of the few witnesses of Romania's 'obsessive decade' to be still alive. As a high school student, she joined an anti-communist youth organization whose members were all arrested soon after. Elena was only 15 years old at the time, and her father was also arrested shortly afterwards as an alleged accomplice. Both received twenty-year sentences of forced labor on charges of "conspiracy against the socialist order". As the trial ended, Elena was briefly able to exchange "*two words*" with her father. She recalls it as "*very painful*", as he only said, "*What did you do? Have you thought about us?*". It was the only time they would speak about anything related to their arrests. After five years of imprisonment, Elena was pardoned and released into an alien world in 1964.

During our interview, Elena both unfolds an unadorned, linear documentation of the "*terror*" in communist prisons and reveals her feelings and strategies for survival. The focus is on the emotions and (self-centered) thoughts she had during imprisonment, which reflect Elena's experience of solitary confinement, which she describes as follows: "*I had the feeling [...] that they can do with me what they want. [...] You had the feeling that you belonged to*

no-one, and that they could do whatever they wanted there". In her telling, imprisonment is a rupture from which she has "*recovered*", but which has changed the course of her entire life as it has made her "*different*". Elena describes this change and otherness very vividly, often emphasizing that she does not normally talk in such a personal and detailed way about her incarceration and its impact on her later life, but also on her family. For example, she recounted the moment she saw her mother again after her release, explaining, "*She was no longer as I knew her, I felt angry with myself. My mother never did forgive me, I think, for what happened, for what I did. My father forgave me, never blamed me, but I felt my mother was a little hostile to me. I had ruined her whole life*". Later in the interview, when talking about the post-1989 period, Elena reveals that she never talked to her mother about her arrest, her experience in detention, and the impact it had on her: "*After the revolution, my mother was watching 'The Memorial of Pain' [popular television series*[9]*] and she was crying. And I was very upset with her, I shook her once, I said 'Why don't you cry for me? You only cry for them'*". After describing her painful relationship with her mother after her release and her feelings of guilt but also frustration, Elena eventually remarks, "*I don't tell everyone like that. Now I have opened up a little*".

I experienced the openness and emotional closeness of interviewees like Elena only to some extent with one male respondent. These interviewees perceived me more as a young woman to whom they could explain the history of Romania (or even the world) or impress than as someone they could confide in or share intimate moments with. Particularly among interviewees from the group of *experts and public figures* and *former regime members and state agents*, there seemed to be little room for personal anecdotes or private events, but plenty for their diagnoses and predictions about the past, present, good, and evil. At times, there were also unpleasant comments or gestures that made me uncomfortable and caused me to refrain from deeper engagement, e.g., with follow-up interviews. These situations occurred despite my 'safety dance', i.e., the protective measures researchers take during field studies (Sharp and Kremer 2006). As Cuny (2021, pp. 5–6) has pointed out, the 'safety dance' reflects the unease of a researcher employing various precautions, practicing restraint, and self-denying when conducting fieldwork. In my case, that meant wearing a wedding ring but never tight or colorful clothing, wearing mascara but never lipstick, leaving the recorder and notebook visible on the table, or maintaining a facade of gender hierarchy compliance by allowing my interviewees to open doors or my water bottle, for example.

During my first fieldwork phase, despite these measures, I experienced a strong sense of unease when I interviewed Simion, who took part in the protests in Bucharest in December 1989 and the following months, in a café. That afternoon, he portrayed himself as active, heroic, or rebellious and embellished this figuratively. I was surprised at how detailed Simion's account of the revolutionary days was, including vivid descriptions of how brutal the security forces were, how he escaped them, or how he saved other protesters, mostly women, from their violence. This part of the interview lasted for roughly 50 min, when he stopped mid-sentence, looked deep into my eyes, took my hand, which was on the table next to my notebook, and made insinuating comments. I was perplexed by the sudden and drastic change of talk—one moment it was about violence and the killing of civilians; the next about my appearance. After the initial shock, I pulled my hand away, switched off the tape recorder, and asked whether we should take a break or end the conversation altogether. He chose the former, we continued the conversation, and, in a way, both pretended that nothing had happened. Yet, his storytelling had changed; it was no longer narrative and ornamental but functional and descriptive. We continued for another 30 min before parting ways.

In the days that followed, I kept thinking about how I had handled the situation. Should I have stopped the conversation? Should I have pointed out his misconduct more firmly? Why didn't I do that? Did I feel dependent or powerless? And what role did I play in this? These questions intensified during my following stay in Romania when an interviewee harassed me near my flat. Before that evening, we had met through personal contact, then for preliminary discussions, and finally for an interview. Over time, I gained

the impression that he, who was in his late 50s, understood the meetings as personal rather than professional encounters, as he would repeatedly direct the conversation towards me, revealing his perception of me and making ambiguous comments. That evening, we had recorded the interview in a restaurant near my flat, and he insisted on walking me home. I did not feel comfortable with the idea, but I calmed myself down with the thought that it was only a three-minute walk together. When we arrived at my front door, he asked me to accompany me to my flat, which I refused. He continued to discuss the matter and eventually began to physically harass me. Without going into further details of the incident, I eventually made it down the hall and into my flat alone. I locked the door and secured it with another piece of furniture. I was safe, but deeply scared and emotionally battered. That night I hardly slept, ignoring his messages that alternated between apologies, insults, and threats.

While I had spoken about the incident with Simion to colleagues and friends immediately after returning from "the field", I kept silent about the harassment that night for several months[10]. In retrospect, one reason was that I was ashamed that, despite my discomfort at the preliminary talks, I met with him for an interview and let him accompany me home. In doing so, I assessed my experience against notions of universalized masculinity as uncovered by Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards in their study. The two conducted a survey in the United States (Hanson and Richards 2017) with 56 sociologists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists who had been victims of sexual violence during field research and who justified their experiences by referring to three ideas: that research is to be conducted independently, that fieldwork involves dangers, and that close proximity between genders leads to slips (ibid., pp. 592–98). Similarly, I initially experienced sexual harassment as something that was part of my everyday life and one of the (acceptable) dangers of fieldwork that I had to carry out alone. I also reproached myself for not having foreseen the "slip" or prevented it. Talking about it afterwards seemed inappropriate at first.

Another reason for my silence stemmed from his marginalized position within Romanian society and power dynamics. I, a researcher at a German university, held a relatively privileged position towards the descendant of a former political prisoner. As a researcher, I had internalized the duty to "engage in lone acts of bravery in order to shed light on the struggles of others with less relative privilege" (Berry et al. 2017, p. 554). My initial approach to this individual was marked by respect due to his participation in Bucharest protests and surviving violence by security forces, triggering a reflex of solidarity. This solidarity led me to overlook signs and assume his moral character, revealing a pro-victim bias (Hermann 2001). Unlike the men in positions of power I interviewed within the group of *experts and public figures* or *former regime members and state agents*, I did not anticipate sexual or physical harassment from him, fearing repercussions, or as Berry et al. (2017, p. 557) describe it: "I remained silent out of fear that talking about my assault might overshadow the research or cause harm to the perpetrator".

Upon reflection, I recognized a possible misinterpretation—my interest in his story and my attentive listening might have been misconstrued as personal interest, akin to observations by Berry et al. (2017, p. 552) that a "female researcher's interest in men's perspectives is constantly misunderstood as romantic desire. In attempting to create respectful boundaries, the interviews we conduct often reproduce the hierarchy of an all-knowing man lecturing a woman assumed to be naive and expected to listen". And I would add a woman who is an object of desire and/or harassment. Not only, but also in this sense, fieldwork is embodied, reinforcing Poets' (2020, p. 112) call to assess how our bodies shape research spaces and relationships by asking ourselves the following questions: "What spaces does it open up for you, and how, and which ones does it close off? Whom are you drawn to, and why? Who is drawn to you and why?".

The contrasting experiences with Elena or Simion show that my identity as a young woman and other facets of my being held different meanings for my interviewees in this study. My exploration of different experiences highlights the intricacies of the researcher's

identity, relationships, and the emotional complexities involved in data collection. Fieldwork thus unfolded as a paradoxical and multi-layered experience, often evoking a mixture of emotions that simultaneously invigorated and drained me, resulting in a pervasive sense of confusion and uncertainty (see Section 4.1). Engaging with stories of violence from multiple perspectives felt akin to becoming an "*emotional chameleon*", adapting to the diverse emotional landscapes inherent in research encounters.

