

Freezing.

*Childhood sexual abuse and the impact it can have on the body and
the brain*



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Abstract

This thesis uses autoethnography of assemblage as its methodology, and philosopher Merleau-Ponty's *phenomenology* and feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad's *agential realism* philosophy as its theoretical framework, in order to analyze how childhood sexual abuse can impact the body, specifically the back and the brain, and how theorizing about one's abuse can lead into a different possibility on how oneself can relate to one's abuse. It entangles theorizations of phenomenology, archive, and affect in order to understand the impact of childhood sexual abuse as something that does not operate within the realm of memory but rather of repetition. Then it analyzes the act of *freezing* through the agential realism philosophy to address the possibility for the impact of childhood sexual abuse to not be fixed nor pathologized. In other words, this thesis contemplates, while engaging with the author's personal story of childhood sexual abuse, how the body can carry the impact of childhood sexual abuse and the possibility of relating to it in a nonfixed way.

Keywords

childhood sexual abuse, the body, the brain, Karen Barad, agential realism, phenomenology

I want to dedicate this thesis to my Mom. You are the condition of possibility of my existence. I am able to endure, sustain, and come out of the dark because of the way you love me. There's no better certainty in the world for me than knowing that in the history of humankind, for eternity, you were, are, and will always be my Mom.

To myself. For believing there was a possibility for a different life. For breaking into pieces while holding such belief. For doing the impossible to have it. For *becoming* it.

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Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a silent health emergency, and it is a global public health problem. It goes unnoticed, is grossly under-reported, and poorly managed. It is surrounded by a culture of silence and stigma, especially when it occurs within the sanctuary of the home by someone the child knows and trusts (WHO 2004). As someone who experienced CSA, there are two things about the research done on CSA that I do not agree with 1.) What has been researched regarding CSA has mainly been framed and approached in a fixed, pathologizing, and exclusively brain-oriented way. The impact CSA has on oneself is exclusively addressed through the impact it has on one's brain, and through such, the behavior and possibilities of relating throughout life have been pathologized for anyone who has experienced it (Blanco 2015). And 2.) The research on CSA does not clarify that each case is different, that not all CSA is the same, and that the embodiment of the abuse and its impact can be different every time. Additionally, it is not very likely for there to be a follow-up research on how the impact of CSA has developed over the years in people who have experienced it, which leads to the pathologization of such abuse to be an even more common approach towards it. "Research on child sexual abuse has underacknowledged the multifaced, tacit and embodied dimensions, leaving the literature without a full picture of events that are often unspeakable, especially with regards to disclosure" (Herland 2022). As someone who experienced CSA, I am writing this thesis with the intention of displaying new possibilities on how CSA can be embodied and how one's understanding of the abuse can shift from fixed and pathologizing, to non-fixed and non-pathologizing. Therefore, along this thesis, I will theoretically engage with my own experience with CSA, the impact CSA has had on myself and how I have carried, through my body —specifically my back and my brain— such impact.

By engaging with my own experience, my aim is to display new possibilities on how CSA can impact oneself and how such impact is embodied: what it entails to have experienced CSA and how such abuse is lived. Since my goal is to not generalize the impact that CSA can have on oneself, in this thesis, I engage with my own experience with CSA. I theorize and analyze the impact CSA had on my body, specifically my back and my brain. In order to do so, I share two stories regarding my experience with CSA, one story per chapter, and along each

chapter I theoretically engage with its respective story with the purpose of explaining how I embodied my abuse and how my understanding of my abuse, of myself regarding my abuse, shifted from embodying it as fixed within myself, to understanding that I am not my abuse. My research question for this thesis is twofold, and reads as follows:

*How can the body and the brain carry the impact of childhood sexual abuse?
And how does theorizing about one's abuse can lead to a development in the way oneself relates
to one's abuse?*

Methodology

As someone who experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA), one of the main problems I encountered while researching about it was the pathologization linked to the impact this abuse can have on the behavior of people who experienced it. To name a few: the relationship between CSA and promiscuity (Widom and Kuhns 1996)¹ or the link between CSA and borderline personality disorders (Zanarini et al. 1997) (Christopher et al. 2007). This suggests a categorization of who someone is, what their problem is, and how to “treat”/“solve” this problem based on their behavior and the diagnosis linked to it. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk explains that nowadays, people will be likely diagnosed with a host of different psychiatric disorders: depression, oppositional defiant disorder, anxiety, reactive attachment disorder, ADHD, and PTSD. The problem with these diagnoses? None of them clarify how this behavior happened to exist in the first place, nor how to address it besides only relying on medication (2015, 150). As a result, people can end up being medically and socially categorized and treated based on their behavior, which leads to a fixation and pathologization on *who* they are and who they can be/ become, or not, based on it. In the case of CSA, it does not only presuppose that whoever experienced such abuse will then most likely turn out behaving in a specific set of ways—which I am not implying for this not to be a possibility—, but most importantly, it condemns for those

¹ Not all the research found was pathologizing, some do provide a broader approach towards the possible behavior and changes in them, that someone who experienced CSA can have during their life. See Miranda et al. (2023)

possibilities to be their *only* possibility of behaving. When the vision focuses exclusively on the behavior and how to “treat” it, instead of focusing on the cause and how to address it, it presupposes then a.) that this behavior is *fixed* within them and should/will have to be perpetually “treated”; b.) that in these cases there will always be something to “treat”, “fix”, “solve”, suggesting that there is no “outside” nor “beyond” this categorization for them; and c.) it denies other possibilities of embodiment that the impact CSA can have on someone.

In *Situated Knowledges*, Donna Haraway explains that *vision* “is *always* a question of the power to see —and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices” (1988, 584-585). From *where* am I seeing, and *why* am I seeing *what* I am seeing? The problem with *vision* in relation to science, and notions such as *knowledge* and *objectivity*, is that it has been “used to signify a leap out of the marked bodies and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581). The *vision* that comes along from a scientific *objective* position with the purpose of producing knowledge is then “the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (*ibidem*). I understand the pathologization and behavior fixation on people who experienced CSA as an example of Haraway’s definition of *vision*, where “objectivity” is created from the standpoint of the subjugated, which is not an innocent position. The subjugated position is one where the “objectivity” of the knowledge produced is preferred because it seems to provide an adequate, sustained, objective and transforming account of the world. It is the position that fixates and universalizes the knowledge produced and defines it as “objective” without considering the contradiction and complexity of the location where such *knowledge* came from. The knowledge produced from the subjugated position comes from “modes of denial through repression, forgotten, and disappearing acts —ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively”, which leads to various forms of relativism, where *relativism* stands as a “mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity, both deny the stakes of location, embodiment, and partial perspective, both make it impossible to see well (Haraway 1988, 584). I argue that this is what occurs in the case of CSA and the impact such abuse can have on people who experience it: the “knowledge” produced about it fixates the impact CSA can have on people, it pathologizes their behavior, and it represses and denies the

complexity that exists outside of the framework of knowledge produced and presented in scientific articles. As a consequence, and with the purpose of defying the fixation and pathologization surrounding this topic, along this thesis I will address CSA and the impact it can have from the vision I am answerable for: my own. Hence, in this thesis, I will use *autoethnography* as my research method.

Haraway (1988) proposes one's own vision as a source of knowledge and defines it as *situated knowledges*: a doctrine of embodied objectivity, of limited location, where there is no split in between the subject and the object used to produce knowledge, and the goal is not for such knowledge to be claimed as transcendent. "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or ground or a resource, never finally slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge" (592). To propose my location as a source of knowledge means to create theory from my body, from its complexity, its contradictions, from all the *intra-actions*² that have made of this body what it is, and to explain and address the positioning that upholds the *vision* that this body is presenting. A vision that does not claim to be universal, nor transcendent, and refuses to be fixed and resists for it to be treated and approached as *final*. With *situated knowledges* as a source of objectivity the goal is to have better accounts of the world, and therefore, "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These claims are people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway 1988, 589). To use *autoethnography* as my research method means to defy and resist the "view from above" that has managed to, on one hand, narrow the impact CSA can have on someone by pathologizing them based on the behavior such abuse can create on someone, while on the other hand, universalizing for such behavior to be final and absolute.

² Unlike the notion of *interaction*, which presupposes a clear boundary and distinction in between entities, and assumes for them to be already "fully made" and existing independently from one another, *intra-action* for Barad stands for the constant exchange and influence entities have with one another, and how they, while *intra-acting*, they constant, mutual, and simultaneously co-create each other. To understand entities *intra-acting* means for entities being constantly shaped, influenced and created. See Barad (2007) p. 139-140

I argue that there is *more* to someone who has experienced CSA than their behavior, that each case is different, that the possibilities of what and how CSA can look like and can be experienced are endless, and that fixating it is simplistic and can be equally harmful. I argue that the path towards understanding *what happened* and *how that looks like* implies contradictions, is neither linear nor clear. On the contrary to other genres of empirical inquiry —such as field work or interviews, them being typically used in CSA cases, and leading to Haraway’s understanding of subjugated positions where research aims to see from nowhere (1988, 584)— autoethnography as a genre is not a discourse of order, stability, control, and destiny, but rather, it is one of ambiguity, contradiction, contingency, and change (Bochner 2022, 15), and hence, as a research method, autoethnography allows for me to address the contradictions and change that can be experienced —that I have experienced— while understanding the impact CSA can have on oneself. In order to explain this, I will theoretically engage with my own experience as someone who lived CSA, by sharing two stories regarding my experience with CSA and how I related to it. I will share one story at the beginning of each chapter, and I will theoretically explain and engage with *what* happened in the story that made me relate to my abuse and the world in a specific way and, hence, how my abuse impacted me.

However, why stories? Which type of stories are they? What is the purpose of each one of them? I decided to share my experience with CSA through stories because part of the complexity of living abuse, sharing it, and reading about it is that sometimes only what is understood as abusive is shared, meaning only one punctual act is addressed. For example, to be raped, to be physically molested, to be hit on, to be verbally abused, and so on. Nonetheless, and while sharing my experience with CSA, I argue and aim to explain that even though abusive acts can be described with the same words between one another, no abuse is the same, and by exclusively addressing the acts, important and substantial parts of the abuse are being dismissed. To say that I experienced CSA does not mean to say that I share or have embodied my abuse in the same way as someone else who also experienced it. To merely address the acts does not encompass the abuse as a whole because the abuse is not only embodied by the act itself. The abuse does not end when the act is done, the abuse is carried throughout the whole situation —pre and post-acts, and the environment— that conforms and surrounds the abusive act. Therefore, instead of only

mentioning the acts that made of my childhood a childhood with sexual abuse, I explain the impact CSA had on me by sharing stories that, not only address the acts themselves but additionally, allow me to explain the situations through which I came to understand the abuse I lived and how I have embodied it.

Now, which type of stories are they? As I will further address in chapter 2, I understand CSA as the involvement of someone, in this case a child, in a sexual activity that they cannot comprehend, and hence, they are unable to give informed consent to, or for which the person is not developmentally prepared” (WHO 2004). CSA involves the physical, sexual, psychological and verbal incapability to understand *what* is happening, and hence, there is an incapacity to label it, address it and verbally incorporate it within one’s life. As a result, in my case, I did not know that what I lived was abuse. I did not understand, nor frame it as such while it happened, nor years after it stopped. The abuse was *merged* in my life, in my childhood, it was not only normalized but rather: the abuse was part of —it was blended alongside— the rest of the elements that due to their repetitiveness made and conform my childhood for what it was. It was not until I was living in another continent, by my own, that I started to understand and realize that what I experienced *was* abuse, and it was through encounters with other bodies that I came to realize it, and to realize the impact it has had on me. As Uotinen explains “Autoethnographic writing can excavate those practices that have been invisible because of their ordinariness or repetitiveness” (2011, 1309). Therefore, each story portrays and unwraps how that which was invisible due to its repetitiveness became visible, visible to me: in the story in chapter 1 I explain how I first realized and started to grasp that what I lived as a child was abuse, while with the story in chapter 2 I portray how, once I had acknowledged it and I was able to address it as abuse, it became clearer to me the impact it had on me, specifically while relating to men.

