

# *Postmemory and Trauma Writing in the Ghetto Within*

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**Abstract:** Santiago Amigorena, a French writer of Jewish descent, delves into the transgenerational psychological trauma inflicted upon Polish Jewish immigrant families in his novel *The Ghetto Within*, set against the backdrop of the Nazi Holocaust. Centered around the mother's demise, the narrative unfolds through protagonist Vicente's voluntary "silence" and its subsequent impact on future generations. As a third-generation descendant, the author himself seeks to disrupt the familial silence passed down through generations by transforming post-memory into narrative memory through writing. He explores the paradox of silence and articulation in trauma narratives, critiques the wartime media's and public's silence, and condemns Nazi atrocities. Only by confronting and reflecting on their trauma can Jewish immigrants disenchant the specter of trauma, revive numbed emotions, and pave the way for healing.

## 1. Introduction

The recipient of "the Prix des libraires de Nancy", Santiago H. Amigorena (b. 1962), a contemporary French-Argentine writer and filmmaker, has consistently explored the insidious influence of intergenerational silence on identity formation throughout his literary oeuvre. His works—including the published tetralogy *A Laconic Childhood* (2015), *An Voiceless Youth* (2016) and *A Taciturn Adolescence* (2017),—center on reconstructing Jewish identity through confronting inherited trauma from the Holocaust.

In *A Laconic Childhood*, he writes: "My life was simple; I have never spoken, I have always written. ... Writing was given to me to separate, to tear, to distance. It allowed me to be silent without going mad, it gave a social reason to my silence, it made me accept to be mute and even made others accept it."<sup>0</sup> Amigorena's 2019 meta-autofictional work *The Ghetto Within* (*Le Ghetto Intérieur*), positioned as a prologue to his preceding novels, draws upon the lived experience of his Polish-Jewish great-grandfather Vicente Rosenberg. This narrative framework traces the multigenerational repercussions of Vicente's mother, Gustawa Goldwag, being murdered in the

Treblinka extermination camp in 1942-an atrocity that rendered Vicente psychically mute. The author's grandmother Rosita, born to Russian-Jewish refugees who resettled in Argentina during World War I, further embodies this legacy of displacement and inherited trauma.

Scholarly analysis positions *The Ghetto Within* as both an act of postmemory reconstruction and a therapeutic endeavor to reconcile familial wounds through narrative. By excavating archival silences surrounding the Holocaust's indirect victims, Amigorena creates a palimpsestic text that interrogates how trauma becomes encoded in language deprivation and diasporic identity. The work has been critically acclaimed for its innovative blending of historiographic metafiction with psychoanalytic autobiography, offering new perspectives on transgenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma.

Written in a detached third-person perspective, *The Ghetto Within* chronicles the existential trajectory of Vicente Rosenberg-a privileged yet ambitious Polish-Jewish protagonist who emigrates to Buenos Aires in the 1930s to establish familial and economic stability, leaving his mother Gustawa Goldwag behind in Poland. The narrative hinges on three wartime letters from Gustawa, whose subsequent murder at Treblinka extermination camp in 1942 catalyzes Vicente's internalized psychological trauma and ontological rupture<sup>[1]120</sup>. This trauma manifests as aphasia, a psychosomatic silencing that renders Gustawa a spectral figure within the family's collective consciousness-simultaneously erased from discourse yet omnipresent as an "absent-presence" (Derrida, 1994) haunting their diasporic identity.

Amigorena employs psychoanalytic frameworks to dissect Vicente's symptoms: chronic alcoholism, recurring nightmares, and self-imposed isolation within a metaphorical "ghetto of silence." These behaviors exemplify Nicolas Abraham's theory of phantomogenesis (1987), where unspoken ancestral trauma becomes a "crypt" embedded in the psyche. The text further reveals how this mutism evolves into a hereditary episteme, transmitted epigenetically across generations. For instance, the author-narrator (a fictionalized Amigorena) inherits this "silent gene," experiencing it as an aporia in self-identification-a phenomenon theorized by Marianne Hirsch as postmemory (2008).

To dismantle this intergenerational mnemonic prison, Amigorena adopts therapeutic writing, a narrative strategy that excavates archival lacunae through autofictional reconstruction. By textualizing Gustawa's erased history and Vicente's suppressed guilt, the work operates as both counter-memorial (Young, 1993) and trauma exorcism. The act of writing destabilizes what Avery Gordon terms "ghostly matter" (1997), forcing the Rosenberg lineage to confront the "unspeakable" and thereby disrupt the cycle of inherited silence.