3.3. Becoming an "Emotional Chameleon"

Having explored my complex positioning in 'the field' through the role of the "*lost daughter*" and the dynamic relationship with research participants during fieldwork using the example of my identity as a woman, I now turn to the reciprocal effects of 'the field' on myself. For, as Reed and Towers (2023, p. 262) have aptly noted, researchers "both *effect* and are *affected* by the shared experience of research". This discussion unfolds by first exploring how exposure to diverse perspectives on violence engenders a proliferation of roles, intensifying the complex web of expectations and responsibilities faced by researchers within the field (Sriram et al. 2009; Stodulka et al. 2019). Subsequently, I address the emotional repercussions of the encountered stories, underscoring the challenges of navigating multiple roles within and beyond 'the field'. In order to illustrate the interaction between my field experiences and their resonance in my own self-perception and emotional world, I will give an insight into one day of my field research, which began with the interview with Aurelia described at the beginning of this article.

On that day in June 2018, I left her apartment after an intensive four-hour interview, exhausted, euphoric, and affected at the same time. With this bundle of emotions, I made my way to my next interview with two political science students, whom I was to pick up at the entrance to the university. An hour and a half after saying goodbye to Aurelia, I greeted Catinca and Flaviu, and we walked together to a nearby café. At the time of the conversation, they were both in their early twenties and in their second year of their bachelor's degree. Compared to the other university students I interviewed, Catinca and Flaviu both shared a relatively dense account of Romania's past with me, which I attribute to their available narrative world, in particular family stories (Avram 2024).

Despite the overall fruitful conversation, it left me pondering. The two knew little about the practices of the communist regime, the mass incarceration in the 1950s and early 1960s, or the resulting individual and societal traumas. Catinca, for example, spoke about her family's painful experiences under the communist regime, including the expropriation of land or her grandfather's imprisonment "*for talking about something*", but without embedding her family's story in the country's history. The violent transformation of Romanian society into a socialist system through mass persecution and a countrywide network of political prisons went unmentioned. This fact saddened me, outraged me, and left me with a number of questions: Why did they know nothing about the fate of political prisoners? Why hadn't their families told them about it? Should I have told them about Aurelia and "*what has happened to [her and others] in the prisons and lager*" or her message to the young generation "*that you can overcome many hard situations and that things do change*"? Was I allowed to do so at all, or was this overstepping my role? What role, actually?

Upon parting ways with Catinca and Flaviu, I headed towards the tram stop, enveloped in a mixture of weariness and bewilderment. Eager to retreat to my apartment, seeking respite and clarity amidst the entangled thoughts clouding my mind, I was about to board the tram when my phone rang. Philip, a former regime member with a scheduled meeting for the next day, was calling to confirm our meeting location and express his enthusiasm to share what he considered the 'truth' with me—a perspective promised to diverge significantly from Aurelia's recollections; offering an alternate view of the communist regime. However, my objective was not to pinpoint a singular 'truth' or to find a sole 'correct' account of violence[11]. Instead, it aimed to unravel, comprehend, and interconnect the multifaceted Romanian narrative landscape on violence and responsibility. The aim of my research was thus often at odds with the expectations of some of my interview partners,

like Philip (see Section 5.1). Simultaneously, navigating the disparities between narratives, such as those between Aurelia and Philip or the incongruities with Catinca and Flaviu, proved to be mentally and emotionally taxing.

This snapshot from a day in my fieldwork encapsulates the challenges and contradictions inherent in my multi-perspectival research, delving into disparate and sometimes conflicting stories of violence. The arduous navigation of multiple positionalities within 'the field' carried acute emotional implications (Stodulka et al. 2019) and led to intricate negotiations and inner conflicts, vividly captured in the following entry in my field diary: "*Researching with different groups demands extremely high flexibility and, in a way, the role of an emotional chameleon*". This flexibility involved adapting my role based on each interviewee's identity and their preferred storytelling mode, as well as their positioning of myself (see Section 3.2). Just as each person I interviewed was different, I was also different during the research encounters. Sometimes I dressed classically in a blouse and blazer to be taken seriously by public figures or former state agents, sometimes in a 'youthful' way to reduce the distance to my younger interviewees. During the interviews, I was not only an empathetic listener who occasionally nodded but sometimes showed myself as a naïve me, sometimes as an informed and knowing me (Siegl 2019, p. 92), depending on research participants and the interview dynamics. In this regard, Verdery (2018, p. 24) notes that "we are all multiplied by those we encounter, we create versions of ourselves that hardly resemble our own versions".

In the course of my research and multiple interactions with different people, my positions have shifted and my roles and identities have multiplied, in addition to the positions I have held outside the field (e.g., lecturer, board member). Such constant shifting from one social, political, or emotional role or 'fixed identity' to another can, as Stodulka et al. (2019, p. 23) point out, "lead the researcher to face personal and collegial emotional conflicts". In my experience, this manifested itself in a state of uncertainty and confusion (see Section 4.1), sometimes making me feel unlike "myself" and rather like an "*emotional chameleon*". In this context, the psychologist Sarah Riley (Riley et al. 2003) reports on interview situations in which she was confronted with opinions that contradicted her own views. Riley remained silent but struggled with it internally because "In not arguing back I was producing a false self. [...] In being false, I was now also manipulative" (ibid., p. 29). Like Riley, I struggled internally with my "false self" and its many versions. I wondered if I was still showing enough respect to my interlocutors in this way if they did not know the extent to which I, e.g., changed my appearance or disagreed with them. And I wondered if I was fooling myself by doing this, and if my feelings even mattered—after all; my research is about different groups' perspectives on violence, not about me? And which me, actually?

Apart from the confusion arising from multiple, fragmented 'selves', the act of listening and engaging with stories of violence had its own effects on me during data collection. Testimonies (in the form of interviews) and reports (in the form of court records) about imprisonment and various forms of torture, about the violence of security forces and the deaths of relatives, about espionage, betrayals, and disappointments, about sustained power structures and ongoing injustices, were a great emotional burden. Repeatedly empathizing with my interviewees' stories and their traumas triggered psychological and physical stress responses in me, akin to what Bosworth and Kellezi (2017), Moran and Asquith (2020), or Reed and Towers (2023) have described, involving strong emotional reactions (sadness, hopelessness, despair), intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, weight loss, withdrawal tendencies, and "research fatigue" (Rimando et al. 2015).

In addition to the sensitive content, the impact of listening to these stories was mediated by my personal connections. As MacRitchie and Leibowitz (2010) highlight, the significance attributed to trauma material varies based on one's perception of suffering and individual contextualization, and Nussbaum (2013) adds that the thought that 'this could have been me' contributes to empathy. The stories I heard could have been about the fate of my own family members, intensifying my "empathic engagement" (Pearlman and Caringi 2009) with the trauma material and increasing my sense of "responsibility

to help them" (ibid). On that matter, Coles et al. (2014, p. 96) propose that investigating trauma could potentially have more adverse consequences compared to roles such as a clinician, primarily due to the researchers' perceived incapacity to provide direct assistance or support to the affected individual.

Although help could only manifest as witnessing, understanding, and validating experiences shared with me, it still demanded considerable emotional labor to regulate and express appropriately (Moran and Asquith 2020, p. 6). This 'regulation' was challenging in 'the field' because there was often limited time between interviews or other appointments, as between my encounters with Aurelia and the two Political Science students described above. However, peer debriefings and conversations with family and friends in Germany and Romania were central to managing my emotions and feelings and resolving inner conflicts during the stays and shortly after. In this context, Alison Liebling (2014, p. 484) notes, based on her prison research, that "it is not always possible to "know thyself" fully, at the time, or even many years later. We may all need to revalidate our humanity during a period of intense data collection, (. . .) and this is rarely accomplished alone". So, I too found the greatest support in personal conversations. In addition, the realization that becoming an "*emotional chameleon*" facilitated my research, or made it even possible in the first place, helped me to ease my inner struggle with my 'false self'.

4. Reconstructing Stories of Violence

This section reflects on the intricacies of the analytical process. Analyzing and interpreting narrative data, however, is not a clear-cut endeavor but "an act of searching for narrative meaning" (Kim 2016, p. 194). Researchers do not simply 'find' stories of violence but construct the story and its meaning through their respective concepts and methods (Riessman 2008; Kim 2016) and from their respective positions (Haraway 1988). In the first part, I draw a parallel between the complexities of handling extensive data during analysis and the act of "*opening Pandora's box*". This underscores the construction of narrative meanings as a multi-layered process where 'the field' extends its influence into our personal spaces, gradually becoming "coextensive with our homes, our minds, and our dreams" (Goulet and Miller 2007, p. 4) throughout the analysis.