In the story in chapter 1, I explain this while sharing how an encounter with a man who touched my back brought me back to reliving an encounter —an act of abuse— I had with my stepdad when I was young. Hence, in chapter 1, I do not engage with the concept of childhood sexual abuse per se because by the time the story took place I had yet not realized nor understood the abuse I had lived. My goal with this story and its respective chapter is to theoretically engage with how I came to realize it and why. Therefore, in chapter 1 I theorize about encounters and

touch: how can CSA be carried by the body —specifically my back, through the skin— and can impact and shape it. As I mentioned before, the story in chapter 2 is different. By that point in life, I had already acknowledged my abuse, meaning I was already aware that I experienced CSA, and as a consequence, I slowly started to be able to verbalize and address the impact it had on me based on how I related and intra-acted with other bodies. The story in chapter 2 is an example of this: I was on a date with someone I liked, and at some point, he said something that made me *freeze*, which made it impossible for me to address and say how I felt, and leading into me having sex with him even though I did not want at the time nor was ready for it. Therefore, in chapter 2 I theorize about the notion of *freezing* —which is a notion I approach through the brain³— and the impact CSA can have on one’s body through the brain.

Each story represents, explains, and portrays a specific positionality I had in relation to my understanding, approach, and self-perception in relation to my experience with CSA. With each one of them my purpose is to explain how I lived and embodied the consequences of my abuse and, while theoretically engaging with each story throughout each chapter, I aim to share the process in which I was able, not only at the specific time when the story took place, but also while writing each chapter later on, to understand and engage with what happened to me and *how* I came to embodied it. It is important to mention that each story took place with a gap of two years in between them: the story in chapter 1 happened first and two years later occurred what I share with the story in chapter 2. Equally, it needs to be addressed that the story shared in chapter 2 happened during the time I was finishing writing and researching chapter 1, meaning, the positionality I was at while writing, researching and theoretically engaging with what happened to me in each story throughout each chapter is different. Hence, along this thesis there are three points in time: 1. the point in time when each story took place, 2. the point in time where I am theoretically engaging with the story while writing their respective chapter, and 3. the point in time in between each chapter. These three points in time together conform this thesis, and because of it, the stories throughout it are different, the chapters are different, because the location in which I was at within myself, in relation to my abuse, and my understanding and

³ I am aware that I am presenting a dichotomy in between the body and the brain by having one chapter focused on the body and another one focusing on the brain. There is a reason behind this decision which will be further explained in the Theoretical Framework. See more on page 21

capacity to address it in a certain way, engage with it and theoretically explain it, is not the same. Consequently, my research method for this thesis is not autoethnography on its own, but rather, my research method is *autoethnography as assemblage*.

While *autoethnography* as a research method can be defined as the method “in which the research’s personal experience from both starting point and the central material study” (Uotinen 2011, 1308), given that along this thesis I am doing an autoethnographic work from two different experiences that relate to each other by being part of a larger topic —CSA— I am doing an assemblage of my experience in relation to such topic. *Autoethnography as assemblage* brings together a range of heterogenous elements in different modalities to offer different perspectives on a phenomenon, which offers a “site-ontological” account of practices, experiences and lives (Denshire 2013, 222). As mentioned before, in the case of CSA the understanding of the abuse itself and its impact is most likely addressed throughout articles within a framework where specific punctual acts of the abuse are being addressed and engaged with (Young et al 2011), and/or the impact of such abuse is fixated and pathologized (Zanarini et al 1997). Which can lead to an abstract, generalized, smooth account of events. By doing an *assemblage* of the autoethnographic research method presented throughout this thesis, my purpose is to visibilize, acknowledge, and address the shadows, contradictions, and struggles that can be embodied after experiencing CSA. I aim to defy the single modality that has been used to address this topic and the impact it can have on whoever happens to experience it by sharing the epistemology of my location, which is composed of contradictions, contestations, positionality and hope for better accounts of the world in relation to CSA.

Theoretical Framework

As it was mentioned before, along this thesis there are three points in time: 1. the point in time when each story took place, 2. the point in time where I am theoretically engaging with the story while writing their respective chapter, and 3. the point in time in between each chapter. As a sum, these three points in time together represent and stand for the process, the sequence and development of thinking and relating to the world that I experienced in between the occurring of the points in time and in relation to this thesis. This thesis is and represents the chronological

sequence of how I understood myself in relation to my abuse, how I understood and related to the abuse itself, and lastly, how I engaged and related to the world while experiencing and understanding the impact my abuse had on myself. Because it *was* and remains to be an ongoing process, it never was nor it will ever be a fixed understanding of myself, nor of my relation to my abuse, or my relation and positionality with the world and the impact my abuse had and remains to have on myself. I want to explain what I mean while using the notion of *positionality*, Sara Ahmed addresses it as *orientation* which stands for the different ways in which one can register the proximity of other bodies and objects in relation to oneself. “Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy and attention towards” (Ahmed 2006, 3). It is due to my orientation, my positionality with a space, with the world, with myself, that I experience the world the way I do. The understanding and knowledge with which I started this thesis regarding my abuse, and the ones with which this thesis finishes, are completely different. The more I read, understood, and explained how I experienced each story along each chapter, the more my positionality changed. I address this as a development of thinking and relating with the world, myself and my abuse. As a consequence, along this thesis I display such development on the different stages of relationality I experienced with the world in relation to myself and my understanding of my abuse: each chapter represents a different positionality —a different point in time in the process — I was in while engaging and relating with myself, my abuse, and with the world. Hence, each chapter has a different theoretical framework. On one hand, in chapter 1, I engage with Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* to explain how my abuse appeared to me, which is the starting point of the development of thinking I had over my positionality and relationality with the world while doing this thesis. On the other hand, in chapter 2 I engage with Karen Barad’s *agential realism* theory to address the next stage within my development of thinking in relation to myself, my abuse and the world, which stands for understanding that my abuse is not fixed by itself, and more importantly, it is not fixed within me. I am not my abuse.

Merleau-Ponty and Barad

There is a crucial aspect to be mentioned, both theories contradict each other epistemologically: while both authors have similarities within their theories, for example, both of them arguing against the cartesian —dualistic— understanding of oneself in relation to the body and the world, their theory regarding the positionality of oneself with the world is completely opposite. So, *why* and *how* having them both? How to approach one research question and aim to answer it with not only one, but two theoretical frameworks that contradict each other? My first answer is: because each theoretical framework addresses the positionality I had with myself, my abuse and with the world. Each framework speaks and explains how I was able to relate with my abuse and from *where* was such relationality starting from. And my second answer is: because there was a development within myself and with my understanding of my abuse while engaging with the theory that allowed me to explain the impact my abuse had on myself. To argue that they contradict with one another in relation to the research presented would imply that the same positionality is being framed with both theories all at once, however, that is not the case.

I will explain first the similarities between both theories and afterwards I will address with more detail why and how they contradict each other. As mentioned above, both Merleau-Ponty and Barad argue against the cartesian “subject-object” dualism, however they do it from different perspectives. In the case of Merleau-Ponty, along his phenomenology he defies the cartesian “subject-object” dualism by arguing against the dualistic distinction in between “mind-body”, where the body falls under the category of “object” in relation to the “mind” which is the category attributed to oneself as subject (Reynolds 2014, 111). For him, the body is not an object from the mind, because the body itself is not an object in relation to oneself to begin with. For the body to be an object to oneself would imply that the relation one has to one’s body would then be the same one has to any other objects: one would be able to distance oneself from the body the same way one can distance oneself from a table, lamp, bottle, etc., because “It is particularly true that an object is an object only in so far as it can be moved away from me, and ultimately disappear from my field of vision. Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 103). However, it is not possible to do this with the body. Oneself cannot get away from one’s body because, as Merleau-Ponty explains, one *is* one’s body,

“Far from my body’s being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body” (2002, 117). There would be no *self* to refer to without a body that allows for oneself to *be*, and therefore, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology emphasizes on the lived experience of inhabiting a body, of *being* a body, where there is no distinction in between “mind-body” because the experience of being in one’s body, of *being* a body, is where the self exists.

In the case of Barad, they argue against the cartesian “subject-object” dualism while defying the idea of there being clear, sharp and fixed boundaries and distinctions in between subjects and objects before they relate to each other. In their *agential realism* theory, the primary ontological unit is not an independent one, it is not about independent objects that have fixed boundaries, properties nor behaviors, that exist for and by themselves and then, with a clear understanding of where the boundary of each is, they relate to each other while still being understood as independent objects relating with one another (2007, 139). Rather, the primary ontological unit for them is *phenomena*. The notion of *phenomena* stands for ontological relations in between “agencies”, meaning, the primary ontological unit of analysis is how agencies ontologically relate to each other. For the ontological relation in between agencies to be the primary ontological unit to analyze in Barad’s theory means that there is no independent nor fixed “subject” nor “object” (observer and observed) while relating to one another, there is no “Inherent/Cartesian distinction between the “object” and the “agencies of observation” (2007, 18). On the contrary, there are *ontological inseparabilities/entanglement of intraacting “agencies”*. Since there is no independent object with fixed boundaries nor properties, while relating to each other, Barad proposes that instead of agencies interacting with one another, they *intra-act*.

“The notion of *intra-action* (in contrast to the usual “interaction”, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful” (Barad 2007, 139)

Barad argues against the Cartesian “subject-object” dualism because presupposes a close and fixed understanding of agencies and of the world itself, on how they relate to one another and what their interactions imply and how they will (should exclusively and fixed) look like.

Now that I have addressed the similarities in between Merleau-Ponty and Barad, I want to explain their epistemological differences and *why* it is not a contradiction to use them both along this research, despite those differences. Even though they both argue against the Cartesian dualism, their opposition to such theory stands and creates a radical epistemological and ontological difference. While Merleau-Ponty defies and breaks the Cartesian dualism regarding the relationship in between the “mind” and the “body”, stating that oneself *is* one’s body and through one’s body —*I am* body and *this* body *is* me— his remain to keep the Cartesian dualism in between the “subject” and the “object”. For Merleau-Ponty there is a clear distinction in between the subject (oneself) and the object (the world) that *appears* to oneself, and hence, that oneself observes. For him, the relationality of oneself and the world is fixed to the degree that oneself is *in* the world: to be *in* the world presupposes a fixed boundary and a clear distinction in between oneself and the world, where the world is a container of oneself. “The self’s relation to itself, its being “for-itself” (*pour-soi*), must be investigated in tandem with its intimate involvement in the world, its being-in-the-world (*être-au-monde*)” (Rousse 2023, 596). The world is there for oneself, and oneself is able to experience the world through and because of the body that oneself *is*. Hence, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is useful to provide an understanding of what it means to *be* one’s body, of how the living experience of inhabiting a body looks like and how it is, because of one’s body and its positionality *in* the world, that the world *appears* to oneself the way it does.

As I will explain later on while specifically addressing the theoretical framework of chapter 14, I use Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology for chapter 1 because it allows for me to understand and engage with what it means to *be* my body —all of it, and in the case of this thesis, specifically what it means to *be* my body in relation to my abuse and what such abuse did to me through my body. My positionality at this stage of the thesis and in relation to myself and my abuse does feel fix, and therefore, so does the world. The story I theoretically explain in

⁴ See more on page 26 of this document

chapter 1 stands for how I realized I had experienced CSA, and I use Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to address how I my abuse *appeared* to me and what it means to understand one's positionality *in* the world through a body that carries abuse. Both my abuse and hence, the world, are fixed for me at this point in my development of relating with the world, myself and my abuse. To realize I had experience CSA—for my abuse to *appear* to my consciousness as I share along the story—made of my understanding of my abuse as something *fixed* for me at that point in time. The realization within myself, through my body, of having experienced abuse and for such realization to be and inhabited realization, made of the beginning of my relation with my abuse an experience that surpassed my capacity to think, relate and understand anything else besides that inhabitation. The impact my abuse had on myself felt fixed, and therefore, I related to it as such. I engage with Merleau-Ponty's "*in the world*" phenomenology theory because it enables me to address and explain how the realization of my abuse became *my* world, I was as much *in* the world as I was *in* my abuse.