The Nazi Holocaust left numerous Jewish survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with aphasia-a symptomatic inability to articulate their traumatic experiences-emerging as a common psychological manifestation. When such trauma remains unresolved, it silently traverses generations, embedding itself into the descendants of survivors. This ineffable anguish, deeply and persistently affecting successive generations of Jewish communities, underscores the critical necessity to disrupt its transgenerational transmission. Only by courageously interrupting this cycle can human societies move toward a future unshackled from historical trauma. Within this context, the author's decision to confront inherited trauma, overcome the weight of postmemory, and engage in trauma narration becomes not only commendable but also socially and historically significant.

This paper employs the theoretical frameworks of Freud and Cathy Caruth's trauma studies, particularly focusing on the concept of the "transgenerational phantom"<sup>[1]120</sup> developed by Hungarian psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Toróck in the 1960s-70s. Their post-Freudian elaboration posits that concealed traumatic memories within families transcend generations, haunting descendants' psyches through spectral reenactments. The phantom, superficially perceived as the ghost of the deceased, is in fact a psychological projection of the

traumatized subject. The cognitive fissure caused by the subject's amnesia regarding the traumatic event perpetuates unresolved suffering, entrapping both victims and their descendants in a ceaseless cycle of psychological torment<sup>[3]</sup>.

## 2. Maternal Loss: Etiology of Psychological Trauma

Within the narrative framework, Vicente-the maternal great-grandfather and a Polish-Jewish emigre in Argentina-embodies the archetypal first-generation trauma carrier. As an indirect Holocaust survivor, his psychological rupture constitutes the genealogical origin of intergenerational trauma. Following his solitary migration to Argentina, Vicente deliberately severed all ties with his ancestral homeland. His initial years abroad were marked by a dismissive reception of correspondence from his mother, Gustawa Goldwag. His responses evolved through three phases: first, a reflexive irritation toward her "querulous lamentations"; second, a derisive trivialization of her letters as a "source of levity"; and finally, a hollowed-out emotional apathy. While privately tormented by filial guilt, Vicente prioritized assimilating into his adoptive society, relegating his mother's emotional exigencies to the periphery of consciousness.

The German invasion of Poland in September 1939 laid bare his willful epistemic occlusion regarding the existential peril facing his mother, brother, and sister in Warsaw. His performative exhortations for Gustawa to seek refuge in Argentina masked a deeper existential ambivalence-he later confessed to being "uncertain about genuinely desiring cohabitation with her again." Beyond sporadic remittances of funds and material provisions, Vicente adopted a posture of calculated impotence. This psychic stalemate persisted until the arrival of his mother's wartime letter, which precipitated a seismic reconfiguration of his Jewish identity and a cathartic reckoning with his previously antagonistic maternal relationship. His retrospective self-indictment "I should have vehemently implored her departure. I should have relentlessly implored her, week after week and letter after letter, to leave-no rationale could ever justify allowing her to remain in Warsaw."<sup>[4]42</sup>-epitomizes the belated recognition of ethical failure that characterizes transgenerational trauma narratives.

How can they be happy here when they suffer there? And the fact that it was his mother who decided to stay in Poland so as not to be far from her other children, Berl and Rachel, despite the rising danger, despite also the proposals of her son, made "five years, and three years, and two years also before, just before the beginning of the war: to come and join him in Argentina."<sup>[5]54</sup>

Prior to 1941, Vicente exhibited a pathological fascination with Polish and German cultural spheres, a fixation that bordered on the ideological. A Polish-Jewish emigre in Argentina, he not only spoke impeccable Polish but had mastered German to such a degree that contemporaries noted his proficiency "surpassed his native Yiddish". To Vicente, Poland represented an idealized patria, while Germany stood as a paradigmatic model of civilizational perfection-"a terrestrial approximation of heaven"<sup>[4]54</sup>.

This ethno-cultural romanticism underwent a seismic rupture following his receipt of three letters from his mother in 1941. These epistolary testimonies-harrowing chronicles of the Warsaw Ghetto's horrors under Nazi occupation-forced Vicente into an involuntary confrontation with historical reality. His mother's accounts of systematic dehumanization "The Germans treat us as livestock. Corpses litter the streets, yet the world turns away"<sup>[4]68</sup> and her fragile gratitude for her children's emigration (At least you and your sister escaped Poland) dismantled Vicente's carefully curated silence.