The following two parts explore how my encounter with loss and grief influenced the analytical process, emphasizing the profound impact of personal experiences on research endeavors'. First, I reveal how the unexpected death of my mother triggered a painful journey in which I encountered uncanny doublings between my life and my research (*Trying to make sense of narrative data when nothing makes sense*). I then discuss how my subjective experiences of loss and grief gradually helped me to create a nuanced view of the data and its analysis. Hence, this incisive life event changed my horizon, i.e., "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer 1993, p. 275), and I subsequently had an altered or additional vantage point from which to process my understanding of the data. My lifeworld thus "afforded a hidden point of comparison" (McLean 2007, p. 275) with my research issues, enabling me to adjust the interpretive lens through which I reconstructed these stories.

4.1. Opening Pandora's Box

Conducting multi-perspectival narrative studies, like mine, offers a profound insight into the attribution of meaning to violent and traumatic events and responsibility practices within the context of (past) collective violence and repression. However, such studies present significant challenges due to the extensive and diverse data sources involved and the goal of identifying, understanding, and connecting a wide range of public and personal narratives. As Summa (2020, p. 145) succinctly puts it, "Dealing with such a large amount and variety of information, often gathered on one—often controversial—topic, and turning it into knowledge is perhaps one of the biggest challenges in doing this kind of work". Accordingly, the initial perplexity stemming from the encounter with numerous contradictory stories of violence during data collection and the subsequent feeling of

uncertainty in 'the field', evolved into a sense of being overwhelmed and anxious when confronted with the volume and intricacy of the narrative data during analysis. In short, I felt as if I had opened Pandora's box when I returned to Romania, but without realizing it directly.

Generally speaking, when someone opens Pandora's Box, they do something that raises a lot of problems that did not exist before or that they did not know about. Opening Pandora's Box is like opening a can of worms, referring to a process that, once started, leads to many unforeseen problems and causes things to spiral out of control. I myself noted this in my field diary in June 2017 as follows: "*After my first field phase, I already had the feeling that I was opening Pandora's box. There are so many threads to follow, so many uncertainties and inconsistencies*". The entry refers to the different perspectives on the same event (*so many threads to follow*), the many questions and sometimes contradictory feelings that accompanied me during the field research (*so many uncertainties*), and the ambiguities that I noticed in the stories of violence (*inconsistencies*).

The impression of having opened Pandora's box stayed over the course of the analysis and was expressed in confusion and feelings of uncertainty, as my field diary attests to, stating that "*everything is politicized and problematic, ambivalent*", or in the recurring question "*What is communism?*". This question, in various forms (sometimes with a specification such as "*What was violence in communism?*"), recurs again and again in my diary. At first, I was surprised because my research was about interpretations and ascriptions of responsibility, not about the understanding of communism. However, as I immersed myself in the different narrative worlds, I realized that the significance of the question of the nature of communism emerges from the different lived experiences of my interviewees.

For example, Aurelia's understanding of communism is characterized by her personal experiences during the violent transformation of Romanian society into a communist regime, in particular her imprisonment and subsequent persecution. Her narrative emphasizes communism as a violent ideology and political system that only made a meaningless life possible. While Aurelia's central theme is the senselessness and absurdity of life under the communist regime, Philip links this era with order, security, and social cohesion. In line with his work in the political steering body, the former member of the regime understands communism as a political system that has gone through various phases, each of which must be assessed differently. He contrasts the initial "bad times" with the 1970s and 1980s, when he entered the political arena and where professionalism and a flourishing industry helped Romania achieve independence.

Following on from this brief account, the understanding of communism varies according to position and personal experience, as the former army officer Andrei aptly summarizes: "*[T]he regime is difficult to define in a single way, from everyone's perspective. Everyone has their own experience. That's why the life stories of individual people are also very different*". Answers to the question of what exactly communism is or was depend, accordingly, on the narrator and their horizons. This ambiguity in turn raised a number of questions for me: Which interpretation and categorization do I personally follow? Do I have to follow a certain interpretation? And what influence does my family memory have on this? The diversity of perspectives ultimately contributed to a state of confusion and uncertainty, which explains the repetition of the question in my field diary.

To not get lost in the data and eventually close Pandora's box again, I developed *the narrative analysis* that provides a flexible analytical framework and a concrete procedure (Avram 2022). The procedure is based on multiple readings of court documents and interview transcripts, the elaboration of different texts based on these original texts, and finally on different interpretations, including translations. The multiple readings began parallel to my field research when I transcribed the interviews after the field phases. Listening to my interviewees' experiences through "the solitary process of transcription" (Reed and Towers 2023, p. 269) was emotionally intense as, unlike in the field, I was exposed to the voice and words without distraction. In their reflection of their qualitative research on baby loss and sibling bereavement, Reed and Towers (ibid.) present one of

their field notes that illustrates the emotional strain of transcription vividly: "I feel so emotionally drained after hearing that interview played back. There is so much pain and hurt in her voice. It keeps echoing around my head like it's trapped in there". The voices of my interviewees similarly echoed in my head, while the emotional connection to them remained intact during the process of analysis and writing.

After repeatedly immersing myself in the trauma material through reading and rewriting, it felt inscribed into my memory yet offered little opportunity for assistance. While I could validate the experiences during analysis, the inability to enact change or influence power dynamics left me with a sense of powerlessness. Simultaneously, the field began to expand, borrowing the term from Berry et al. (2017) in fugitive anthropology, infiltrating my body and allowing experiences like sexual harassment to become overwhelmingly present. This occasionally led to heightened stress reactions, increased sleep disturbances, nightmares, and a tendency to withdraw and isolate. Fieldwork, accordingly, haunted and bothered me 'at home' (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017; Bilgen and Fábos 2023), delaying the analytical process repeatedly. Then, in May 2019, the sudden passing of my mother brought my life and research to a complete halt.

4.2. Trying to Make Sense of Data When Nothing Makes Sense

Articulating personal experiences and intertwining these with my study subjects and research is a difficult undertaking in more ways than one. Reporting personal events, I leave familiar "fields of writing" and make myself publicly vulnerable, which is an emotional and "scary endeavor" (Kušić 2020, p. 154), the outcome of which is still uncertain for me as I write and revise this text. Sharing my mother's story without her consent in an academic text, I face an ethical dilemma, paralleling Kušić's (2020, p. 157) ponderings: "I have turned my stories—and everyone who lives in them—into something to be consumed. Is it not treason to give our 'desires and wounds' to a ruthless system?". Following on, I would have to ask whether I am not betraying my mother, her complex life, but also the wound that has accompanied me ever since, if I write about her and me, my loss and pain, in such an abbreviated way as in this article.

Yet, this writing venture straddles both personal and professional realms. Personally, recounting these experiences offers a semblance of closure, akin to Ellis's (1993) notion of creating emotional distance through writing about loss. Aside from fostering empathy and therapeutic benefits (Reed and Towers 2023), writing also facilitates the integration of my experience with the search for narrative meaning, offering a structured approach to understanding how my personal journey has reshaped my perspective on stories of violence and how these stories, in turn, have influenced my personal process of coming to terms. Professionally, my aim is to illuminate the connections between personal experiences of loss and scholarly pursuits with stories of violence. Death, as Ellis (1993) highlights, significantly alters one's life and the meaning one gives to the world and the self. Such experiences, accordingly, reframe our personal lives, professional perspectives, and scholarly endeavors.

To illuminate the connections between my personal and my research journey, I weave memories of my late mother and of my experience of her death into a narrative account that reveals "the exceptional circumstances that conjoined my life and work" (McLean 2007, p. 264) and uncovers the transformed meaning of being a "lost daughter". While acknowledging the dissonance of this part with the rest of the article, this peculiarity reflects the importance of this event in my personal and professional journey. Building on this, I explore the connections or duplications between my personal experience and my engagement with stories of violence in the next section, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of intertwined personal and professional spheres in doing research (Visser 2017; Rehsmann 2019; Pearce 2021). Through this exploration, I seek to encourage introspection among researchers, echoing Behar's (1997) call for vulnerable observers to examine their experiences of loss within their work.

**

One of my earliest childhood memories involving my mother takes place in a large room resembling a hall. She sits on a white plastic chair, weeping and embracing me repeatedly. The atmosphere is tense, with other adults visibly distressed and a television playing indistinct images. When I later inquired about this memory, my mother confirmed it was during the televised execution of the Ceauşescu couple in the common room of the temporary accommodation for asylum-seekers. It was December 1989, and we had only been in Germany for a few months. At that time, she was in her early twenties, and I was a toddler. Reflecting on this intense reaction, my mother shared her astonishment at the events. Leaving Romania, she believed Ceauşescu's rule was unassailable, thinking she could never return or see her friends again, making our departure a poignant farewell she mourned for a long time.