Nonetheless, this was only a period of time, a stage within the development of thinking and relating to myself and my abuse. The more I was able to address, understand and explain *what* happened to me, *how* it happened to me, and the more aware I started to be about the impact it had have on myself, there was a shift within my approach to my abuse: although it still felt fixed, constraining, containing and everlasting, there was a desire, a need, for it not to be so. More importantly, there was a need for understanding it as not fixed, for addressing it and myself as not fixed, for my body to not be nor feel *fixed* by it. For there to be another possibility of relating to myself and my abuse. Merleau-Ponty allowed me to address the realization—the *appearance* to my consciousness—of having experienced CSA and enabled me to address *how* is it to embody the abuse while having such realization. Nonetheless, while writing the last section of such chapter there was a *need* of addressing my abuse as not fixed, of not pathologizing nor fixing myself to it. However, how to do it? How to address myself, my body, and my relationality with my abuse—with the world—differently? As mentioned before, the epistemological difference in between Merleau-Ponty and Barad is that for Barad, instead of being *in* the world—understanding the world as a container, as something fixed—we are *of* the world: we are part of the different becomings *of* the world. The world is not separated from

agencies, there is no hard boundary nor preexisting distinction nor distance between agencies and the world, we mutually co-create the world as the world mutually co-creates us. As Barad explains,

“Practices of knowing and being are not isolable, they are mutually implicated. We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its different becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. *Onto-epistem-ology*— the study of practices of knowing in being— is probably a better way to think about the kind of understanding that we need to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter” (2007, 185)

To understand and relate with the world through *agential realism* means to approach it as never fixed: never fixed itself, never fixed in relation to oneself, and more importantly, neither of them ever fixed as independent from one another nor oneself. For *phenomena* —the ontological relations in between “agencies”— to be the primary ontological unit of analysis for Barad implies that what should be observed is the *intra-action* between agencies, meaning, the primary ontological unit of analysis is how agencies ontologically relate to each other. What matters is how agencies *emerge* from the intra-actions they have, agencies are then not fixed, but *produced* from how they relate, and it is precisely such *relating* —intra-acting— what is being analyzed by Barad. Therefore, to be *of* the world is not only an epistemological approach towards how oneself relates with the world, but rather is an ontological approach, or as Barad says, it is an onto-epistem-ological approach on how one becomes *with* the world, while knowing and getting to know oneself and the world while *becoming*.

However, what does it mean *to become with the world*? What does Barad mean while saying that agencies *emerge* from their intra-actions? And still, *why* having Barad’s *agential realism* theory as a theoretical framework after having engaged with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology? *Why* having them both and not only one? In order to answer to these questions I need to first explain with more detail where does Barad’s theory come from and *why* did it enable me to relate to myself and my abuse in a non-fixed way.

Agential Realism and Quantum Physics

The fixation of myself in relation to my abuse came from the hopelessness and devastation I experienced while realizing I had experienced CSA and from the pathologization I encountered while researching about CSA and the impact it has on one's body—and hence, on oneself. As a consequence, the main question that I had after writing chapter 1 was: will I, through my body, forever behave based on the impact CSA had on me? Is my body—the materiality that I am—fixed to its behavior? I found the answer to these questions in Barad's *agential realism* theory. Barad argues against the scientific determinist approach towards *matter* by addressing quantum physicist's Niels Bohr discovery on the condition of *light*: is light a particle or a wave? While Newtonian physics assumed that *light*, or matter, could only have one reality—one position in life—either light operated under the logics of particles or it behaved and operated as a wave, Bohr discovered that it depends on the circumstances under which they are being observed, that they will have a different behavior. It was the *apparatus*—which Bohr defines as “macroscopic material arrangements through which particular concepts are given definition and through which particular phenomena with particular determinate physical properties are produced” (Barad 2007, 142)—used in the experiment what determined the light's behavior and hence, the result of the experiment. Hence, it is not that *any* given material context then results in either *light* behaving like a particle or a wave, but rather that *specific* material conditions—in Bohr's experiment addressed as *apparatus*—what has a direct impact on the entity observed—in this case *light*.

Barad reads and redefines the notion of *apparatus* by taking it away from the laboratory and into the material-discursive practices that are constantly being produced and enacted by matter. For Barad, *apparatuses* are not measuring tools but rather they are material-discursive practices that produce differences that matter—they are boundary-making practices that create matter and meaning, while being part of the phenomena produced (2007, 146). As a consequence, matter is then not fixed, and it will behave differently depending on the circumstances—the *apparatus*—through which it emerges. “The key is understanding that identity is not essence, fixity or givenness, but a contingent iterative performativity, thereby reworking this alleged conflict into an understanding of difference not as an absolute boundary between objects and subjects, here and there, now and then, this and that, but rather as the effects

of cuts *in a radical reworking of cause/effect*” (Barad 2014, 173-174). The *apparatus* and the agencies make cuts that reveal specific differences, specific boundaries, while intra-acting, and it is this *intra-action* and the revelation of those differences and boundaries what lead to *matter* behaving in a specific way. Hence, the differences and boundaries —the cuts, which Barad addresses as *agential cuts*— are temporary and made anew (Knoors 2018, 3). The way in which matter will behave, meaning, make cuts, create boundaries and reveal specific differences, is temporary to each intra-action: to speak about matter, about the properties and behavior of matter, should not be a deterministic, fixed or pathologizing, because matter, and substances such as *light*, behave differently depending on the material conditions in which they are intra-acting.

I use Barad’s *agential realism* theory for two main reasons: 1.) because their understanding of *matter* as non-determinist allows for me to address the materiality that I am — my body— and the impact my abuse had on it without falling myself into a generalized, fixed or pathologizing approach towards it. To address how CSA impacted myself does then not mean to say that my materiality will then always behave accordingly to such impact. I am not my abuse, nor my body will then forever be fixed to the consequences of such abuse. Additionally, to address matter as non-deterministic, means that the impact CSA had on me is only one example of *intra-action*, it is not my aim to imply that this is how it is supposed to impact anyone else who has experienced CSA as well. Therefore, while addressing *matter* along this research, more specifically the notions of *body*, *back*, *skin* and *brain*, I am not addressing them as a generalization nor fixation of them in relation to CSA, rather, I am addressing them as a possibility. And 2.) if matter behaves differently according to the apparatus —material conditions — under which it is intra-acting, and the cut —the differences and boundaries— that reveal from each intra-action are temporary, then there is a possibility for my own matter to eventually *intra-act* differently and create different boundaries, different differences. Intra-actions “cut together apart” in the sense that they temporarily include and exclude certain objects, subjects and matter, which in turn affects how those specific included objects, subjects and matter intra-act in their intra-active becoming (Knoors 2018, 3)⁵. To be *of the world*, stands for intra-acting with it, to simultaneously revealing temporary differences, temporary boundaries that then lead to other

⁵ Knoors is simultaneously quoting Barad in “Diffracting Diffraction” (2014, 176)

intra-actions. I am not separated from the world, but rather, I am *of* the world, I am entangled to it as much as it is entangled with me.

To have both theories, Merleau-Ponty's *phenomenology* and Barad's *agential realism* is necessary, not only because addressing both stories with one theory would not align with the understanding I had of myself and my abuse at each given moment, but additionally, because under Barad's theory, I would dare to say that it was the intra-acting of myself and my abuse while writing chapter 1, while excluding, including and theorizing about it in that specific way, that I *became* able to engage with myself and my abuse differently. As Barad explains "Intra-actions are temporal not in the sense that the values of particular properties change in time; rather, which property comes to matter is re(con)figured in the very making/marking of time" (2007, 180). Therefore, to have both theories enables me to address how the properties and behaviors of myself—of the materiality—that I am *became* and were (are) re(con)figured while writing this thesis. Not in the stories per se, but more importantly, in how I *became* to understand and relate with myself and my abuse because of it.

The Body and the Brain

It seems quite a contradiction to use theories in which their authors specifically address that they argue against the dualistic approach *mind-body*, and have myself a chapter on the body and another chapter on the brain. So, why do I? Why is there a chapter in which I address the impact CSA abuse has on the body and another chapter on how it impacts the brain? And more importantly, why do I engage with different theories to address the notions of *body* and *brain*? To be more precise: Why using theories that are epistemologically different to address the *body* and the *brain*, if the brain is part of the body? I am aware that given the title of this thesis, and by having a chapter on the body and another chapter on the brain, this thesis might come across as dualistic, however that is not the case. The goal of this thesis is to address how the body as a whole can carry the impact of CSA, however, given to the limitations of this research, and given to the infinite ways in which one's body can carry such abuse, I choose to focus only on how two specific parts of one's body can carry CSA. I focus on my back—through my skin—to address

how my body carries nonconsensual touching, and I focus on the brain to address how my body carries the act of *freezing* —of not being able to say “no” while sexuality relating to men.

Given that both, the back —together with the *skin*— and the brain, are part of my body, part of the materiality that I *am*, I wanted to first address what I was referring to with the notion of *body*. Therefore, in chapter 1 I address the notion of *body* through Spinoza’s definition of *body* as the “infinite number of particles; it is the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles” (Deleuze 1988, 123). *To be* my body then, means to be the sum of particles that conform my body, their velocities, movements and way of relating to one another. To focus on the back and the brain means to focus on a smaller sum of particles within the body and how they can relate to each other regarding CSA, however, I am still nonetheless, while addressing the back and the brain, talking about possibilities on how one’s body can carry the impact of CSA. As a consequence, in chapter 1 I mainly focus on the notion of the body in order to, later on within the same chapter and then in chapter 2 as well, *zoom in* and particularly engage with the back and the then with the brain. To have a chapter on the body first allows for me to settle a baseline on the understanding I have and I am proposing regarding how the body can carry the impact on CSA, but it does not mean this research has a dualistic approach regarding the body and the brain.

For this thesis to be dualistic would entail for me to assume that I am my brain, and that the impact CSA can have on oneself differs from one’s body to one’s brain, and this is not the case. Each part of my body has a different way of carrying information, but that does not mean to entail that there is one part of the body that has hierarchy over the others. I *am* my body and the sum of particles, its movements and speeds in which they relate to each other, and the back and the brain are part of that sum of particles. To particularly engage with the back and the brain allows for me to address different ways in which one can embody the impact of CSA, but that does not mean to say that they are separated from one another. As Barad says “But not everything is possible at every moment. Interior and exterior, past, present and future, are iteratively enfolded and reworked, but never eliminated (and never fixed)” (2007, 182). It is not possible to address it all at once, therefore, I choose to go from the general —the body— to the particular —back, skin and brain— to address how my body carries nonconsensual touching and

the impossibility to say “no” while sexually relating to men (which I will address with the notion of *freezing*).

In order to answer the question: Why using theories that are epistemologically different to address the *body* and the *brain*, if the brain is part of the body? I need to first explain a.) Why am I engaging with the brain and not with another part of the body while explaining the act of *freezing*, which is the act addressed along the story shared in chapter 2, and b.) how am I understanding the notion of *brain* along this research and its involvement as being part of the body. While researching about the impact CSA can have on the body, specifically on the act of *freezing* and what leads for someone to *freeze*, most of the research I found immediately linked the act of *freezing* to the brain, more specifically to the amygdala and the DVC (the dorsal vagal complex) (Roelofs 2017). Although the act of *freezing* involves the whole body: it immediately reduces the metabolism throughout the body, the heart rate plunges (we feel our heart “drop”), we can’t breath, and our gut stops working or empties (literally “scaring the shit out of” us) (van den Kolk 2015, 82), the mainstream scientific field has assumed that it is the amygdala and the DVC—the brain— what makes it possible for the heart rate to plunge, and for the metabolism to be reduced. Meaning, it has been assumed that the brain is where all the decisions regarding one’s body take place, concluding then that oneself *is* one’s brain (Nixon 2013, 115). This dualistic and fixating approach towards the brain settled in even more when the plasticity of the brain was addressed.