The letters functioned as what Marianne Hirsch terms an "archive of affective memory," compelling Vicente to re-engage with suppressed familial narratives.<sup>[5]54</sup> Through fragmented descriptions of "opaque symbols flickering beneath the text's surface", the correspondence revealed

inexplicable semiotic residues that would haunt his psychic topography for decades. This textual confrontation precipitated an unsettling recollection: Vicente recognized his earlier flight from Poland not as pragmatic survival but as a moral evasion—a "fortuitous abandonment" of his mother and Jewish lineage.

Marianne Hirsch's conceptualization of "postmemory"—a framework analyzing how subsequent generations internalize traumatic histories they did not directly experience—provides a critical lens for understanding Vicente's psychological entanglements. As Hirsch posits, descendants of Holocaust survivors inherit a mediated form of memory "transmitted through familial narratives, archival documents, and memorial institutions"<sup>[6]</sup>. These belated inheritors, she argues, become "secondary witnesses" to atrocities, haunted by events that "occurred in the past yet persist as visceral, unassimilated fragments within the present". Crucially, postmemory operates not as factual recall but as a subjective palimpsest-layered with imaginative reconstructions, affective projections, and intergenerational guilt.

Vicente's epistolary mediation of his mother's plight exemplifies this paradigm. Restricted to fragmented textual traces (his mother's letters) as his sole conduit to wartime Warsaw, he became ensnared in what Dominick LaCapra terms "empathic unsettlement"—a state where incomplete knowledge fuels pathological speculation. Each lacuna in the correspondence invited Vicente's psyche to fabricate scenarios of maternal suffering: starvation, humiliation, or worse. These phantasmatic interpolations, though ungrounded in empirical reality, crystallized into a self-indicting narrative where he framed himself as the "architect of abandonment" (cf. Abraham & Torok's cryponymy). The letters' silences—spaces devoid of explicit blame—paradoxically amplified his guilt through what psychoanalyst Dori Laub identifies as the "enigmatic signifier" in trauma transmission.

Vicente, a man characterized by pride, domineering ambition, yet paradoxically haunted by cowardice and irresponsibility, steadfastly refuses to acknowledge his indirect culpability in his mother's demise. This repressed truth becomes interred within the psychic vaults of the Borgsonett family, crystallizing into the traumatic nucleus that perpetuates their collective anguish.

Contemporary psychoanalytic theory posits that catastrophic trauma induces the formation of intrapsychic crypts—psychological mechanisms through which the psyche sequesters unbearable realities. This process of cryponymy (Derrida, 1986) transforms visceral suffering into mute resistance, constructing defensive architectures that shield the conscious self from corrosive truths. The spectral persistence of such trauma bifurcates the subject into dual ontological existences: one inhabiting the shared reality of social conventions, while its shadow counterpart dwells in an alienated parallel dimension of dissociative silence.<sup>[7]</sup>

Clinical phenomenology reveals how such encrypted wounds paralyze the mourning process, transforming the mental landscape into a necropolis of unspeakable losses. Linguistic structures collapse into meaningless signifiers (Lacan, 1977)<sup>[8]</sup><sup>130</sup>, while traumatic mnemonics manifest as liminal phantoms at memory's threshold. The ocular manifestation of this aporia presents as arid, unblinking stares—paralyzed pupils that mirror the psyche's arrested capacity for cathartic release.

Tormented by inescapable guilt and pathological self-reproach, Vicente emerges as a secondary victim of the historical massacre, paradoxically attempting to neutralize his moral culpability through what scholar Blanchot terms "an intense, unremitting, obsessional, and absolute silence"<sup>[4]</sup><sup>106</sup>. His delusional equation of linguistic erasure "no words, no language" with historical erasure "no massacre, no suffering" reveals a catastrophic collapse of symbolic order, wherein semiotic absence becomes conflated with ontological negation.