After a year, we settled into a small social flat on the outskirts of the city. She trained as an accountant, and we tried to 'arrive' in Germany. As a young single mother with a migrant background, it was not easy for her and us, and we both had discriminatory experiences. During that period, we both grew (up) together in a foreign country.

*

In spring 2011, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 43. The following weeks and months were an emotional rollercoaster ride. I commuted to the hospital almost daily for five hours and was there for every phase of the illness, operation, or treatment. Due to the unusually aggressive nature of the cancer, there were a number of critical moments, and I was terrified of losing her. Yet she survived, which was a miracle, according to the doctors.

*

Shortly after New Year 2019, my mom came to visit me. I just moved to a city a few weeks earlier to be closer to her again. We had lunch and coffee, made plans for the new year, and laughed a lot. As I walked her to her car, we stood together for a long time, hugging deeply. We told each other how proud we were of each other, how much we loved each other, and what our wishes were for each other in the new year. All of a sudden, an elderly lady stopped just as she was passing by on her bicycle. She thanked us with a big smile for "letting [her] see something so beautiful today" and added that one could see the love between the two of us and that it was wonderful to watch. My mother and I thanked her, somewhat irritated. As she drove on, we hugged each other and giggled.

*

In May 2019, my mother complained about breathing problems, and was taken by a friend to the hospital. When I called a few hours later, I was directly forwarded to a doctor who reported on water in her lungs and heart chambers, their attempts to pump it out, the return of the water, the suspicion of metastases and a recurrence of cancer, and her weak heart. He suggested to come to the hospital as she was in a critical state.

My best friend picked me up, and we drove the longest 40 min to the hospital. I could not shake the feeling that a gigantic wave was building up and rolling towards me, and that I did not have enough time to catch my breath.

*

Entering the room of the intensive care unit, I found my mother hooked up to several machines with countless tubes pumping fluids into her. Even in the most critical moments over the last years, I had never seen my mother like this. I was deeply shaken and gradually the seriousness of the situation got through to me, while I still clung to the experience that she had overcome many difficult moments in her illness. Why not now? After all, I was there and together we were unstoppable. I immediately leaned over to her, began to caress her face, and to speak words of love, gratitude, and reassurance.

*

About an hour after I entered the room, I was gently talking to my mother, encouraging her to wake up, a nurse came in. When I asked him what exactly my mother was receiving in terms of medication and drips, he paused for a moment and then sat down next to me. I knew this was not a good sign. The nurse began to tell me that he had lost his father when

he was very young, and I felt resistance building up inside me. His words reached me less and less. It was only when he pointed to the tubes that I came back and heard that my mother's heart would not work without the machines and the medication; that she was on life support. That was when I began to understand that my mother was dying. And that nothing was going to be all right. That I was losing everything.

*

After her vital functions continued to decline throughout the night, the doctors turned off the machines in the early morning hours in the presence of family and friends.

When we left the hospital, the sun came up and the birds were chirping. I was very surprised about this and said in disbelief to my friend: "The birds are chirping"—"Yes, it is morning and a new day is beginning", she replied in a soft voice. Her answer penetrated through to me but I could not process it. Why were the birds singing like it was a new day, like everything was normal, like the world kept turning? My world as I knew it had stopped. That morning, not only did my mother lose her life, but my life lost its meaning.

*

After the funeral and the memorial service, we left her apartment, my father flew back to Romania, and my friends went back to work. Arriving at my own home, I felt empty and disoriented. I sensed that the wave I was anticipating on the way to the hospital was only now starting to fully collapse on me.

*

Six weeks later I dreamt of her for the first time: I am in a dark room. The only source of light comes through the crack of a door slightly ajar. As I turn towards the light and finally the door, I catch sight of my mother through the crack in the door. I am overjoyed, call out "Mum" and run through the door just to arrive in another dark room. Again, I sense my mother's presence in the next room. Again, I pass through a slightly open door and again I miss her. This process repeats itself until I finally wake up.

Waking up, I was happy at first; I had finally seen my mother. Then I was overcome by pain and loneliness. I started to cry and only stopped when a friend drove me to the funeral home for a final appointment. There, I told the funeral director about my dream, completely distraught. After a short pause, she said in a gentle voice: "Where she is, you cannot go". I will never forget her words, but also my pure despair: I cannot go where she is. But where I am, I cannot be. I found myself in an in-between world.

*

What happened in my body and mind over the next weeks and months is hard to put into words. The in-between world I found myself in was a place of loneliness, grief and pain. The dominant temporality in this world was the past. There was hardly any room for the present, and certainly not for a future. Basic needs were displaced by violent crying fits that lasted for hours. I took meals prepared by others with great difficulty. I slept little and was afraid of waking up. I was constantly cold even though it was midsummer. My hair was falling out in clumps, and often, I did not even know what day it was. Everyday things like taking the subway or going shopping triggered panic attacks. I could only communicate with people sitting across from me. Yet, even when I was in the company of others, I felt thrown alone into the coldness of time, of the universe.

**

In the in-between world described above, I experienced a shift or narrowing of my roles and identities. With the sudden death of my mother, I was no longer the lost daughter returning to Romania, but the daughter who had lost 'everything' and no longer knew whether and how she could return to where. Thus, as Pearce (2021, p. 192) notes, the death of a parent brings our sense of belonging to the fore, including the question of "where our home lies and what the act of returning means". Her death meant not only the loss of a parental figure, but also of a sense of home in Germany and our physical home in her flat. It severed connections to memory, heritage and a sense of belonging, which is also expressed in Behar's (1997, p. 71) reflection on the loss of her grandfather and thus "the culture and history that were part of his lived reality". During that night in May, I lost my

mother and my companion, my memory and my home, my past and present, in short, I lost 'everything' and was "mutterseelenalein". This is a German word used to describe a state of complete loneliness. The term is derived from a misinterpretation of the French idiom "moi tout seul" (just me) by 17th- and 18th-century Huguenots in Berlin. The literal translation, "mother's souls alone," makes little sense in English, but it captures the feeling of being utterly alone and not having a single person in the world one can turn to, not even a mother.

Apart from the daughter, who lost 'everything,' there was little room for other roles or identities in the in-between world I found myself in. The once vibrant and empathic individual who returned and was openly welcomed now became silent and absent, deeply immersed in personal grief. As a grieving daughter, other private (e.g., granddaughter, friend) and professional roles (e.g., board member, lecturer) and my research identity faded into the background, which led to contemplations of abandoning the search for meaning in my data. This was also due to the strange duplication of my life and research. While work served as a distraction for many people affected by my mother's sudden death, for me, it meant confronting similar experiences and issues. Sherine Hamdy, an anthropologist working on organ transplantation and donation in Egypt, faced similar issues when her father developed a fatal brain tumor while she was doing fieldresearch. In the foreword to her book, she writes: "Questions that had formed the bulk of my research into how people come to make difficult bioethical decisions when faced with tremendous and the imminence of death were now questions I was living with" (Hamdy 2012, p. xxiii). In my case, I might put it this way: The questions that made up a significant part of my research about how people interpret and integrate situations of violence as well as traumatic experiences into their life stories, and how they deal with issues of responsibility in the process, were now questions I was living with. As in my research, my life was now also about creating meaning, a coherent narrative, and questions of responsibility (and guilt). These doublings contributed to my despair and made me shun the analysis for a long time.

4.3. Shunning the Analysis and Immersing in It

Under the guidance of my PhD supervisor and project leader, I gradually reengaged with teaching and research, yet not with the analysis of my data, at my own pace in the subsequent months. However, with the transition from autumn to winter and the approaching holidays, another wave of loss and grief struck me, prompting me to seek solace with friends abroad. Upon my return to Germany, I slowly reintegrated into academic and social life until the onset of the March 2020 lockdown. Recognizing the persistence of the situation and lacking an apparent 'escape', I redirected my focus to my data, progressively immersing myself deeper into the analytical process.