For the brain to be *plastic* stands for how experience materializes in one’s brain: how through experience, the forms of communication between neurons (*synapses*) can be created, strengthened, reduced in strength and/or even disappear (Huchín y Sánchez 2023)⁶. Hence, given the plasticity of the brain, is it assumed that oneself *is* one’s brain and that the brain, giving its plasticity, is then the part within the body that is in charge of the rest of the particles that conform one’s body. However, I do not agree with this statement. As Dr. Lu Ciccia explains, it appears to be forgotten that “Our social practices involve habits and behaviors that materialize in our body in general. Our whole body is plastic, there is no specific physiological parameter, and the brain

⁶ Translated by myself from Spanish to English

happens to be the most plastic organ we have” (ibidem)⁷. My body as a whole is plastic and it materializes the experiences I live through and because of it. For the brain to be, until now, the part of the body that has been agreed to be the most plastic part within the body, should not entail then that oneself *is* the brain. “Plasticity speaks of a changing matter, capable of being transformed. We are not only a brain, although science has made of its morphology and its functioning a discourse that could give an account of a totality” (ibidem)⁸. Hence, along this thesis, while addressing the notion of *brain* I am not entailing that I *am* my brain. On the contrary, I am my body as a whole, and the brain is part of it. Now, to say that I am not my brain does not mean to say that the research done on the brain is not important nor accurate: I can state that I am not my brain while still being interested in analyzing what happens on my brain whenever I freeze. Therefore, I choose to focus on the brain while researching and addressing the act of *freezing* because, although the hegemonic discourse engages with the *brain* assuming we *are* our brains, that does not mean that the research done on what occurs in one’s brain does not actually happen. As a consequence, I have decided to analyze the research done by the hegemonic discourse and address the act of *freezing* in relation to the brain.

To decide to engage with the hegemonic discourse on the brain in order to understand what can happen to my brain whenever I freeze, led me to two problems: a.) the brain is such a complex part of the body that, in order to explain how it operates, the hegemonic discourse is constantly explaining the *brain* through analogies on the latest technological advances: the brain as a machine, the brain as a computer, the brain as *deep learning* (Cobb 2020, 11), and b.) since in the hegemonic discourse oneself *is* one’s brain, to be one’s brain while relating and addressing the impact CSA can have on oneself, leads to fixate and pathologize the link between CSA and oneself —through the brain. Therefore, I use Barad’s definition on *apparatus* to solve these predicaments because it allows me to engage with the hegemonic research done on the brain without falling into the fixation of CSA in relation to the brain, nor into the dichotomy *brain-body*. For Barad, the notion of *apparatus* is not a measuring tool that observes and assesses entities, its behaviors and properties but rather the material-discursive practice that produces

⁷ Translated by myself from Spanish to English

⁸ Translated by myself from Spanish to English

differences that matter —they are boundary-making practices that create matter and meaning, while being part of the phenomena produced (2007, 146). As mentioned before, in Barad’s *agential realism*, *matter* is not fixed and it will behave differently based on the circumstances—the material conditions of possibility and impossibility, which is the *apparatus*— through which *phenomena* emerges. Therefore, to understand the brain as an *apparatus* means to approach it, not as a measuring tool that simply assesses entities, its behaviors and properties but, rather, as the material-discursive conditions that not only produce *phenomena* but additionally, it is part of it. To address the brain as an *apparatus* means to take it away from the hegemonic discourse where it is fixed, passive and deterministic, and understand it, not only as not fixed matter, but also as the material conditions of possibilities for specific boundaries and meanings to be made while *intra-acting*. I use Barad because if I would only read brain theory through the hegemonic discourse I would be led to believe that there is actually a split in between the body and the brain, that I am the brain and that the brain is fixed in general, but specially while relating it to CSA. However, using Barad’s *agential realism* theory, specifically their theory on the *apparatus*, opens up the possibility for understanding and relating to oneself, to the brain, to the world, and to one’s abuse, where *matter*, boundaries and meaning are not fixed, but rather they are ontologically produced.

So, why using theories that are epistemologically —and ontologically— different to address the *body* and the *brain*, if the brain is part of the body? I am aware I am making a theoretical jump by going straight to the brain as an *apparatus* in chapter 2 without addressing first the body as an apparatus. However, I choose to keep such theoretical jump because given the limitations of the research I am not able to engage and address them both, the body as an apparatus and the brain as an apparatus (given that the brain is part of the body), while simultaneously keeping the phenomenological approach on the body in chapter 1 (which is crucial for my explanation on my relationality with my abuse and myself). As Barad explains “The reworking of exclusions entails possibilities for (discontinuous) changes in the topology of the world’s becoming” “Intra-actions reconfigure the possibilities for change. In fact, intra-actions not only reconfigure spacetime-matter but reconfigure what is possible” (2007, 182). Given the limitations of this research, to exclude a theoretical explanation on the body as an

apparatus is necessary because it means giving the resources needed to address first the body with a phenomenological perspective, which it is not only how I was able to embody the abuse at that time, but additionally, what enabled me to think, need and research for other possibilities of embodying my abuse, myself and a different way of relating with the world.

Engaging with Barad's *agential realism* in chapter 2 by proposing the brain as an apparatus does not mean to entail that the body, from which the brain is part of, is not an apparatus itself as well. As I have mentioned before, I *am* my body, and the brain is a sum of particles within the larger sum of particles that conform my body as a whole, therefore, to propose the brain as an apparatus does entail for the body to be an *apparatus* as well. Nonetheless, because of the limitations of this research, and given that my goal in chapter 2 is to address the act of *freezing* and there is extensive research on *freezing* in relation to the brain, I choose to mainly focus on the brain as an apparatus.

Theoretical Framework Chapter 1

The story in chapter one portrays the baseline of the development of thinking of this thesis: it is the baseline of my understanding and realization of my abuse, of myself in relation to the world through a framework of abuse and how I, through my body —specifically my back and skin— have carried such abuse. Therefore, there are four main aspects I address and engage throughout this chapter that englobe the positionality from which this chapter takes place: a.) the notion of *body*, what am I understanding while using this notion; b.) the positionality from which I understand and relate to the world from such given *body*; c.) how I propose the body to operate in relation to the world; and d.) how does my back —through my skin— can carry the impact of abuse.

1.1 Merleau-Ponty and being *in* the world

Given that the story addressed and theorized about along this chapter is about how I came realize and understand that I had lived abuse, the theoretical framework I use along this chapter is an *existential phenomenological* one. *Phenomenon* comes from the Greek word *phanionmenon*, taken from *phaino*, which means *light*, and as a consequence *phenomenology*

devotes itself to be the study that addresses *how* something appears to consciousness: how something becomes conscious, how something appears to the light of consciousness (Allen-Collinson 2011, 2). As a theoretical perspective then, *phenomenology* theorizes and engages with lived bodies, creating theory from a person's account of perception and experience (idem). In this chapter I aim to explain and address how my abuse appeared to my consciousness, *how* it made an appearance. It is not that the abuse and its impact did not exist within myself—my body—already, but rather that I did not understand it as abuse before. I engage with Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology in *Phenomenology of Perception* because his approach enables me to portray how I *am* my body, and it is through my body that I came to not only live the abuse but, more importantly, realize it existed in the first place. “Far from my body's being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 117). It is because there is a body that I am able to relate to the world, and it is through my body that the world *appears* to me and I carry, through and because of my body, the impact such world has had on myself.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology argues that one *is* for oneself, and one appears for oneself by being *in* the world. “The self's relation to itself, its being “for-itself” (*pour-soi*), must be investigated in tandem with its intimate involvement in the world, its being-in-the-world (*être-au-monde*)” (Rousse 2023, 596). It is because there is a body that one has a world to live *in* and perceive it to begin with “The body is our general medium for having a world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 169). This presupposes the world as a container that is preexisting to oneself: the world is there on its own and it appears to oneself through one's body. One relates to the world through one's perception, but the world has been there already and it is up to one's perception to encounter oneself in relation to the world that comes to appearance. I engage with Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body *in* the world along this chapter because to be *in* the world presupposes and establishes the start-point of how something, through perception and appearance, begin to *exist* for oneself. It is the starting point for something to *exist* through *appearance* in relation to oneself, it is the existential realization of oneself existing through one's body based on how the world happens to appear. To address his theory enables me to explain and theorize about the starting point of how my abuse *appeared* for me, how my abuse started to *exist* for myself as

abuse in the first place. Therefore, this chapter represents the starting point on *how* I realized I had experienced abuse and *how* that realization happened to occur.

I use Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology because it allows for me to explain what it implied for myself that my abuse *appeared* to me: my positionality was one where the abuse, the world and my body in relation to it, already existed and were exclusively then *appearing* to myself. The existential positionality was not one of *intra-acting*⁹ with the world and co-creating the world, and hence, being of and with the world—like is the case in chapter 2. Rather, along this chapter, the point in the development of thinking I had in relation to my abuse is one of realization of said abuse. The perception and understanding of myself in relation to my abuse was one where I was constrained by it because it had just come to my awareness that it even existed in the first place. Along this chapter the positionality that I address is one of being as much *in* the world as I was *in* the abuse. If “to be *in* the world” stands for the world being a preexisting container that appears to oneself through perception, at this point in this thesis' timeline, at this point in my understanding and relation to myself through my abuse, I was as much *in* the world, as I was *in* the abuse I experienced. I experienced and perceived my abuse as the container of myself, of my existence, of the perception and understanding I had of myself and to the world. When my abuse appeared to my perception through my body, it appeared as fixed because it became the world that I was *in*. As a consequence, the focus on this chapter is to explain *how* my abuse appeared for me through my body, and based on such appearance, based on how it was through my body—through the materiality that I am—that the abuse appeared, to start grasping and understanding *how* my body has carried such abuse.

1.2 Spinoza and the notion of *body*

Now, if I am my body and it is through my body that I perceive the world and the world appears to me, it is important to explain what I mean with the notion of the *body*. I understand the body as the materiality that upholds myself in the world, such materiality being both human and non-human, and I define such materiality as dependent and autonomous. It is important for me that while addressing the notion of *body* the broadest range of possibilities and characteristics

⁹ The definition of the notion of *intra-action* in Barad is on page 15 of this document

of *what* and *how* a body can be to be addressed while mentioning such notion. Therefore, I use Spinoza's definition of *body* as the "infinite number of particles; it is the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles" (Deleuze 1988, 123). To engage with Spinoza's definition of body is to defy the idea behind *bodies* being fixed to specific functions, organs, characteristics and systems. A *body* is the sum of particles, how they relate to each other, their movements and velocities, and what makes each body what they are: its form, how it functions, how it relates, and not the other way around (idem). Given that at this stage of the thesis, the development of thinking regarding how I relate to the world and my abuse, is still one in which the world and my abuse only *appear* for me—the world is fixed, preexisting and a container of my existence—my positionality and understanding of myself *in* the world is one where I am being *affected* by the world. As it will be explained along the story in chapter 1, it was because of an encounter with another body that my abuse appeared for me. Hence, my positionality towards the world is one where bodies are *affected* by other bodies. Spinoza defines this characteristic of the body as the *dynamic characteristic*, where he addresses the capacity bodies have to be affected by other bodies, but additionally, how bodies have the capacity to *also* affect other bodies (Deleuze 1988, 123). I use Spinoza's theory because it does not approach *bodies* as fixed, it acknowledges and proposes that the sum of particles that make of a body what it is, are constantly being *affected* by other bodies and how being *affected* constantly also changes and shapes those bodies. Along this chapter I exclusively focus on how other bodies *affected* myself, and not how, by being a body myself, I also affect other bodies, because the aim is to understand the impact other bodies had on myself and how, from such impact, my abuse appeared for me. Nonetheless, to use Spinoza's theory on the *body* additionally allows for my understanding of myself through my body and in relation with the world—other bodies—to potentially be different; to not fix my way of relating to them nor the way in which they relate with myself. To be *in* the world, when my abuse *appeared* to me, means that the main focus was to realize *why* bodies affected me making my abuse appear to me, and *how* they were affecting that led for my abuse to be perceived as such. That is the positionality I was at during this point in my development of thinking in terms of how I related to the world, however, that does not mean to

say that as a body, I was not constantly and simultaneously affecting other bodies as they were (are) affecting me.