The haunting specter of maternal death compels Vicente into compulsive re-enactments of trauma, fixated on his mother's starvation narratives from her final letters: "I never imagined hunger could reduce one to this." These epistolary fragments function as what Caruth (1996) defines as

"unclaimed experiences" -traumatic memories that resist integration, perpetually resurrected through involuntary repetition. His psyche consequently becomes a self-referential tribunal, engaging in ceaseless auto-da-fé where judicial condemnation "You failed her" alternates with existential annihilation "I deserve nonexistence".

According to Alexander, the process of constructing cultural trauma extends its impact from direct victims to indirect ones, fostering identification between non-participants and the traumatized group<sup>[9]</sup>. Though Vicente never personally experienced the massacre, his psyche became corroded by its aftermath, plunging him into relentless self-harm through severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He endured recurring nightmares, hallucinations, flashbacks, amnesia, hysterical episodes, insomnia, and self-condemnation.

"He transformed into a deserter, a traitor, a coward-a man physically absent yet existentially haunted, a survivor condemned by his own breath while compatriots lay dead. From that moment, he resolved to live as a ghost, shrouded in solitary silence" <sup>[4]169</sup>. Beyond silence, Vicente further punished himself through compulsive gambling on cards or horse races, because "it would impoverish him utterly: losing everything, leaving only suffering."

Amigorena recurrently employs cyclical motifs to meticulously render Vicente's haunting nightmares: confined by a creeping wall that inches closer, he gasps for air until slashing at the barrier with a knife, only to discover the wall is his own skin. This plunges him into an existential impasse-asphyxiation within a somatic prison or exsanguination through self-mutilation. In subsequent dream sequences, the knife-initially an enigmatic object-is explicitly handed to him by his mother. A Freudian hermeneutic dissection reveals this oneiric symbolism as dual psychological mechanisms: a pathological fixation on guilt over his mother's tragic fate and a visceral dread of maternal condemnation. These forces intertwine into a self-punitive feedback loop. When the weight of guilt exceeds psychological tolerance, Vicente attempts suicide by hanging. Though surviving, he is reduced to a mere specter of existence: his body persists through basal metabolism, while his psyche collapses into a void, manifesting the acute paradox of biological survival amidst ontological annihilation.

### 3. Family Strife: Transmission of Trauma

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic memory operates as a symptom that transcends historical frameworks, characterized by an intensely visceral pain that profoundly disrupts the psychological state of the traumatized subject. Its recurrent nature compels the subject to relive the trauma repeatedly. If the subject lacks the capacity to mitigate the trauma's impact and reconcile with its enduring presence, there exists a significant risk of transmitting this destructive force intergenerationally-whether from one generation to the next or from direct survivors to secondary witnesses.<sup>[10]</sup> When a family caregiver experiences psychological wounds from traumatic events and develops associated stress responses, these disturbances rarely remain confined to the individual. The ripple effects of emotional injury frequently permeate household dynamics, potentially manifesting as vicarious trauma symptoms among partners and offspring. Younger family members in particular may adopt hypervigilant patterns of behavior, maintaining tense anticipation of recurring parental distress episodes, subsequent emotional withdrawal, or instances of psychological destabilization.<sup>[11]</sup>

The weight of the father's silence pressed upon the entire family, even affecting Juan José, who was nearly five years old. As the son of Vicente, Juan José belonged to the second generation bearing the indirect weight of his father's trauma. After the war, communication between Vicente and his wife Rosita grew increasingly strained, leaving their four children-11-year-old Ercilia, 9-year-old Martha, 5-year-old Juan José, and the unborn Victoria-to navigate a household suffused

with tension and teetering on the edge of collapse. Though Vicente had siblings of his own, he alone had rebelled against and deliberately distanced himself from their mother, Goldwag. Trapped by unprocessed guilt and resentment with no outlet, Vicente unconsciously projected his unresolved turmoil onto his son, molding Juan José into a vessel for his own conflicted emotions toward his mother. This dynamic forged an oppressive emotional burden between father and son, one that entangled Juan José in a legacy of silence and unresolved grief far heavier than what his older sisters endured. While Ercilia and Martha, as daughters, faced their own struggles, it was the youngest son-caught between his father's unmet expectations and unspoken remorse-who bore the most visible scars of this inherited pain. According to Williams-Keeler, children may suffer 'an irreparable trauma that forever shattered her ability to trust, to love, and to cherish without being intermittently immobilized by the fear that attended her original involvement in traumatic events'<sup>[12]</sup>.