The analysis was conducted in stages over a period of about a year that I perceive as very blurry, similar to how Roxani Krystalli (2021a) reflects upon her grieving process: "When I do not know if it is Tuesday or May, where we are in the pandemic, where I am in my own grief". During this fuzzy time, I reconstructed narratives and stories of violence from court documents and interview transcripts while confronting my own pain. In the course of this, I gradually came to see the aforementioned doublings between my life and my research not just as a burden but as a fruitful lens—a perspective that not only facilitated a more nuanced comprehension of the themes in my research but also broadened my analytical outlook. As Jackson (2011, p. xiii) highlights, true understanding "is never born of contemplating the world from afar" but unfolds in the "subjective in-between". Notably, I do not equate my experience with that of my interviewees. The imprisonment and repression in a political prison as experienced by Aurelia or the murder of one's own wife by the army during the events of December 1989 as experienced by Ioan, whom I present below, are different from my experience of loss and pain following my mother's sudden death. However, as Krystalli (2021b, p. 43) notes, "What loss does is tune inquiry and calibrate responses", ultimately deepening our understanding of the people and contexts we study.

Following on, I illustrate how my personal experiences and emotional connectedness have enabled me to interpret stories of violence and their constituent parts in a nuanced way, which in turn has influenced the direction of my analysis. Examples of such nuanced insights, rooted in the intersection of my life and research, address issues of guilt, narrative temporality, and structure, as well as the ambiguity of human experience and storytelling. In doing so, I reveal the complex, usually hidden, processes involved in working with stories of violence (McLean and Leibing 2007), emphasizing feelings and subjective experiences as crucial aspects of knowledge production (Ellis 1993). This illustrates research as a hybrid endeavor between professional and private life's (Visser 2017; Rehsmann 2019) and highlights the need to de-center the 'field' as the sole, privileged site of knowledge (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

My emotional experience of being caught in a 'logic of guilt' helped to amplify my sensitivity to similar expressions within my data and to foster empathetic connections with those revealing similar experiences, e.g., trauma-related guilt or survivor guilt, as present in Elena's narration (see Section 3.2) or in the interview with Ioan, a survivor of the armed repression of protest in December 1989. I visited Ioan in November 2017 in his small, untidy flat in Timişoara. There, in December 1989, he had been one of the first civilians to take to the streets to put an end to the communist regime. The next day, his wife accompanied him to the protests, which were violently put down a short time later. Dozens of civilians, including Ioan's wife, were killed. The profound impact of Ioan's wife's tragic death, which he witnessed during protests, remained a pivotal theme in his life for over three decades. Following an emotionally intense interview where his sense of responsibility and guilt were palpable, I left with a mixture of empathy, admiration for his bravery in the face of repressive forces and anger at the ongoing injustices. I felt strong sympathy and respect for the courage of this ordinary worker who defied the repressive state authorities, losing so much in the process and receiving far too little support since. At the same time, I wished I could alleviate his communicated feelings of guilt.

During the first year after my mother's death, much of the in-between world I found myself in revolved around self-hatred and remorseful thoughts that stemmed from the conviction that I should have recognized my mother's approaching death and—had I acted differently—could have prevented it. The guilt and shame over my supposed failure as her daughter and care-giver dominated my emotional and mental state and took over me. My being became absorbed in a logic of guilt, accompanied by self-contempt. Here I borrow from the political theorist Wendy Brown (1993), who speaks of a "self-subjugation" of politicized identities in terms of a "wounded attachment" and of the "logic of pain" (ibid., p. 390), which can grasp and engulf a subject. Only when I realized that my feelings of guilt served an important function did I start to break free from this logic. By focusing on my failure, her absence and my loss faded into the background. Simultaneously, the logic of guilt maintained the illusion of control and gave the event a touch of significance—my mother died because I failed to interpret her condition correctly. For me, the weight of loss and pain seemed so heavy that the self-image as a daughter who had failed was easier to bear than the image of a daughter who had lost her mother. With this personal insight from my grieving process, I viewed Ioan's account of loss, particularly his communicated survivor guilt, not as a burden to be lifted but as a narrative told in a language of grief, revealing a unique form of meaning-making.

Experiencing a fuzzy temporality both in the in-between world and afterward, I could acknowledge the importance of complex temporality for narrative reconstruction. Often, notions of time are conceptualized as linear and singular, seen as "an endless chain of cause and effect [and] of radical separations of past and present" (Ganguly 2004, p. 17). At the same time, I did not perceive my mother's death as being separated from my present. Sometimes my mother's death seemed like yesterday or like three months ago, or both at the same time. Yet, it was never something of the past, which reflects how interviewees like Ioan experience their loss and thus the temporal disruption of victimization (Pemberton et al. 2019), where the wound suffered in the past influences or is a part of the present.

Similarly, feminist scholars have noted that formal explanations of the end of war that relegate violence to the past often do not align with how people experience the ongoing effects of violence (Wibben 2020, p. 117). This insight about the assemblance of past and present sharpened my attention during the analysis for "multiple temporalities operating in the same moment" (Dinshaw 2007, p. 110) and made comprehensible the complex timelines with divergent paths I came across during analysis. In addition, this motivated me to write about (past) violence in my texts.

Through my own telling about my mother's death, I further recognized the multi-layerdness of narratives and adjusted the methodological orientation of my analytical framework. During the first two years, I included many different episodes and little stories about her and our life together, often a meticulous account of the last day, remarks about our love, and so on. All these components were important to me, and for my story about her death and the trauma it inflicted upon me. Although the scope and nature of the components of my narrative about her death and my loss have since diminished or changed, my account in this article also includes an early childhood memory, episodes that refer to our love and bond, or the retelling of a dream; it is therefore multi-layered. This recognition informed my development of the analytical framework that interprets narratives holistically. This meant, first, analyzing narratives in their totality, taking into account "both the 'distinctive features' of each narrative and the 'relational significance' of events within a narrative" (Rolón-Dow and Bailey 2022, p. 2). Secondly, I related the textual analysis to the narrator and the moment of narration, thereby "situating participants' narratives in the macro-context in which these lives take place" (Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs 2020, p. 619).

Amidst the sorrow and pain that accompanied my mother's passing, there also existed moments of warmth, joy, and gratitude in the weeks and months that ensued. Not a day passed without thoughts of her, and each day brought a sense of being cherished by her enduring love. I would often jest about the intensity of our bond, attributing it to the brevity of our time together, and suggesting that our love was so profound because it had to span my entire lifetime. When I refer to "joking" in this context, I mean the way in which I framed my experience from a bearable and humorous perspective. In a parallel vein, Aurelia's narrative about her imprisonment weaves together various comedic scenes, similarly reflecting the complexity of human experience. This is also captured by Krystalli (2022) in an essay in which she stresses that, even in the midst of war and turmoil, people continue to experience love, joy, and ordinary life events: "When I listen to the stories of people affected by war, many tell me that they continue to fall in love and care for each other in the midst and aftermath of violence [. . .]. I have never met people who have been affected by violence or loss and wish others would live a life without joy or exclusively tell stories of suffering". This observation resonates strongly with both my personal journey and that of my interview partners[12]. Experiencing and accepting the ambivalence of human existence has been instrumental in recognizing and conceptualizing what I call the *transformative effect of the wound* during analysis (Avram 2022). Through a particular kind of storytelling, I suggest, the wound is transformed into stories that construct meaning for the self and orient actions in the present.

5. Writing about Stories of Violence

This final section reflects on the presentation of data and the writing process. Although this research phase is central to narrative studies, sometimes taking as much time as the data analysis itself, it remains relatively unconsidered in methodological reflections. Yet, because the stories that people tell about violent events, traumatic experiences, their lives, or life in general are multi-layered and often so compelling, multiple challenges arise when trying to fit stories about violence into the word count and structure of book manuscripts or journal articles. Next to decisions about story selection, trade-offs between different narrators, and the presentation and interpretation of data, there are ethical issues to consider, for example, in terms of adherence to standards of protection (Sriram et al. 2009) or whether and how

to include explicit depictions of violence or reproduce inhumane language (Robben and Hinton 2023). All of these decisions can be emotionally challenging (Jackson et al. 2013) and add layers of complexity to the writing process.

Despite the underemphasis on the writing phase in methodological discussions, the researcher's life, experiences, and field relationships inevitably cast shadows on the narratives about violence and the ensuing knowledge. The following sections offer insights into the challenges encountered during this writing process, emphasizing my evolving role first in crafting individual narratives *(From axe-wielder to archaeologist)* and subsequently in creating the overall text (*Managing responsibilities*). Here, the roles of the lost daughter who returns and finally the daughter who has lost everything recede into the background, while my (self-)positioning as both a researcher and storyteller takes over. This shift in my positionality, which is an expression of my advanced grieving process, finally allowed me to recognize the benefits of working with stories of violence.