1.3 Derrida: The body as an archive

As it will be address during the story in chapter 1, to say that “my abuse *appeared* to me” means to say a.) that I had not understood nor lived the abuse *as* abuse before the encountered shared in the story, and b.) that it was because of a specific moment in time, a specific positionality within myself, the world and other bodies, that one encountered made for the abuse I lived to become conscious to me. The story tells how after one encounter where a guy unconsensually touched my back —making me feel extremely violated— hours later I found myself being conscious of one moment during my childhood where I experienced nonconsensual touching. While sharing this story and my goal for this chapter with others, many of them suggested that *memory theory* would then be the best approach to explain the what occurs to my in the story and the appearance of my abuse, nonetheless, I do not agree with this suggestion. Why? Because I understand *memory theory (remembering theory)* to operate under the logics of accessibility: to be able to remember stands for being able to have access to such memory and given that access, one then *remembers* such memory. “Stronger versions of the epistemic theory say that remembering at a moment requires knowing not only then but also previously. Earlier knowing explains, or bears some other special connection to, the later knowing.” (Frise 2023). Additionally, *memory theory* in relation to accessibility implies that the ability to remember lies on oneself, which presupposes that oneself is independent from one’s surrounding and it does not require anything else but oneself’s capability and accessibility to *remember* something.

In relation to my relationality and awareness of my abuse, *memory theory* would entail that to become *aware* of my abuse was possible because I always had access to it and that such *access* is a constant possibility for myself given that I have the capacity to remember. I do not agree with this theory because, as I have mentioned already, my abuse was something I never realized nor acknowledge as such (abuse) while growing up and experiencing it. I argue that there are *marks* of my abuse carried through my body, but it was given my positionality with the world that it was possible for my abuse to *appear* to me as such. I propose the *body as an*

archive, as the territory of one's history, as the physical place that has gathered and has been shaped by the information received, without that information being necessarily consciously addressed. I use Derrida's theory on the notion of *archive* to explain what does it mean for the body to be an archive, how do archives operate, and most importantly, *why* do archives —the body as an archive— do not operate through memory theory. In *Archive's Fever* Derrida explains that there is an illness to the archive —the archive's fever, *death drive*— that has as its main characteristic for it to destroy itself in order to keep itself alive (1995, 12). The death drive provokes forgetfulness, amnesia and the annihilation of memory, making it impossible for the archive to be a place that operates through memory (1995, 14). Now, given that the archive cannot operate through memory, Derrida explains that in order for any archive to be kept alive, it needs to have —it has— an *external place of consignment* that enables for the archive's information to repeat itself through such place of consignment. "There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside" (1995, 14). The archive —in this case the body, the *body as an archive* — is in the need for an external element that cannot be destroyed by the death drive, something that falls outside of the death drive's jurisdiction, and therefore, something that helps the archive to regain access to information. Derrida's theory allows me to explain how information about oneself can *appear* to oneself without falling into the idea of such information relying on *memory*. Because it is not about memory, it is not about the information one can remember, but rather, in this case, in my case with childhood sexual abuse, it is about the information gathered in my body that I had no access to until my positionality with the world made for the external place of consignment to allow for my abuse to *appear* to myself.

1.4 Sara Ahmed: *affect* and the skin as a border that feels

Derrida addresses how an archive operates and it explains as one of its main characteristic that, in order to be kept alive, all archives need and rely on external places of consignment to be able to regain access to information the archive's fever has deleted. However, how do the archive and the external place of consignment are linked to one another? How do they remain linked so that the information can be regained? I use Sara Ahmed's theory on *affect* to explain how can the link

in between an archive and an external place of consignment be preserved and sustained even after the information has been deleted by the *death drive*. I argue that whenever information is saved by an archive—regardless if such information is then later on erased by the *death drive*—the *act* of such information being saved creates an *atmosphere* in between all the bodies (human and non-human) that *sticks* to all of them.

For Ahmed, there is an effect created within bodies and objects based on how they relate to each other, based on their orientation and proximity to one another and how they are perceived. She addresses such effect as *affect*, which for her is “sticky”, is that which sticks, sustains and preserves the connection between ideas, values, objects and bodies (2010, 29). Hence, an *affect* is created in between bodies and objects whenever they relate to each other. Now, *affects* work through activation, meaning, an *affect* sticks to bodies and objects, creating and sustaining the link between them, but it will only be activated whenever the situation in which they were created repeats itself. As Ahmed explains “So we may walk into a room and “feel the atmosphere”, but what we feel depends on the angle of our arrival” (2010, 37). *Affects* will only be activated on the bodies and the objects where such *affects* was created in the first place, and more importantly, they will be activated given how oneself is currently situated within the space where one’s *affects* have also stuck. I use Ahmed’s theory on *affect* because it allows for me to explain how my body as an archive is linked to external places of consignment that enable for information about myself to *appear* to me and for myself to perceive them. Within her theory, Ahmed does not only explain how *affects* are embodied, but additionally, she emphasizes that one’s positionality in the world is what allows for them to activate. I use Ahmed’s theory on *affect* because it helped me understand *why* specific information about my life—the sexual abuse I lived as a child—only *appeared* to me when it did (given my positionality with the world, which is explain along the story) and *how* my body carried such abuse through the *affects* it created.

There is one additional characteristic on *affect theory* that is incredibly relevant for my research, and that is that *affects* are not immediately clear or defined into a specific emotion, they are an atmosphere that surpasses oneself—meaning, they are an overwhelming atmosphere—that can, later on, be evaluated and translated into emotions (Brown 2015, 12). However, the

atmosphere brought up by *affects* being activated surpass any possibility of oneself feeling or engaging in anything else besides the atmosphere one is then stuck to through one's *affect*. I address this characteristic on *affect theory* because it enables me to explain the positionality I was at during the story shared in chapter 1, my development of thinking in relation to the world and my abuse. The reason why I do not engage with the notion of CSA directly during this chapter is because my aim is to address *how* it felt and what it means for my abuse to *appear* to myself. I aim to explain the experience and the positionality I was at when I realized I had been abused as a child, and such experience does not entail me being able to address it back then for what it was. Hence, at this stage in my development of thinking in relation to the world, my abuse, and myself, my purpose is to address how my body operates like an archive, how that archive works and how that *affect* was stuck to me and was activated.

Lastly, I engage with Ahmed's theory on *Strange Encounters* to explain how the *affect* of my abuse was displayed throughout my body. Along this research I approach myself as being *my body*, meaning, I am all that my body is and this body *is* me: I am through my body, because of my body, I am *this* body and it is through *this* body that I am who I am and I experience, relate and engage with the world the way I do. Nonetheless, if I would have to address from *where* within my body was my abuse displayed for me, I would without a doubt say that it is within all my body, but it has been displayed through my back and through the *freezing* that makes it impossible for me to say "no" whenever there is a sexual encounter at stake that I do not want to be part of. Hence, along this chapter I focus on how my abuse *appeared* to me through the nonconsensual touching of my back. I use Ahmed's theory about *strange encounters* because it allows me to address the implication the element of *surprise* can have while activating an affect. Both, the *strangeness* and the *surprise* do not necessarily stand for an encounter in between strangers, but rather for the unclear communication under which they happen to occur. "What passes is hence not spoken, it is not a transparent form of communication. The sense that something is wrong is communicated, not through words, or even sounds that are voiced, but that through the body of another" (Ahmed 2000, 38). It was the unexpected, unclear and nonconsensual touching of my back what activated the *affect* made by my abuse, and therefore, I address along this chapter my abuse in relation to my body in general, but specifically, in relation

to my back, more precisely to my skin. “While the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialization of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others” (Ahmed 2000, 45). I use Ahmed’s explanation of skin in relation to oneself and other bodies because, while writing chapter 1, and even more as I started to engage with Ahmed’s theories in general, the development of thinking and relating to myself, the world and my abuse, changed.

My positionality changed in relation to how I understood myself and my abuse. Even though I remain to feel constrained in relation to my abuse, the more I researched and tried to explain how my abuse appeared to me, how my body *carried* the abuse, the more I kept on thinking about Spinoza’s characteristics on the body: bodies are constantly being *affected* by other bodies as equally, they *affect* other bodies (Deleuze 1988, 123). Ahmed’s theories allow for me to achieve two things: 1. To explain how my body *carried* my abuse, how it was impacted by it and how one regains access to information through *affect*, and 2. To return to a point that was not the main focus at the beginning of this chapter, but is extremely important nonetheless: the openness and relationality I have and am while being of the world. Although, at this point in my relationality with the world, it did not feel so, Ahmed’s theories opened the understanding I had of myself in relation to my abuse. It might yet not be different, but there was the possibility for it to be so given the openness I had learned I have.

Theoretical Framework Chapter 2

The story in chapter 2 portrays the transition in the development of thinking of this thesis, from understanding and relating to my abuse as fixed, to being able to address the impact my abuse has on me as something unfixed and constantly being reconfigured. This story is the transition of my understanding of my abuse because the research done in order to theoretically engage and explain the story, opened new possibilities on how to address and relate myself with my abuse. Additionally, it opened new possibilities on how to address my abuse in relation to myself and the impact the abuse has had, and continues to have on myself. I approach this relationality transition while engaging with a specific part of my body, my brain, and how can the brain carry

the impact of CSA. Therefore, there are three main aspects I address and engage with throughout this chapter that englobe the transitioning in my positionality in relation to my abuse and the world: a.) I engage with the notion of *freezing* in relation to CSA; b.) the notion of the brain as an *apparatus* in comparison to the understanding of the brain as a *machine*; and c.) how the understanding of the brain as an *apparatus* leads to me engaging with the act of *freezing* in relation to CSA in a nonfixed way.

1.1 Freezing, the brain and CSA

I engage with the notion of *freezing* because in this chapter's story, I share how I *froze* when a guy I was on a date with suggested for us to go somewhere more private after we kissed for the first time. During the time when this story took place, me freezing while sexually relating to men still felt like I was *in* the world, that I was *in* my abuse, and that my abuse was a container of myself, of the possibilities I had to relate with men, and with myself. The embodiment of that experience while it occurred was still one of absolute fixation in relation to my abuse; it seemed that there was no possibility for any other way for myself, for my body, to engage differently. However, there was one difference between my way of relating to men and my abuse in the story shared in chapter 1, from the relationality I was at during the story of chapter 2: while in chapter 1 I shared how I came to realize that I had experienced CSA, while *freezing* in the story in chapter 2, I was already aware I had experienced CSA. Such awareness was present *while* the story was occurring, and hence, along this chapter I engage with the notion of *freezing* in relation to CSA.

Freezing is explained in the medical and biological mainstream field as the third and last resource for survival, which is set based on the level of brain activity involved in a situation of danger. "Trauma is expressed not only as fight or flight but also as shutting down and failing to engage in the present. A different level of brain activity is involved for each response: the mammalian fight-or-flight system, which is protective and keeps us from shutting down, and the reptilian brain, which produces the collapse response" (van der Kolk 2015, 82). I address the notion of *freezing* and its relation to the brain based on Dr. Bessel van der Kolk's research in *The Body Keeps the Score* because, on the contrary to other medical and scientific research done on

the impact of abuse, CSA and trauma in relation to the brain where the studies are done on a specific group set of people with similar characteristics, the research done by Dr. van der Kolk addresses a larger range of possibilities in which abuse and trauma can impact the brain. This is done by Dr. van der Kolk by analyzing and engaging with different cases based on his patients' life stories and the multiplicity and difference there can be in how people come to embody and carry abuse (See for example, van der Kolk 2007, 7, 51, 124). Although I do not engage in this thesis with the testimonies Dr. van der Kolk uses in his book, the existence of such testimonies while doing the research for this thesis was part of my transitioning to an understanding of CSA having a different impact on each person. I use Dr. van der Kolk's theory on *freezing* and the brain activity it involves, not because the conclusions on the brain are different from other medical researchers, but rather because his way of naming, addressing, and engaging with abuse and trauma are less fixating than the rest. They are approached through a wider lens of possibilities; the testimonies are not framed as fixed, nor are they pathologized. Hence, while being someone who experienced CSA and with the aim of addressing CSA and its impact in a nonfixed and unpathologizing way, I use Dr. van der Kolk's theory because it is important for me to reference and theorize in relation to authors who have dedicated the time to see people who have experienced any type of abuse beyond the impact such abuse can have on them.