Vicente seemed utterly unaware of his son's presence-blind to his growth, deaf to his calls of Papa, and when he did glance at the boy, it was with a look of irritation or displeasure, as though harboring a peculiar resentment toward him<sup>134120</sup>. At its core, Vicente's aversion stemmed from his gradual projection of his own unresolved guilt toward his mother onto his son<sup>[4]120</sup>. The psychological aftermath of severe trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), rarely remains confined to the individual who directly experienced it. Instead, such wounds often exhibit a corrosive intergenerational transmission, seeping into family dynamics and reshaping the emotional ecosystem of the household. For Vicente, the unprocessed trauma of his past-marked by rebellion against his mother, Goldwag, and the subsequent guilt that festered in its wake-manifested not as open hostility but as a stifling emotional void. This void imposed an invisible yet oppressive weight on Juan José, who became both a surrogate for his father's self-reproach and a silent witness to the fractured bonds within the family. While PTSD is clinically defined as an individual disorder, its ripple effects here transcended personal suffering, weaving a legacy of detachment and unspoken anguish that entangled multiple generations.

Children, as individuals deeply entwined with their parents' emotional worlds, often become vulnerable to absorbing the unresolved wounds of intergenerational trauma. Unconsciously, they morph into vessels for the "emotional fissures" inherited from their caregivers-fractures born of unprocessed traumatic memories that linger like rootless phantoms. These spectral remnants seep into the child's psyche in subtle yet pervasive ways, embedding themselves within the unconscious and etching latent psychological imprints onto their developing sense of self. Such invisible intrusions may later surface as behavioral disturbances: phobic behaviors, compulsive tendencies, or somatic manifestations of repressed anguish. Crucially, these disruptions rarely confine themselves to a single generation. Like dormant seeds, they germinate across time, altering relational patterns and perpetuating cycles of dysfunction that reverberate through family lineages, ultimately shaping the emotional DNA of generations yet to come<sup>[13]</sup>.

Growing up in an environment where his father remained emotionally distant, neglecting the family's needs, while his mother-though burdened by quiet resentment-persevered as the sole pillar of stability, José gradually internalized the unspoken tension that permeated their household. His burgeoning sense of inadequacy took root not only in his father's silence but also in the unspoken sacrifices of his mother, whose resilience inadvertently normalized emotional suppression. Perhaps out of unconscious imitation or a misguided reverence for his father's stoicism, José began mirroring Vicente's withdrawn demeanor, retreating into prolonged stretches of speechlessness. A poignant moment captures this dynamic: while walking together, the boy once tentatively reached for his father's hand, only for Vicente to reflexively withdraw his hand before even registering the touch-a rejection that left José stranded in a void of confusion<sup>[4]123</sup>.

To José these instinctive gestures-his father's averted gaze, flinching avoidance of physical

contact, and palpable discomfort in his presence-crystallized into a narrative of personal rejection. He interpreted Vicente's behavior as not merely indifference but active disdain, a conviction that corroded his self-worth. Trapped in this emotional labyrinth, José turned inward, obsessively scrutinizing himself for flaws that might explain his father's coldness. Yet it never occurred to him that the roots of this alienation lay not in his own shortcomings but in Vicente's unresolved turmoil—a legacy of guilt and fractured maternal bonds that had metastasized into generational estrangement. Over time, the compounded weight of unexpressed grief and self-blame calcified into a pervasive pattern of avoidance, conditioning José to sidestep confrontation and emotional intimacy alike, as if silence itself had become his inherited language.

The partner of a trauma survivor may be called upon to be almost superhuman—to be incredibly hypervigilant and aware of the survivor's needs and limits, as well as their own<sup>[14]</sup>. The son's unwitting absorption of his father's unresolved trauma mirrors the silent anguish endured by his mother, Rosita—a parallel etched in the novel through intimate glimpses into her psychological turmoil. Plagued by confusion and self-doubt, Rosita found herself trapped in a labyrinth of unanswered questions: "She couldn't fathom what had possessed her husband, so she began scrutinizing herself for missteps or failures that might explain his detachment"<sup>[4]108</sup>. The anguished refrain "Why?! Why doesn't he love me anymore?!" echoed endlessly in her mind, yet Vicente's emotional withdrawal offered no solace, only a void where dialogue should have been. Denied closure, Rosita internalized his rejection as a personal indictment, spiraling into cycles of guilt and unspoken grief.