5.1. From Axe-Wielder to Archaeologist

After the lengthy and comprehensive data analysis, I struggled with the presentation of my findings because it meant heavily condensing the reconstructed narratives and stories from documents, transcripts, and field notes and changing the words of my interview partners. I felt I was breaking the trust of my interviewees and not doing justice to the time they allowed me to immerse myself in their narrative worlds and the stories they shared with me. In short, I felt that I was violating their stories of violence.

This feeling of neither doing justice to my interlocutors nor to the narratives I reconstructed, even violating them, resonates with the contributions of Kušić (2020) or Summa (2020). Both researchers describe the uncomfortable, often painful, and frustrating process of "transforming our embodied experiences, insights, and memories into texts to be read by others" (Kušić and Záhora 2020, p. 11). Josselson (1996, p. 65) describes the shift in our counterpart that accompanies the writing of texts and feelings related to it as follows: "When we get to the writing stage, we tend to take ourselves out of relationships with our participants to form a relationship with readers. How can we help then but have feelings of betraying our participants?". These feelings of frustration and betrayal were particularly pronounced in my case, due to both my complex positioning in 'the field' and my personal experience of loss and grief, which are reflected in the peculiar doubling of the image of the lost daughter.

First, as the lost daughter who was welcomed upon her 'return' to Romania, I felt the weight of exuberant and sometimes contradictory expectations placed on me during research encounters; after all, people seem to have been waiting for her and to trust her despite her unfamiliarity. While some interviewees expressed that she/he is happy that someone is finally writing down the truth, making past injustices or a particular case public, or advocating for the much-needed change that relies on the younger generation, other interviewees even made clear demands of me, such as that I address the personal continuity in the judiciary and justice sector ("*You have to write about that, otherwise it [i.e., my research] has no value*"), or that I should advocate for a legal complaint at a European court. These far-reaching expectations manifested themselves during the writing process in a heightened sense of responsibility, which was reinforced by my closeness and connection to 'the field', including the interweaving of my own (biographical) story with that of some of my interview partners. Several entries in my field diary refer to this interconnectedness, such as this one: "*My story is part of a larger story*". This sentence appears in the exact wording four times in my notes and emphasizes the entanglement between my life and research. In this regard, I felt internal pressure not to misrepresent my 'home' Romania or betray my community (Nelson 2020). At the same time, I felt an obligation to amplify voices often marginalized, especially given the prevailing silence around collective violence and repression and its profound impact on individuals and society. This awareness stemmed from my close connection to the country, where these narratives have historically found little space in the public sphere and remain largely unspoken today.

Secondly, as a daughter who had lost everything and who experienced the complexity and breadth of talking about traumatic events, pain, and guilt (see Section 4.3), I felt great resistance to turning the broad narratives of the interviewees into small stories according to academic standards and to intervening in them. The question of "what right a scientist has to penetrate other people's subjective worlds and report them to the world" (Plummer [1983] 2001, p. 206) has been strongly reinforced by my own personal loss. How can I summarize another person's pain and trauma, put it into scientific terms and categories, and present it to the world as knowledge when I know how profound the personal experience is, how complex the coping process and the search for meaning are. Furthermore, I felt great discomfort in transforming the experiences of my interviewees and their multi-layered narrative worlds into static results. Hence, as Summa aptly points out, when we present our analytical results in writing, "we inevitably freeze the experiences of our conversation partners and transform the dynamic into a certain standstill" (Summa 2020, p. 147).

The dilemmas described triggered despair and frustration and were accompanied by inhibitions and writer's block that only gradually dissipated in repeated conversations with friends. In order not to burden them, I did not describe the reported events in detail but rather shared with them how much writing preoccupied me, what worries I had, and how cruel it made me feel. Talking one evening to a friend, I complained one more time that I was neither doing justice to the interviewees nor to their narratives. In an attempt to project my feelings outwardly to her, I said that I felt like an axe-wielding person running through a forest and smashing everything to pieces. As I continued to portray myself as destroying the stories of violence I reconstructed during the analysis, she interrupted me and asked, "*Aren't you more like an archaeologist, carefully removing layer after layer?*".

Her question and the image of the archaeologist carefully handling her objects of investigation resonated directly with me, and the more I thought about it, the more appropriate this image seemed. During the analysis, I created several comprehensive texts for each narrator, which I then condensed as I progressed. Through various stages of writing and editing, I actually took on the role of an archaeologist, carefully peeling away layer after layer of each narrative until the delicate and precious kaleidoscopic view of responsibility, the central insight of my research (Avram 2022), emerged. With my careful approach, I not only took into account the complexity and multi-layered nature of narratives but was also able to bring out a more accurate picture of my interviewees' experiences and interpretations. Thus, as María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 91) reminds us, "the term *accurate* derives from care: 'prepared with care, exact'", and that "doing something with care led to that of 'being exact'". This change of perspective in my self-perception, i.e., from axe-wielder to archaeologist, helped me find a way to deal with the personal dilemmas resulting from my own traumatic experience, as well as the (self-imposed) responsibility for the presentation of the data and my findings reinforced by my connection to 'the field'.

5.2. Managing Responsibilities

During my stays in 'the field,' the role of the "*lost daughter*" returning to Romania decisively shaped the dynamics of access and intimacy in this research context. At the same time, this role has been linked to multiple expectations as discussed above. During the writing process, this gave rise to an overwhelming sense of responsibility, which also points to the relational nature of responsibility. Kutz (2004), for example, asserts that we consider ourselves responsible in relation to certain people or institutions and hold people accountable in the context of legal, personal, or organizational relationships. Similarly, in my analysis, I have also come to the conclusion that the narrator's (self-perceived) relationship to the past in general and to collective violence and repression in particular is essential for the (non-)centrality of the question of responsibility and the shaping of responsibility ascriptions in narratives about the past (Avram 2022).

The fact that responsibility was not only my research interest but also a central companion of my research results from my proximity to and my entanglement with 'the field'. On that matter, Barad (2007, p. 392) notes that responsibility is an "incarnate relation that

precedes the intentionality of consciousness"; i.e., that it arises from a 'fact of entanglement'. This reveals a further doubling between my life and my research (see Section 4.2), as illustrated by the following note I made after presenting and discussing the first draft of my chapter on *former regime members and state agents* among friends in March 2021: "*My work is about responsibility and at the same time I have a very strong sense of responsibility towards my interviewees—I have to detach myself from that because they chose to tell me something. There was no contract that they would definitely make it into the book and that I would do justice to them all. That is not the theme of my work*".

Decisive for coping with my sense of responsibility was, on the one hand, the change of perspective in my self-perception from axe-wielder to archaeologist when reconstructing and dealing with the individual stories of violence (see Section 5.1) and, on the other hand, my positioning when writing the final research text. Through extensive and intensive discussions with friends, a close exchange with colleagues, and mutual support in revising the text with a friend who has worked on torture, I was not only able to share the burden of the emotional labor of writing. Rather, these interactions crystallized the need to foreground my role as a researcher while acknowledging my role as a storyteller. "Researchers are storytellers. We choose which stories we tell when we present, interpret, and analyze data" (Sandberg et al. 2015, p. 14). Each of these two roles, as I outline below, is associated with specific goals that guided the writing process.

As a researcher, my goal was to answer the research question and present my findings in a scientific text. In this context, Josselson (1996) points out that the publication of research results, when we write about the life of the interviewee, always involves a breach of the trust established in the interview. She emphasizes that, in the end, the researcher must admit that the interpretation and outcome of this research are only the researcher's work. In this light, I emphasized in my dissertation that I introduce conceptual narratives, defined by Somers (1997, p. 85) as "concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers", and I accepted that these are shaped differently than the interviewees might expect or hope for[13].

As a storyteller, my aim was to immerse the readership of my PhD thesis in the polyphonic narrative landscape of Romania, but without leaving the topic and the research question aside, or to fixate Romania's turbulent past on a 'single story' (Kušić 2020). On the one hand, it was important to recognize knowledge as partial, i.e., "it can never be complete, and we can never be equally balanced on all sides" (Siegl 2019, p. 89). On the other hand, it was important to make clear the limitations and subjectivity of the academic text and the reconstructed narratives. To do this, I chose a writing strategy that was "not totalizing, i.e., which exposes the fragmentary character of the production of knowledge" (Summa 2020, p. 147) as well as the narratives I present.