1.2 The materialization of *matter*: the brain as an *apparatus*

Understanding that there are different ways of relating to the world, to myself, and to my abuse did not only become possible from the quantum physics discovery on matter—how matter comes to emerge differently, to have different properties and behaviors, depending on the material conditions within which it relates to—but additionally because of how Barad approaches the entanglement between *discourse* and *matter*, and the *materialization* of matter: how *matter* comes to matter. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Barad argues against Judith Butler's performativity theory in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), where Butler affirms that it is through discursive practices, it is based on the reiteration of performativity, that the sexed bodies materialize. "Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names"

(2). Barad critiques Butler's theory by stating that while privileging discourse over matter, Butler forgets about the forces of *matter*, about matter being an agentive factor in processes of materialization (2007, 232). This debate is meaningful for this research because while engaging with the brain in relation to the impact CSA can have on it, and more so, while engaging with the understanding of me being my body, of me being the materiality that I am, it became extremely difficult to understand how I can *be* my body without that falling into the conclusion and fixation that I am therefore my brain as well —since the brain is part of one's body. Additionally, stating that I *am* my body also led me into the trouble of addressing and engaging with matter, with materiality, since *matter* is approached through the Newtonian framework as fixed: matter is supposed to only have a specific set of fixed properties and behaviors, and hence, matter is approached as deterministic. So, how to solve this predicament? How to address matter without falling into the deterministic understanding of it? How to approach the relation between matter and discourse, and how to engage with discourse in relation to matter without privileging discourse over it?

I found the answer to these questions in Barad's *agential realism* theory and their proposal against Butler's understanding of *discourse* and *matter*. In an *agential realism* account, "Matter is not simply "a kind of citationality" (Butler 1993, 15), the surface effect of human bodies, or the end product of linguistic or discursive acts. Matter is not a linguistic construction but a discursive production in the posthumanist sense that *discursive practices* are themselves material re(con)figurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted" (Barad 2007, 151 *italics by me*). Hence, addressing matter does not imply a deterministic approach because matter is constantly being re(con)figured through discursive practices, but simultaneously, discursive practices are equally being re(con)figured through matter. "Matter is discursive (i.e., material phenomena are inseparable from the apparatuses of bodily production; matter emerges out of, and includes as part of its being, the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries), just as discursive practices are always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material [re]configurings of the world)." (ibid, 151-152). To address the materiality that I am throughout this thesis, and to specifically address the brain in chapter 2, does not entail a.) a fixed or deterministic approach of matter, nor b.) a privileging of

matter over discourse. Rather, along this chapter, and although I primarily engage with the notion of *matter* and its materialization, while addressing *matter*, I understand matter as the emerging of material-discursive practices that is being re(con)figured from each intra-actions. Therefore, to affirm that I *am* my body, that I *am* the materiality that my body is, and to address along this chapter the notion of the *brain* does not imply an epistemological distinction between matter and discourse, but on the contrary, it assumes the mutual entanglement and re(con)figuration of material-discursive practices that materialize the body that I am through intra-activity.

Following the solution to the problem mentioned above, another issue I encountered while trying to engage with the *brain* and the impact CSA has on it, was that the mainstream scientific understanding of the brain was addressed while addressing the brain as a machine. “In 1665, the Danish anatomist Nicolaus Steno argued that if we want to understand what the brain does and how it does it, rather than simply describing its component parts, we should view it as a machine and take it apart to see how it works” (Cobb 2020, 8). To define the brain as a machine troubled me because it assumes the brain to be a passive organ that is already programmed into working, reacting, and operating in an already established way, which leads then to an understanding of the brain as fixed. And hence, to an understanding of the brain being fixed by CSA, which concludes in a pathologizing approach towards whoever has experienced it. Therefore, and with the aim of not fixating the brain, nor the impact CSA can have on it, I propose the brain as an *apparatus* based on Karen Barad’s *agential realism*. For Barad, *apparatuses* are not measuring tools but rather they are material-discursive practices that produce differences that matter— they are boundary-making practices that create matter and meaning, while being part of the phenomena produced (2007, 146). As mentioned before, I use Barad’s *agential realism* because it enabled me to explain and understand the constantly unfolding possibilities *matter* has on *becoming* and being re(con)figured. Specifically, for this chapter’s section I use Barad’s theory because to propose the brain as an *apparatus* opens the possibilities in which CSA can be approached through the brain and can lead for them to not be understood as fixed.

1.3 Freezing as an act

By this point of my research, and after engaging with Barad's understanding on *matter*, on how agencies intra-act and are constantly *becoming* and *emerging*, I revisited my positionality and my understanding regarding my *freezing* in this chapter's story. There was a step missing: if *freezing* is being explained through the brain's activity, and I am proposing the brain as an *apparatus* —as the material conditions that are constantly being re(con)figured while intra-acting, then, the possibilities of my *freezing* to not be fixed to my brain and hence, to myself can also be re(con)figured. To theorize about the brain as an *apparatus* from a Baradian perspective led me into understanding that a.) the brain does not *react*, but rather, acts while intra-acting, and hence, b.) that *freezing* can be something besides the embodiment I had from it so far, which was one where it was impossible for me to move, leave and say “no” while sexually relating to men. Therefore, I argue for *freezing* to not be a *reaction* made by the brain, but rather an *action* that becomes possible through the boundary-making of the brain as an *apparatus*. I use Sara Ahmed's theory on *How To Not Do Things with Words* (2016), where she explains “not doing” as a *doing*. “Not doing something is still an action; it might be a technique that is perfected over time. The action being performed is just not the action made explicit by the utterance” (2). I engage with Ahmed and Barad in this section because it enables me to explain the transitioning I experienced in relation to my positionality with my abuse, myself, and the world. For me to understand *freezing* as an act implies that there are further things being enacted while *freezing* takes place besides the embodiment of the impossibility to move. This transition in my understanding and embodiment of *freezing* in relation to the brain as an *apparatus* has allowed me to relate with myself and my abuse differently: if my brain is not fixed, but rather is constantly *becoming* and *emerging*, then the impact CSA has on myself is also *becoming* and hence, being re(con)figured. To intra-act with my abuse has led me into understanding that I am no longer *in* my abuse, but rather I am *of* my abuse and my abuse is *of* me. We are entangled, we are constantly being re(con)figured while intra-acting, and hence, if I am no longer *in* my abuse, that means that I can now be *of* the world and no longer *in* it.

Chapter 1. The Body as an Archive

The idea of the body as an archive came from the experience of someone touching my back and that encounter —that “touching”— triggering specific things in my mind. If I had to describe the experience, it would be as follows:

It was the middle of one of my first long lockdowns in Utrecht due to COVID. It was my first semester living here and therefore, meeting people, making friends, spending time with them, was almost impossible. If already living abroad can be, has been in my experience, one of the most challenging, vulnerable and lonely situations there are, going through it while a global pandemic was happening does not only enhance but also potentiate the vulnerability and loneliness of the experience. Even though loneliness and vulnerability are things we carry within ourselves, I was lucky enough to live with very warm and caring roommates, and therefore, I did not carry my vulnerability entirely alone.

In one of their many acts of caring, and since they had been living in Utrecht longer than I, and had already built a community of close friends, they invited me to some of their gatherings. In one of them there were many people: people that in that moment I would dare to call my friends, others I had only met briefly before and other ones that I was meeting for the first time. While I did not know all of them, and some of them I had only met once before, my need and hope to make friends, my desire to belong in a community of people, was ginormous. And, although I did not know them long enough or well enough, I did know my roommates: we were (are) friends. So, in my mind, if my roommates and I became very close friends, then there was a high possibility for me to like their friends and to become friends with them as well. Therefore, my approach towards the space and the people was an unguarded one. My desire to be surrounded by people, to have fun, to enjoy the very much needed interaction with others, overtopped any possible thought of precaution life had already taught me to have while meeting strangers. And that is the thing: in my mind, I was not meeting strangers, I did not label them as such.

It is important to contextualize who was there, how I got to meet them and what my current situation was, in order to understand why the “touching of my back” was so overwhelming, surprising and later on, so revealing. During this gathering, at some point some of us decided to go to the swings in the neighborhood. There were some of my friends, some of the people I had just met and also some others that I had met once before. I was talking to one of them while I was sitting on the swings and he was standing right next to me. I remember we were commenting on the sun, on how precious it was to have a sunny day while living in the Netherlands, we were laughing, having a nice time, when suddenly he steps closer to me and starts massaging my back while talking. I froze. What was going on? Is he actually

touching my back? Why? Who gave him permission? Why is he touching me? Is this happening? I remember I became instantly afraid. Afraid of moving, of alerting him, afraid of him. What will he try to do next? Is this as far as he will try to go? Or should I prepare myself for more intrusions? I remember looking around, trying to meet some of my friends' gazes, trying to understand what was going on, trying to find some information in my friend's eyes. As if the parameter with which to assess the situation was elsewhere, as if my own parameter was not enough, or even worse, nonexistent. Is this normal? Is this what people do? Is anybody else here witnessing what he is doing? Is anyone else confused by it? I was paralyzed for several minutes, until someone suggested to go back to the house. I remember I was not able to return to myself, I was already long gone within my thoughts. I felt violated and the feeling was not new. On the contrary, it was too familiar. But, from where? By whom?

It was not until I came back home, in my room that I remembered: it happened when I was a teenager, I was probably fourteen at the time. My stepdad was arriving home in the middle of the day and I was heading out, we encountered each other at the entrance. He was leaving his keys, I was taking mine and we hugged in a "hi-goodbye" kind of way. The hug lasted longer than usual, which now that I think about it, was weird. Right when I was about to break the hug off, he suddenly put his hands inside my blouse. He did not go very high, but he went high enough, he was rubbing my back, my skin. I remember him saying "Oh, you are so soft. I don't remember you being this soft. Are you doing something different?" At the moment I think I just replied with a quick "no, nothing", I pushed him away very quickly but at the same time very carefully, as if me breaking the hug was a casual thing, a casual thing happening because I was running late or something. I said goodbye, I grabbed my keys and left. I shook off the shivers I had, probably without me realizing, and continued with my day. Events like this one were a usual thing in my relationship with him, things that I can now properly address and understand how intrusive, and abusive, they were for me. But it took me many years to realize what those events were and it has taken me even longer to be able to name them.

*Some years ago, I came to realize with the help of my psychiatrist what those encounters meant. That the feeling of intrusion was there for a reason, that it meant something. That the encounters were not asked by me but that due to the close relationship I had with the abuser—he was my stepdad, I knew him since I was 5, I lived with him at his house for years, I saw him daily, he was an authority in my life, he was one of the main references in my life with which I encountered the world and myself—they were unconsciously normalized by me. Similar encounters have probably happened in many different occasions with different people, but I did not have the words, nor the self-awareness I have gained throughout the last years to address them. One thing is to name the abuse and to rationally understand how such encounters were abusive and why, and another completely different thing is to actually **feel***

them as abusive. The encounter with the guy at the swings, the experience of him touching my back, massaging my back, without me expecting it, without me asking for it, without him having any right to do it, brought me back to that encounter in my house's entrance. That was the moment everything clicked. Suddenly I was a teenager again, I was reliving it all over again but more vividly, more aware, more conscious. It was, it still is, as if I was experiencing the same encounter all over again but from a different perspective. From a perspective that I could now address and recall, that I can now name. I can now finally understand why everyone else called my experience with my stepdad an abusive experience. I can now not only understand it, but feel it as well.

My back spoke to me that day. My back saved information and luckily, I was aware enough to listen. My back has kept on speaking to me ever since. Now, all unannounced, unexpected, non-asked, sudden and surprising back touching experiences freeze me in the same way. Nonetheless, now I can understand why this happens and I can name them for what they are: non-consensual touching.