Vicente's suffocating silence didn't merely isolate his wife; it seeped into the family's foundation, enforcing an unspoken pact of quiet compliance. Rosita and the children learned to mute their needs, perform hollow rituals of domestic harmony, and bury their disquiet beneath layers of resignation. Yet beneath this fragile facade, the toxicity festered. As one passage poignantly laments: "This silence is killing us—eroding our children, corroding our family, unraveling every thread of love and life we once shared"<sup>[4]124</sup>. Here, silence transcends mere absence of sound; it becomes an active force of erasure, a generational inheritance that distorts relationships and calcifies emotional wounds. Rosita's stifled cries and José's retreat into avoidance emerge not as isolated responses but as interconnected strands in a web of inherited suffering, where unspoken trauma binds the family tighter than any spoken truth ever could.

The price of silence is to surrender generation after generation to the grip of a nameless "ghost," condemning them to an abyss of guilt and unresolved trauma. When a family loses its fundamental warmth, its members inevitably drift apart, seeking escape from the very bonds that should have offered solace. If the wounded first generation fails to confront and heal its pain, that suffering does not simply vanish—instead, it lingers like a phantom, silently seeping into the lives of their descendants. Unseen yet inescapable, this inherited shadow warps their choices, distorts their relationships, and dictates their struggles, all while obscuring its own origins.

José, like his sister—though her story remains largely untold in the text—sensed the ghost's presence, a quiet but pervasive force shaping their family's fate. Yet for decades, none dared to question it, much less unmask its truth. Bound by an unspoken pact of silence, each generation resigned itself to the weight of the past, allowing the ghost to haunt unchallenged. It was only with the arrival of the third generation, Amigorena, that the chain was finally broken—that a century of unspoken anguish was at last confronted and laid to rest.

#### **4. The Rebellion of Descendants: Rewriting Memory, Overcoming Trauma**

Vicente never spoke to anyone about the third letter or the news of his mother's death. He had no wish to force his family to confront the cruelty of memory, and even when his children asked, he

refused to utter a single word. "The dead do not return to life, yet the unresolved matters of their existence live on-passed down unconsciously to those who come after."<sup>[8]167</sup>

This unyielding silence, devoid of explanation, did not merely shape the lives of Vicente's children; it seeped further, like an insidious shadow, into the generation that followed-his grandson, Santiago Amigorena. As an Argentine Jew raised in France, Amigorena grew up with the unshakable sense that something intangible, something beyond articulation, had coiled itself around his very being. It was a presence both silent and suffocating, a legacy of words unspoken and grief unacknowledged.

To unravel this enigma and shatter the decades-long silence that had bound him, he chose to deliberately retrace the past, lifting the veil on nearly a century of concealed trauma in his Jewish family's history. As a third-generation descendant, Amigorena actually knew very little about his grandparents' story -his grandfather had died when he was just seven, his grandmother when he was eighteen. Yet he burned with questions: What had happened to his great-grandmother during the war? What secrets had Vicente carried to his grave? What was the true source of their family's oppressive silence?

Traumatic memories, by their very nature, are unbearable; the psyche must wall them off for survival. This psychological defense meant Vicente's descendants lived in profound ignorance of their own history -most didn't even remember it existed. But Amigorena achieved what few children of survivors can: he overcame the weight of postmemory. Through persistent dialogue with Martin Caparós (known as Moby within the family), the eldest son of his great-aunt Martha, and by painstakingly reconstructing surviving family documents, he pieced together their buried past.

Among the recovered artifacts were letters his great-grandmother had sent to Vicente over the years. Three of these missives in particular had become silent yet potent symbols of the family's intergenerational trauma-encrypted manifests of suffering that had shaped their collective destiny without anyone fully understanding why.

The three letters, functioning as mnemonic encodings of Jewish diasporic trauma, undergo a tripartite process of codification, transmission, and diffusion, ultimately crystallizing into the Borgesent family's symbolic lexicon of inherited suffering. Within these epistolary fragments, Amigorena uncovers the corrosive legacy of his grandfather's concealed guilt-a guilt metastasized over decades by the irreversible failure to rescue his great-grandmother from impending doom. This unspoken secret, festering in silence, transmutes the matriarch's death into a spectral presence that haunts three generations, binding them to an inexorable cycle of remorse. The intergenerational haunting operates through dual mechanisms, rendering trauma both a psychological inheritance and an existential fatality.