First, I decided to introduce one or two narrators in each group in more detail. With this decision, I tried to mediate between the axiological option of narrative approaches to give the participants a voice on the one hand[14], and the demands and scope of the text on the other hand, but also to provide orientation for the reader. In selecting exemplary narrators, I considered the density of their narratives and the insights gained from this research question. I did not take into account the stories of Simion and the person who harassed me (see Section 3.2). For the exemplary narrators, I have written summarizing narratives of 5 to 8 pages, which introduce the respective chapters.

Secondly, I included additional vignettes, i.e., condensed stories taken from other interviewees or judgments, to highlight divergent perspectives within groups of actors. Similarly, Summa (2020, p. 146) explains her decision to use 'snippets' in her dissertation, which she defines as "small fragments inserted on the narrative in order either to illustrate some points or to allow for further analysis, as a method of presenting the research". With these, she was able to convey different voices on the subject and a heterogeneous picture of the places she had explored. In my case, the use of vignettes aimed both at acknowledging the plurality of human experience as well as the wide repertoire of stories along with their "narrative complexity and ambiguity" that is "often left out" (Sandberg et al. 2015, p.

16) and at highlighting the heterogeneity and messiness of responsibility practices in the context of (past) violence and repression.

By carefully selecting exemplary narrators and including vignettes, I was able to place the participants at the center of this research and present the "colorful language of the field" (Czarniawska 2004, p. 61). In this way, I was able to invite readers into Romania's narrative landscape and make clear my role as a storyteller alongside my role as a researcher, which I expressed by writing an academic text. At the same time, this writing strategy has helped to eclipse both the role of the lost daughter who returns and the role of the daughter who has lost everything, opening up space for me to recognize benefits of my research endeavor.

5.3. Recognizing Benefits

As outlined in previous sections, engaging with stories of violence is challenging as it requires wide-ranging emotional and intellectual endeavors. In this regard, Bosworth and Kellezi (2017) point out that while navigating the emotional terrain during research can be overwhelming, these encounters have the capacity to stimulate both personal and intellectual growth. With this in mind, I conclude my reflection on the data presentation and writing process by addressing the insights I have gained for my personal and professional life in the course of my research. In doing so, I see my research experience as similar to a journey as described by Behar (1997, p. 3): "Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. At the end of the voyage, if you are lucky, you catch a glimpse of a lighthouse, and you are grateful".

In the short term, 'catching a glimpse of the lighthouse' meant submitting my dissertation in spring 2022, which I dedicated to my mother. The completion of the text was closely linked to my personal grieving and healing process and sometimes meant "stopping places along the way" (ibid.). The fact that I did not stop there but continued was due to both my sense of responsibility towards the stories of violence that I had collected and reconstructed (see Section 5.2) as well as my relationship with my mother, who had witnessed the beginnings of my research and assumed that I would bring it to an end. At an early stage in crafting the final text, I had already formulated the dedication, which later served as my motivational anchor during periods of stagnation. I thus felt relief and gratitude when I could write on the first page of my dissertation, "*For the most loving, courageous and elegant person I know*". This sentence testifies to my gradually acquired ability to adjust my own narrative, in which she continues to accompany my life, but in a different way.

In the longer term, 'catching a glimpse of the lighthouse' meant recognizing the challenging research process as a worthwhile endeavor. On that matter, Moran and Asquith (2020, p. 6) emphasize that engaging with sensitive topics such as trauma and violence yields positive outcomes for researchers. These include increased gratitude, heightened self-awareness, and the acquisition of valuable skills that are applicable in various personal and professional contexts. Furthermore, Nelson's (2020) personal account emphasizes the overlooked reward of discovering connections and shared experiences. In the following, I discuss some benefits of engaging with stories of violence in my country of origin amidst personal loss.

The extension of Romania from my country of origin to 'the field' proved beneficial in several ways. My proximity to this research context facilitated easier access to groups, smoother rapport with participants, and offered practical advantages such as the opportunity to stay with family and friends or to have a personal support system in place. My familiarity with cultural and linguistic subtleties (idioms, allusions, and jokes, but also what remains unsaid or cannot be said) enhanced data collection, analysis, and presentation. However, this did not imply 'exclusive access' to a "monolithic insider view [. . .] There are multiple insider views and multiple outsider views. Every view is a way of seeing, not *the*

way" (Wolcott 1999, p. 137). In this sense, I did not feel like an insider, in line with Wüstenberg's (2008) survey of international doctoral students. Rather, like many respondents, I felt like a returnee to my country of origin for research, much like a 'halfie' navigating multiple identities and shifting positionalities. In this regard, my familiarity and insights acted as an additional resource (Hodkinson 2005) for the reconstruction and juxtaposition of stories of violence and thus for plausible interpretations of the data I collected in 'the field'. Fieldwork, at the same time, transformed my relationship with Romania as it allowed me to stay for prolonged periods, gain a deeper understanding of Romania's history and politics, establish interpersonal relationships beyond familiar contexts, or explore new regions and sites. This deepened the connection to my country of origin as one of my 'homes'.

My research immersed me in countless stories of violence, which proved beneficial in two main ways. First, exposure to stories of violence from different perspectives has increased my tolerance for ambiguity. By meeting people of different ages, genders, social and economic statuses, and levels of education, I was immersed in diverse life stories that revealed the plurality of roles and fluidity of positions in the context of (past) collective violence. At the same time, these encounters provided me with contradictory stories of violence, contributed to the multiplication of my 'selves', and made me feel like an "*emotional chameleon*", carrying different experiences (e.g., emotional attachment vs. sexual harassment) and requiring constant repositioning. Taken together, my research has fostered flexibility and my ability to tolerate uncertainty and contradiction, an essential quality for navigating a complex and constantly evolving world. Secondly, engaging with different stories of violence has broadened my understanding of the human experience and altered my perspective on personal narratives. In this context, one of my dissertation examiners summed up her assessment as follows: "*Finally, I want to acknowledge the author's intellectual and emotional labour of collecting and engaging with these stories rising out of human pain and suffering*". While these stories undeniably testify to pain and human anguish, and I acknowledge the sanctity of bearing witness to human suffering (Moran and Asquith 2020), I also see them as testimonies to survival, strength, resilience, courage, and transformative processes, exemplified by Aurelia's life and message to the younger generation. In line with Robbins' call to move beyond the singular focus on the suffering subject in anthropology (Robbins 2013, p. 448), my perspective has thus broadened to take greater account of aspects beyond suffering, such as resistance, empathy, hope, or love. Hence, as Krystalli and Schulz (2022, p. 17) note, love and care "shape how people survive and make sense of violence and how they imagine and shape life after violence".

Finally, in my personal process of coming to terms with loss and pain, witnessing my interviewees' journeys of survival, courage, transformation, and healing played a crucial role. In the process of narrating their traumatic experiences, the interviewees revealed coping strategies in which humor and hope emerged as remarkable elements interwoven with the process of making sense. In this light, I have conceptualized the 'principle of hope' as a recurring theme in my field diaries, symbolizing interviewees' unwavering optimism and confidence despite adverse circumstances[15]. This principle embodies the yearning for change, whether on a personal or societal level, and emphasizes the transformative potential of action and temporal progression in the present and future. As such, it is diametrically opposed to the in-between world I found myself in after the loss of my mother, which revolved around the past as the dominant temporality. However, as my research and healing progressed, this principle gradually found its way into my emotional world and became intertwined with gratitude—as long as I am grateful for something, I can also be confident and ultimately hopeful. The 'principle of hope' is thus a demonstration of how the lives, agency, and resistance of my research participants have shaped my own life. This points to intersections where the subjective lives of the researcher and the researched converge (McLean 2007; Visser 2017; Rehsmann 2019), revealing research as a journey in which the professional and the private spheres intertwine in myriad ways.

6. Moving on from Research and into Life

Five years have now passed since the fieldwork day in June 2018, which I described at the beginning of this article. Despite the distance in time, the conversation with Aurelia in particular and her message that "*you can overcome many hard situations and that things do change*" are still very much with me. The former political prisoner attributed her testimony to her release from prison and, later, to the end of Ceaușescu's rule. At the time, I had no idea what a profound impact her words would have on my life after the sudden death of my mother and what intricate connections would emerge between my research and my personal experiences. Uncovering these connections and my shifting positionalities was at the forefront of this article, which has revealed the subjective nature of knowledge and pointed to the need to look at researchers and research processes holistically.