Introduction

The story above is the baseline for this chapter and therefore, the purpose of this Chapter is to develop a theoretical framework that can explain the incident in the story. To be more precise, the questions that I will answer and the questions that stand behind such theoretical framework are: What happened to myself—to my body— while being touched by the guy at the swings? How is it possible that hours after that incident I was able to recall what happened with my stepfather so many years ago? Which role did my body play in the story, and continues to play in my life nowadays? I will approach these questions by going through the notions of the *body as an archive* and the *skin as a border that feels*. In order to do so, I will engage with each concept separately: in the first section, I will approach the notion of the body by proposing a theory that defines it as the materiality that upholds oneself in the world, and that is simultaneously dependent and independent. For this definition of the notion of *body*, I engage with Spinoza's definition of body (Deleuze 1988) and with Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) in order to explain how oneself relates to the world through one's body and, hence, how oneself *is* one's body. In the second section I explain the notion of *archive* with Derrida's theory on *Archive's Fever* (1995) in order to later on link Derrida's theory with the notion of *body* and all together creating the notion of the *body as an archive*. Lastly, in the third section I address

how would the *body as an archive* operate while introducing Sara Ahmed's (2010) theory on *affect* and the notion of the *skin as a border that feels*.

The Body

The body. What is the body? I would argue that the body is the condition of possibility for my existence in the world. If I had to describe the body I would describe it as the materiality that upholds myself in the world, the materiality that I am, and that enables me to be in the world. I started to envision the body as such after encountering Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* where he affirms that "Far from my body's being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 117). I would describe the main characteristics of such materiality as both, autonomous (independent) and at the same time co-constituted (dependent). In addition, I will describe such materiality as a sensor that is constantly working and gathering information from its surroundings. But, what does this mean? I will unpack these sentences in pieces in order for it to be clear what do I mean with the notions *materiality*, *dependency*, *autonomy* and *sensor*, and how every notion links with one another, summarizing then my understanding of what the notion of *body* stands for. First of all, when I address the body as materiality I am understanding such materiality as both human and non-human, and I would define such *materiality* with Spinoza as the "infinite number of particles; it is the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles" (Deleuze 1988, 123). This means that all the particles that are within a body, the way they relate to each other, their movements, etc, is what makes a body —the materiality that I am naming *body* — and it is what makes such body the type of body that it is. It is due to how these particles relate with one another, their movements and their velocities, that a body (human or non-human) has the shape (form) and function that it has, and not the other way around (Deleuze 1988, 123). As an example, I think of the height bodies have: it is not due to one's height that one's particles operate the way they do, but on the contrary, it is due to how one's particles within one's body interact¹⁰ with one another that as a consequence one has the height they do. The particles within

¹⁰ It is important as a reminder that to *interacting* is epistemologically different from *intra-acting*. It is due to this chapter theoretical framework that the notion of *interaction* will be use as far as this chapter goes.

the body are what determine the physical characteristics such body will have; in the case of a human body, it is due to how its particles relate to one another, their movements and velocities that one has a specific height, eye color, skin color, weight, etc. Therefore, one's body, one's materiality, is the summary of how the particles within such materiality are and relate to one another. This physical —material— understanding of the body is named by Spinoza as the kinetic characteristic of the body.

Before explaining what I mean with the body as “the materiality that upholds oneself in the world”, I want to explain what I mean by situating the body — materiality— as both autonomous and dependent. Stating the body as autonomous is controversial because it could imply the Western dominant and humanist understanding of the body as discrete, logical, self-sufficient, coherent, fixed and autonomous from its surroundings (Neimanis 2017, 2). Such understanding of autonomy positions the body as autonomous in the sense that it needs and depends on nothing but itself, as independent from its surroundings, from other bodies, as if a body needs nothing but itself to be kept alive and exist. However, this is not what I am implying while stating the body as autonomous. I understand the body as autonomous because it has agency over itself. As an example and going back to the short story: while encountering the person's touch, it was my back that reacted to such encounter. My back reacted to the encounter with that person autonomously, all by itself. My back, my body, the materiality that conforms me, the materiality that I am, acted —reacted— on its own to the encounter. It acted and reacted due to an agency that I have no control over, and will never have, an agency that lies only within my body. Magdalena Górska labels this agency in her research *Breathing Matters*, as *matterwork*: “A term I developed to engage in the agential work of matter, in relation to the ways in which bodies (human and non-human) enact the complexities of movement and air metabolization for someone to dance” (Górska 2016, 29). Saying that the body is autonomous means that the body has agency over itself, that it acts, reacts and enacts over itself. If I understand the body that I am as the sum of infinite particles that interact with one another, and I address that my body is the way it is due to how such particles operate, then I am addressing that there is agency — autonomy— in the body.

While stating that the body has autonomy over itself, that it has agency, I recalled the part of the story where my back reacted to an encounter. While the body has agency over itself, and such agency is reflected over how its particles operate the way they do and how the body reacts to its surroundings, the fact that the body reacts to something means that it is simultaneously dependent upon its surroundings. The body is constantly in relation and conversation with itself and also with external elements to which it reacts to. Spinoza calls this the *dynamic characteristic* of bodies, referencing on the capacity bodies have to be affected by other bodies and their surroundings, and simultaneously, the capacity bodies have to affect other bodies¹¹ (Deleuze 1988, 123). Therefore, the body is autonomous to the point that it has agency and autonomy on how it reacts and enacts itself within the world but it is dependent because by being *in* the world, is constantly being affected and affecting other bodies. The interaction in between these two characteristics of the body addressed by Spinoza as the kinetic and dynamic characteristics are what make of the body a materiality that is constantly changing and therefore, a materiality that will never be fully constructed nor fixed.

In her research on *Bodies of Water*, Astrida Neimanis addresses the relationality of bodies through water and how water is directly implicated in the becoming of bodies. “We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially courses through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells: human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, whole reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies— which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by ocean’s dark belly” (Neimanis 2017, 3). Stating that the body is *in* the world means that the body is actually part of the world, is an element that is in contact, touch and reach to other bodies and materialities. The body has agency over itself in terms of how it reacts and operates in relation to how is it affected by other bodies, but the autonomy I propose by no means implies that the body is then self-sufficient. If anything, the body is relational and dependent on how it relates with other bodies.

¹¹ To further explain how bodies affect other bodies, I will address Spinoza’s and Sara Ahmed’s theory on *affect* in the last section of this chapter.

After explaining what I mean with *body*, the body as *materiality* and how the body is simultaneously dependent and autonomous, it is left for me to explain what I mean by the body as “the materiality that upholds myself in the world, the materiality that I am”. I will start by separating the sentence into two: 1.) the materiality that upholds myself in the world, and 2.) the materiality that I am. The first sentence, *the materiality that upholds myself in the world*, puts me in the need of explaining the relationship between an *I*—myself, oneself— and the *body*. First of all, to say that the body is the materiality that upholds myself —oneself— in the world could imply then that the *body* and whatever it is that is understood by *oneself* are separate elements that can be disattached from one another. As if there could be (is) an *I* without a body, as if it is due to the existence of an *I* in the world that the body —one’s body— exists. This statement can also be linked to the connotations of the words “my body” as if the *I* is then the owner of the body, again, as if the body is an object, a possession, that can be disattached from whatever is being referenced with the notion of *I*. While addressing the *body* as my own, then it could be supposed that the *I* is separate from the body and that it owns the body. Nonetheless, I mean the exact opposite. However, how can one prove if the body is an object or not?¹² In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2002) explains that if the body were an object, then one would have the same experience with it as one has with other objects. For example, one would be able to distance oneself from the body the same way one can distance oneself from a table, lamp, bottle, etc., because “It is particularly true that an object is an object only in so far as it can be moved away from me, and ultimately disappear from my field of vision. Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence” (103). However, it is not possible to do this with the body. The presence and permanence of the body in relation to oneself is entirely different from any other object because the body never leaves one’s sight. One cannot get away from it, it is constantly present and it is constantly perceived; additionally, the body always presents itself in the same angle: “The permanence of my own body is entirely different in kind; it is not at the extremity of some indefinite exploration, it defies exploration and is always presented to me

¹² Hereby I am approaching the idea of the body as an object in relation to oneself, however, it is important to mention that there is an approach on the body as an object in relation to the hegemonic structures. The latter addresses the ways in which the body is used and addressed by hegemonic structures with the purpose of universally categorizing and defining bodies. An example of this approach can be found in Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1995)

from the same angle. Its permanence is not a permanence in the world, but a permanence on my part. To say that it is always near me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with me*” (104). The body cannot be an object of oneself because it is, on the contrary to all objects, something that I cannot get myself away from, and more importantly, the body is actually *something* that it is always with me. I have addressed the *body* as materiality, as the assembly of particles that conform a body and that operate simultaneously as dependent and independent, but what is the relationship between the *body* and *oneself* then? How is the body the materiality that I am?

If the body is then not an object of the self, what is that materiality for the self? How are they aligned? How do the *self* and the *body* “merge”? Merleau-Ponty positions the body as the element that enables us to *be* in the world¹³: “I regard my body, which is my point of view upon the world” (2002, 81). One experiences the world through the body, through what one’s body is, and how such a body relates to and is affected by the world. It is through the body, through how the particles that make one’s body what it is, that one is *in* the world and that one is *in* relation to the world. For example, it is due to one’s height that one will perceive the world from a specific angle. It is based on the diseases that lie within one’s body, the diseases that shape one’s body, that one will engage with and *be* in the world. To portray this example in more depth Johanna Hedva explains how their body, by having a chronic illness, shapes their life: “When you have chronic illness, life is reduced to a relentless rationing of energy. It costs you to do anything: to get out of bed, to cook for yourself, to get dressed, to answer an email. For those without chronic illness, you can spend and spend without consequence: the cost is not a problem. For those of us with limited funds, we have to ration, we have a limited supply: we often run out before lunch” (2016, 3). It is based on how one’s materiality *is* in the world that one will then engage with the world and *be* in the world. The body cannot be an object of the self because that would imply that the self, the *I* as consciousness of the body, could be disattached from the body. There is no *self*, no *I*, no *consciousness* separated from the body, but rather *oneself is* the body: I am my body. As quoted before, “Far from my body’s being for me no more than a fragment of space,

¹³ To see the difference in between the body being *in* the world (phenomenological approach) and *of* the world (*agential realism* approach), see the explanation given on page 14 of this document

there would be no space at all for me if I had no body” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 117). The materiality that is my body, that constitutes my body *is* myself and my experience within the world: I am my body. One’s experience of the world is crossed over by one’s materiality, by one’s body, because the body is a sensitive apparatus that is constantly being touched, being affected, and in turn affecting and relating to the world, and one cannot get apart from such sensitive apparatus. The body is then the condition of possibility for one’s existence in the world: one is one’s body, and there is no consciousness separate from the body. Nonetheless, the fact that the body is not an object does not mean that there is no interpretation being made of the body, but how would this work?

I understand the body as a sensor, a sensor that is constantly and continuously receiving information from the world, a sensor that it is constantly gathering information and being affected by it. Saying that one experiences the world through the body means that it is due to the body as materiality that the world presents itself the way it does to us, and also, that one is *in* the world based on how one’s body reacts and relates itself to its surroundings. To understand the body as a sensor is to position the body as that which allows and enables for oneself to be in the world. Without a sensor to experience and perceive the world, there would not be a world for oneself to be in. By this I do not mean to say that only what is perceived —can be perceived— by the body exists in the world, but rather that it does not exist through perception to oneself: it is due to the body that objects exist for oneself in the first place, the body is what enables for objects to exist for us by perceiving them (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 105). However, what happens to all that information that the body gathers from perceiving the world? How does one have access to the information gathered by/through the body? In order to answer those questions I propose that the body, this materiality that is a sensor, operates as an archive. Therefore, in the next section, I will explain how an archive operates following Derrida’s understanding of the notion of *archive*.