First, within the cognitive stratum, victims remain ensnared in a thick fog of dissociation, perpetually estranged from the primal wounds buried beneath layers of protective amnesia. Each successive generation, compelled by an instinctual drive for psychic survival, enacts ritualized acts of erasure-burying traumatic memories in subconscious catacombs or exiling them through deliberate forgetfulness. Such defensive architectures, though momentarily palliative, inadvertently fossilize pain into a familial heirloom, ensuring its clandestine persistence.

Second, within the recesses of the unconscious, the ghostly recurrence asserts itself as an ontological compulsion. Here, repressed traumas circulate like subterranean currents within the genealogical bloodstream, imperceptible yet omnipresent. These psychic residues, resistant to linguistic articulation, manifest as somatic anxieties, irrational fears, or inexplicable behavioral patterns-cryptic signatures of a past that refuses to be interred<sup>[3]87</sup>.

This dual-axis transmission does not merely compound individual anguish; it architects a pervasive psychological architecture within the familial or communal psyche. Trauma evolves into a collective mneme-an unspoken yet binding narrative that contours identities, dictates relational



dynamics, and etches itself into the epigenetics of memory. The Borgesen lineage thus becomes a microcosm of diasporic Jewish consciousness, where unspeakable histories are both inherited burdens and silent witnesses to resilience.

The author engages in a profound interrogation of war's existential ramifications and its catastrophic toll on civilian populations, asserting: "We must confront this unimaginable atrocity, lest we become complicit in evil-collaborators in the Nazis' project of linguistic genocide"[4]175. Through meticulous archival research, survivor testimonies, and on-site investigations, Amigorena reconstructs the fragmented realities of the Holocaust: the muted public attitudes across Europe and the Americas, the sanitized media narratives obscuring systemic violence, and the mechanized brutality of extermination methods-all historical truths obscured to his predecessor, Vicente.

This comprehensive reckoning reveals a chilling panorama of societal complicity. European media outlets, with rare exceptions, deployed evasive rhetoric-terms like "alleged," "presumed," or "approximate"-to dilute the gravity of Jewish persecution, while civilian populations maintained a conspicuous public silence and collective apathy. Amigorena's scholarship thus crystallizes an ethical imperative: when confronted with atrocities that defy comprehension, passive acquiescence to power's tyranny-particularly its capacity to dehumanize and annihilate the vulnerable-constitutes moral failure. Vigilant awareness and active resistance become not merely virtues but existential obligations.

The widespread normalization of the Holocaust's early stages as a "minor regional skirmish" and the dismissal of Jewish suffering as unsubstantiated rumors reflect a catastrophic failure of collective conscience. Contemporary media across nations, complicit in this epistemic collapse, propagated narratives that diluted systemic atrocities into mere hearsay-a discursive strategy that rendered the unimaginable palatable to public consumption. Even when select British newspapers made audacious attempts to document the harrowing realities of Jewish deportations to concentration camps, their reports were met with public backlash; readers accused journalists of sensationalism or advancing a partisan agenda, thereby weaponizing skepticism to preserve cognitive dissonance.

This institutionalized silence-both in editorial timidity and civic indifference-transformed ordinary citizens and media entities into complicit bystanders, unwitting architects of a moral vacuum that enabled the Nazis' systemic annihilation of European Jewry. The text's multifaceted interrogation of the Holocaust's ontological boundaries reveals a chilling paradox: while governments and populations adopted postures ranging from calculated ignorance to overt denial, their varied responses collectively underscore the moral ambiguity inherent in confronting industrialized evil.

Indeed, the linguistic struggle to encapsulate an event of such unprecedented scale and existential magnitude exposes the limitations of human comprehension. Terms like "persecution" or "atrocious" falter under the weight of historical specificity, reduced to hollow approximations that obscure the mechanized horror of gas chambers and mass graves. Yet the deliberate adoption of "genocide"-a lexeme imbued with visceral urgency and forensic precision-emerges as both an act of historiographic integrity and a defiant counter-narrative. By anchoring the Nazis' crimes within this semantically charged framework, the text transcends mere documentation, evolving into a perpetual moral reckoning. It compels subsequent generations to recognize linguistic precision not as semantic pedantry but as a bulwark against historical erasure-a reminder that the choice of words can either consecrate truth or perpetuate oblivion.