In this article, I have offered a collage of field notes, interview excerpts, snapshots, and personal memories, and I have entered into dialogue with anthropological and feminist literature as well as auto-ethnographic works. The individual sections vary considerably in length but also in structure and collage elements. This points to the different meanings of the respective dimensions or aspects of my research journey for myself as well as to the messiness of research practices in general. Undoubtedly, this article could have achieved greater coherence had I chosen to concentrate solely on either data collection or analysis, omitting specific snapshots and experiences like those involving sexual harassment. Nevertheless, my purpose was to comprehensively reflect on and narrate my entire research journey, aiming to unveil a holistic understanding. In doing so, I resonate with Simić's (2016, p. 108) insight stressing the importance "for us as researchers to become aware of our own research activities, to tell ourselves a story about ourselves," particularly in emotionally demanding research, such as that focused on violence. Given the scarcity of opportunities for researchers to engage in such reflective storytelling, I am grateful for the space provided by the editors of this issue.

Sharing my reflections, emotions, and insights on delving into stories of violence has revealed that research is akin to a journey, echoing Behar's (1997) depiction of it as a path marked by loss, longing, the struggle to articulate experiences, and the simultaneous challenges and rewards it offers. Throughout this journey, the spatial boundaries between 'home' and 'the field' become blurred, as do the identity boundaries between 'insider' and 'outsider' (Bilgen and Fábos 2023) or the professional and private spheres in a researcher's life. Accordingly, positionalities shift, roles multiple, and identities are negotiated. The evolving image of the daughter, transitioning from the lost daughter returning to Romania to the daughter who has lost everything, and its intersections and collisions with other roles, serves as an illustration of the intricate connections between my personal and professional life and the complex research relationships that are "mediated by emotions" (Robben and Hinton 2023, p. 22). In this light, emotions should be acknowledged as a "normal part of research" (Shaw et al. 2020, p. 289), and I advocate for the creation and use of emotional field diaries (Punch 2012). This aligns with debates urging for radical empiricism as an epistemological stance, placing the researcher's empathy and emotions at the core of ethnographic knowledge production. Such an approach adds complexity to the researcher's role, acknowledging knowledge production as an inherently personal process (e.g., Kanafani and Sawaf 2017; Stodulka et al. 2019).

This argument of the subjectivity of knowledge production has echoed through my reflections on how personal loss has affected my life and research. In these sections, I have revealed the connections between my life and my research, and located my emotions and subjective experiences as integral dimensions of knowledge. Accordingly, I propose recognizing personal experiences such as loss and pain as constitutive of knowledge production and thus placing more emphasis on "who" we are as researchers rather than "what" we are (Cavarero [1997] 2000) when we search for meaning in narrative data and reconstruct stories about violence. Here, I align myself with authors who emphasize the interplay between life and research as a central aspect of positionality and reflexivity (Behar 1997; Ellis 1999; Rehsmann 2019; Hassouna 2021) and acknowledge that both

fieldwork and writing require a continuous "construction and production of self and identity" (Coffey 1999, p. 1). In this context, Cavarero ([1997] 2000, p. 41), for example, emphasizes that narratives serve precisely as instruments for providing and discovering the "who". In revealing my narrative of my research, however, I hope to have written a text that transcends my own situatedness and limitations and provides an impetus for other researchers to consider their research and lives in conjunction. As Ellis (1993, p. 725) writes, "Most likely, my story is unique enough to permit comparisons and yet universal enough to evoke identification".

As this article draws to a close, the same cannot be said of my work on stories of violence. This work is an ongoing process of reflection and writing that has fed into this and other articles and is being developed into two monographs—one in English and one in Romanian. Similarly, my reflective inquiry into the entanglements between my life and my research amidst personal loss is an iterative endeavor that can be taken up in several ways. For instance, I could expand on questions surrounding the influence trauma has on our identities, narratives, and (self-ascribed) responsibilities both within and outside 'the field', and its effects on data analysis and presentation that this article touched on only briefly. For this expansion, I could draw from additional material unconsidered in this article. Similar to Roland Barthes, who began a mourning diary after his mother's death in 1977, I kept a notebook to grapple with my loneliness and the ebb and flow of grief. In addition, I could delve into the theorization of trauma, guilt, and ambivalence within the context of my research and amidst my personal loss, while engaging with literature from political theory or feminist studies (Kolozova 2014). Another fruitful avenue would be to revise this text, my research experience, and my personal loss at a later point while focusing on myself as a subject in an ongoing process of becoming and knowing (Barad 2007). In this light, every future endeavor, remains an attempt to remember as well as to self-reflect, with which I will never know myself fully (Cavarero [1997] 2000). With this present text, however, I have been able to distance myself sufficiently from this research process again and, in a sense, to move on from it and continue with life.

Notes

1.   All of the names are pseudonyms that I have assigned to my interview partners in this and other publications.
2.   In her article entitled "Heartful autoethnography", Ellis (1999, p. 673) provides a conversation with a student researching breast cancer in which she describes it as follows: "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth, autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. [...] In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as

relational and institutional stories impacted by history and social structure, which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts, and language".

3   The reasons for choosing these countries lay in my focus during my studies and my practical experience, especially in the field of development cooperation. At the same time, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative ascription of responsibility through the different ways of dealing with violence within both countries as well as on the part of the international community.

4   After a positive decision, this research project began in May 2017 under the title "Ascribing Individual Responsibility in the Aftermath of Collective Violence and Repression: Interpretations of Criminal Proceedings in Post-Communist Romania". The project examined how individual responsibility is attributed in the course of trials and in the resulting verdicts in order to compare these findings with the interpretations of different groups of social actors, how they attribute responsibility, and whether the judicial process has an impact on their views. The data collected in this project forms the basis for my dissertation, and so I am greatly indebted to my supervisor for the idea and project management and to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for the funding.

5   However, as Okin (1998, p.47) noted almost three decades ago, "the very concept of "inside" and "outside" is problematic". The binary approach is generally blurred, as insider researchers do not share all identities with the participants (Nelson 2020). Rather, researchers move along a continuum along several axes, while their "situatedness" changes in relation to time, location, and research participants (Jewkes 2012).

6   These archives are the Archive of the Territorial Tribunal of Bucharest (ATMTB), the Bucharest Military Court of Appeal (ACMAB), and the Romanian Supreme Court of Justice (AÎCCJ) in Bucharest. For one trial, documents were obtained through another researcher from Romania.

7   In the movie *The Twelve Tasks*, Asterix and Obelix are set to complete different tasks. The eighth task is to find Permit A38 in "The Place That Sends You Mad." The place is a maze-like, multi-story office building founded on bureaucracy and staffed by chronically unhelpful people who direct all their clients to other similarly unhelpful people elsewhere in the building.

8   Only sometime after the interview, I understood that these objects and the stories Irina told about them testified to the various strategies of resistance and survival that other interlocutors employed.

9   The longstanding, widely disseminated, and highly popular televised series '*The Memorial of Pain*' is "by far the most influential movie production to dwell on communism" (Stan 2013, p. 231). Between 1991 and 2008, 120 episodes were aired, concentrating mainly on anti-Communist activities during the 1940s and 1950s. In 2008, the series was rebroadcast, and new episodes were added, including the '*Black Series*' in 2013, consisting of interviews with perpetrators and torturers.

10   Only after months did I talk about it with others, but in advance I already adjusted the "safety dance". I now was careful not to use interview locations close to my home and to strongly emphasize my role as a researcher and my scientific interest to male interviewees.

11   Here, I concur with Fujii (2010, p. 237) who notes that the value of narrative research in the context of (past) collective violence and repression does not lie in the stories' truthfulness but in the accompanying meta-data, including inventions or silences that "can both hide and reveal".

12   Similarly, Jessee (2017) concludes from fieldwork in Rwanda that the focus on trauma often belies the wide range of emotions that people exhibit, including resilience.

13   Similarly, Susan Chase (1996) also distinguishes between what she wanted to communicate in her analysis, i.e., how culture shapes storytelling, and what her participants wanted to communicate, i.e., their life experiences.

14   Conceptualizing narrative research as an axiological option is informed by the desire to provide a stage for interviewees to tell and disseminate their stories. Yet, Riessman (2008) rightly introduces a note of caution regarding the belief that storytelling is quasi-mechanically empowering or healing, particularly in contexts of (past) collective violence and repression. Hence, the presence of an emancipatory intent does not assure an emancipatory outcome (Riessman 2008, p. 199).

15   My remarks here should not be confused with the major work of the philosopher Ernst Bloch. "The Principle of Hope" is a three-volume compendium in which Bloch sets out multiple ways in which hope and the human desire for liberation and fulfillment appear in our daily lives (Gili and Mangone 2023).

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