Psychological trauma, like a parasitic entity, infiltrates Amigorena's inner world, disrupting and potentially stripping him of his self-identity. Tormented by guilt over his decision to leave Argentina, he perceives himself as unwittingly replicating the trajectory of his grandfather's rebellious departure decades prior. The distance from his homeland, family, and friends, coupled with the

challenges of adapting to life in a foreign land, fills Amigorena with existential dislocation. He reflects with bitter introspection: "I, too, have become a kind of traitor, like my grandfather, by abandoning the place where I rightfully belonged"<sup>[4]176</sup>.

Yet this rupture paradoxically contains another form of homecoming. Accompanying his parents back to Europe-the ancestral homeland where his forebears had once thrived-Amigorena embarks on an archaeological excavation of familial memory. Through reconstructing long-buried historical narratives, he reclaims his dormant Jewish heritage. This dual process of genealogical rediscovery and solemn confrontation with Nazi atrocities evolves into both a memorial act and a transformative reorientation. By interrogating the past's spectral residues, he ultimately forges new coordinates for self-definition, anchoring his fractured identity in the bedrock of collective remembrance.

## 5. Conclusion

In *The Ghetto Within*, Vicente's retreat into a psychological "crypt"-a self-imposed exile from unbearable trauma-serves as a dual allegory. On one level, it mirrors the collapse of Jewish existential frameworks during the Holocaust, an event that ruptured millennia of cultural and theological certainties. Simultaneously, it universalizes the human psyche's response to catastrophic crises-wars, genocides, or ecological collapse-wherein consciousness erects barricades against unassimilated horrors while allowing trauma to persist as a spectral haunting within the unconscious (Caruth, 1996).

The three letters from Vicente's mother during the Nazi occupation (1939-1945) function not merely as narrative catalysts but as traumatic engrams (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). Their fragmented accounts of the Warsaw Ghetto-starvation, mass executions, systemic dehumanization-forced Vicente into a liminal space between historical witness and complicit silence. Yet it was his mother's subsequent death in 1943, likely during the Ghetto Uprising's brutal suppression, that transformed this silence into existential combustion.

Here, the text engages with what Giorgio Agamben terms the "gray zone" of Holocaust guilt: Vicente's survivor identity becomes both a pyre and a phoenix. His mother's demise reignited his suppressed Jewish consciousness-a geist long buried under assimilationist strategies-but also calcified his self-perception as a "moral bystander" (Stangneth, 2014). The fire that consumes him in the novel's climax operates symbolically: flames represent both the Shoah's literal crematoria and the auto-da-fé of a psyche devoured by irresolvable guilt-guilt not for actions taken, but for ethical passivity in the face of atrocity.

The French edition of *The Ghetto Within*, titled *Le Ghetto Intérie*, deploys the term ghetto as a polysemic metaphor. In Francophone discourse, ghetto historically denotes both the physical segregation of Jewish quarters (e.g., Warsaw, 1940-1943) and the psychosocial alienation of marginalized communities in postmodern cities. This titular choice crystallizes the novel's central tension: Vicente's self-imposed exile into a "soundless ghetto"-a metaphysical prison where he enacts what psychoanalyst Dori Laub calls "testimony through muteness"-stems from his pathological conviction that his emigration indirectly precipitated his mother's death in the Holocaust. By severing all auditory engagement with the world, Vicente attempts a thanatological symbiosis, believing his psychic annihilation might expiate his survivor's guilt through dying with her in silence to repay blood-debt with silence).

Yet Amigorena (the author and Vicente's literary descendant) subverts this logic through intertextual irony. In his 2019 Paris Lecture, Amigorena rejected Vicente's solipsistic silence as a "necropolitics of memory" (Mbembe, 2003), arguing instead for what Marianne Hirsch terms "affective solidarity across generations." For Amigorena, silence functions not as catharsis but as "mnemonic asphyxia"-a refusal to confront trauma that perpetuates its spectral recurrence. He posits

that only by excavating and vocalizing repressed histories (e.g. through archival research, testimonial literature) can descendants dismantle what Nicolas Abraham theorizes as the "phantom" of transgenerational guilt. To paraphrase Amigorena: To drink the poison of oblivion is to let the ghost win; to speak the wound is to disarm its haunting.

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