The Archive

I want to add another characteristic to the body, because the body is not only a sensor that is constantly receiving information, but it is rather also a materiality that gathers information, that

keeps it. To be more precise, by stating that the body gathers information, I understand that the body does not only receive information but also saves information; in other words, the body archives information. However, which type of information? While saying that the body receives information per second —if not less—, I think of the information I can articulate that I am receiving now while writing: I perceive the temperature, whether I feel cold or warm, I perceive the noise of people talking at the back, the hardness of my computer’s keyboard, the proximity or remoteness of the persons sitting next to me, and so on. There is an infinite amount of information that my body constantly receives; nonetheless, the information I listed above is information for which I already have a reference within language that I can use to address it. I have words and references to address when I am cold, when the light is too bright, when music is too loud, when food is too salty. I will label this type of information that the body gathers as conscious information, information that has been archived in my body and for which I already have a verbal and physical reference within my experience. Nonetheless, there is also the unconscious information that is gathered by the body, information that has shaped one’s perception of the world but remains “undercover” from our consciousness, information that operates beneath the consciousness and, therefore, goes unnoticed¹⁴.

The Unconscious necessarily requires consciousness in order to appear, even though in appearing it also brings to appearance its difference from consciousness. Concretely, this means that the Unconscious manifests itself through *gaps* within the coherent connections of consciousness: in illogical trains of thought, in forgetting, in the fantastic formations of phantasies and manifest dream contents, in phobias and other neurotic symptoms. (Bernet 2002, 329)

Hence, while proposing the body as an archive, I am proposing the body as the territory of one’s history, as the physical place that has gathered and has been shaped by the information it has constantly received, without that information being necessarily consciously addressed. In addition, to propose the body as an archive means to propose the body as the materiality where the unconsciousness leaks and is exposed.

¹⁴ I am understanding *consciousness* with Brentano’s definition of it where consciousness is “a unitary connection of intentional representations that are accompanied by a pre-reflective internal consciousness”, and therefore, *unconsciousness* is defined as a (self)-consciousness that lacks an accompanying internal consciousness, that is internally unperceived (Brentano 2009 Ch.2, Section 2-13)

Along this research my main focus is on the information that lies within the body that has yet not been consciously appeared for oneself, the unconscious information. Nevertheless, before explaining how does the body operates as an archive and how it gathers information, I will explain how I understand the concept *archive* and how the body can be regarded as an archive. The main questions to answer for this section are: how does an archive operate? How does it gather information? And, more specifically, how does one have access to such information? Let's start from the beginning: what is an archive? The archive as a concept can be linked to the idea of a physical place that fulfills the only purpose of keeping files (information) in one place. The archive can be thought as the place where files and information are being saved, left behind, forgotten, and accessed to whenever one desires. As if an archive is a passive place, a public and political infrastructure¹⁵, where information just accumulates over time and what is left to do with it is only enter and find the information needed. However, on the contrary to this line of thought, an archive is actually more complex than just a physical place where information is gathered.

Derrida uses the word archive from its root word *arkhé*, which simultaneously stands for commencement: the place where everything emerges from, and commandment: the place where authority is exercised and externalized (Singh 2018, 24). Under this definition, an archive is therefore, the physical place, the residence, the location, where everything emerges from and simultaneously, the place that exercises and externalizes authority over itself. From these two characteristics, the one that needs to be further explained is commandment, because: how can a physical place exercise and externalize power? Based on the Greek word *arkheion* —which means “initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded” (Derrida 1995, 10)— it could be thought that instead of an archive being the place that exercises and externalizes authority, it is actually the home, the place, where those who have authority live, and where official documents were filed. The archons are then the ones in charge of the physical safety of what is being archived and subtracted from the archive, but yet, they are not the ones who state the law over the archive.

¹⁵ The idea of the archive as a public and political infrastructure that is assumed as given comes from Judith Butler's text *Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics* where they address the streets not only as the basis for political demand, but as a infrastructural good that is assumed without them being questioned (2015, 126)

While the archons are in charge of what is archived, they do not have the authority to state the law over the archive but only to interpret the law stated within the documents filed. The law is not given by the archons but by the documents archived, they are the ones who impose the law over how the archive operates (Derrida 1995, 10). Therefore, while stating that the archive is commandment, Derrida is addressing that it is what is being kept within the archive —the information— what dictates the law, making of the archive the place where authority is exercised and externalized. This gives a completely different approach towards the interaction between the archive and the archons, because while the archive could be thought as a passive place, where the archons would have control over and it would be them who are in charge of filing and stating the law, Derrida's proposal positions the archive as the one in charge of stating the law based on the information gathered and the archons are only in charge of interpreting what has been archived. More importantly, it is the information gathered what dictates the law, it is the information what makes and states the law of the archive, and the archons have no control over it, their power only goes as far as interpreting such information. Hence, to propose the body as an archive would entail that it is the information constantly being received and gathered by the body what shapes, alongside the body itself, the law on how the body will operate. This leaves oneself —as the archons— to only be capable of interpreting the information gathered and to interpret the ways in which such information is being kept by the body. Nonetheless, the question that arises from this theory is: if the archons have no control over the information gathered and subtracted, what has control over the information that states the law? Derrida proposes an archive theory where the archive does have control over such information, and hence, the next question to ask is: how can a place, an archive, have control over the information that is filed within itself?

In *Archive's Fever* Derrida addresses two main characteristics of the archive while proposing an archive theory: 1.) that the archive's theory does not operate like a memory theory, meaning, the archive is not a place that gathers information with the purpose nor the structure for such information to be remembered; and 2.) that the archive does not operate through memory because there is an illness within every archive, a fever, a condition, that makes of the archive what it is. For Derrida, such fever is the condition of possibility of every archive, it constitutes the archive and it is the characteristic that allows for the archive to be what it is and to do what it

does: destroy itself in order to preserve itself (1995, 12). However, how can this be possible or doable? How can an archive not operate under a structure of remembering (memory)? And how can its condition of possibility allow for the archive to destroy itself in order to preserve itself? While at the beginning of this paragraph I addressed Derrida's characteristics of the archive as two different ones, both of them are aligned and coexist with one another: it is the fever Derrida attributes to the archive what makes of the archive theory not a memory theory. In order to explain the fever within the archive and why the archive's theory is not a memory theory, Derrida appeals to Freud's psychoanalysis theory and uses Freud's notions of *marks*, printing, trace and Magic Mystic Pad to address the archive's structure and mechanism (Nava 2012, 98). I will start by explaining the archive's fever, what it is, how it operates and what it implies for the archive and later on, I will explain why is the archive theory not a memory theory.

Derrida defines the archive's fever, also known in his work as *death drive* or *archive's drive*, as a drive that "always operates in silence, it never leaves any archive of its own. It works to destroy the archive: on the condition of effacing but also with a view to effacing its own "proper" traces "It devours it even before producing it on the outside" (1995, 14). While such drive's main characteristic is to lie within the archive and destroy it, this drive is also a condition of possibility for the archive to exist in the first place. However, how can a drive that destroys the archive be its main condition of possibility? The answer lies in the access the death drive as to the way the archive operates. In order for the death drive to be the condition of possibility of the archive and to also equally destroy the archive, such drive must constantly be in relation with how the archive relates with the notions of time, memory, loss and forgetfulness (Nava 2012, 98). The death drive is and operates as a silent drive that lies in the archive and works with the purpose of destroying the archive, and therefore, in order to be able to efface information, the death drive intervenes in the custody, conservation and interpretation process of the archive. The death drive is a condition of the archive that relates to how the archive saves information, how it links to it and what it does with it. By proposing the body as an archive, I am proposing that within the body there is also a death drive that conditions the way the body registers and saves the information it is constantly receiving and therefore, the body will also regain access to such information in the same way an archive would.

As Derrida mentions “The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhé*. But it also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to say also that it forgets it” (Derrida 1995, 9). The death drive destroys with the intention of maintaining the information and structure that already keeps the archive alive and functioning. Therefore, the death drive destroys the archive because it has the need to preserve the archive, to maintain it alive. The intervention the death drive has within the archive and the way it operates within it, positions the death drive in a paradox within itself. On one hand, the archive’s drive has the intention to preserve everything, to register every single detail, for no information or testimony to get lost and to keep a track of every trace that has created a filed archived. Nonetheless, on the other hand, while having the desire of registering and gathering everything, there cannot be such desire of gathering and archiving it all without the unbreakable and undeniable possibility of forgetting and losing information during the process (2012, 98). The paradox exists because the death drive within the archive erases and loses information in order to preserve the archive itself, making of the archive a place that does not actually gather and holds on to all the information it receives. However, if the archive is then not a place that can hold on to all the information it receives, how can the archive can actually archive? How does the archive relate to the information? How can an archive be trusted? If my body is an archive, how can I trust my body to “remember”, to “relate” to previous experiences? To experiences that have not yet been addressed by the consciousness but that have indeed shaped my body and my experience with it?¹⁶

So far, I have explained what an archive is and how the archive operates in relation to the death drive that lies within it. It is left for me to explain why is the archive theory, not a memory theory and how the archive upholds the information given if there is a death drive that is constantly attacking and destroying the archive’s information. Derrida explains that the death drive provokes forgetfulness, amnesia and the annihilation of memory, making it impossible for

¹⁶ The Magic Mystic Pad is Freud’s reference to explain the way past events are permanently attached to one’s unconscious. While the Magic Pad is a children’s pad where they can draw on the surface and erase multiple times, even though each drawing can be erase from the surface, all drawings are not entirely erased from the Pad but sent to the back of the waxy surface. Hence, it becomes almost impossible to read each drawing separately from one another after they are erased from the surface. The same thing happens with every event —*mark*— one experiences, after they occur, they might not be still actively present in one’s life, but they are not erased from one’s unconscious. (Brown 2015, 2)

the archive to be a place that operates through memory (Derrida 1995, 14). By memory I am understanding the active act of remembering, the conscious act of trying to remember, and such act can only be done with elements that one can already address, or has already addressed at least once. Nonetheless, this does not mean that experiences that have yet not been consciously labeled are then unavailable. Based on Freud's theory on the unconscious, experiences that lie in the unconscious are "available" but not "accessible" (Brown 2015, 2). And this is what happens within the archive, it stores experiences that are yet not accessible, but they are indeed there. Therefore, by proposing the body as an archive, I am proposing that within the body lies one's unconsciousness: the body is the archive of one's history and it is within the body that one's unconscious experiences take place.

Going back to the archive theory not being a memory theory, the archive is incapable of gathering information and going back to it through memory, it cannot rely on the act of remembering the experiences lived when the information was being received because the death drive makes it impossible for the archive to trust itself and to hold on to the information gathered: information within the archive will be forgotten, lost or erased. Therefore, if an archive does not operate through memory, and I am proposing the body as an archive, then the body's archive does not respond to a conscious act of remembering, but rather on something else. The body as an archive does not and will not respond to a conscious act of remembering due to the following characteristics: a.) the body has agency, and b.) the archive is a place that externalizes and exercises authority. Stating that the body has agency over itself, meaning that it does not only respond to conscious and willing acts commanded by oneself and the brain, but rather, that it also actively and independently works as a whole: the body as an archive externalizes what has been registered in the unconsciousness.

So how does the archive archive? It appears then that the archive is in the constant need for an external element that helps it gain access to the information that was once received. As Derrida explains "There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside" (1995, 14). The archive is in the need for an external element that cannot be destroyed by the death drive, something that falls outside of the death drive's jurisdiction, and therefore, something that helps the archive to

regain access to information. The body is dependent due to its constant need and interaction with its surroundings to survive and likewise, the archive is in the need from external physical places and elements to be kept alive —to be able to keep archiving. The need for an external element in order for there to be an archive makes it impossible for the archive theory to be a memory theory because a memory theory could imply an independency that the archive does not have. The archive theory cannot be a memory theory because that would imply for the archive to not coexist with its exterior. Hence, even though the archive —the body as an archive— has agency and it externalizes and exercises authority, due to the death drive that lies within, it faces the need to be in relation to an exterior place in order to exist.

To say that the archive does not and cannot operate by itself implies that there is something that connects the archive, the information received and its surroundings, so the question to answer is: how do the archive and its surroundings relate and communicate with each other? The archive does not operate through memory not only due to the death drive that lies within it, but because it operates through a technique of repetition, not through the act of remembering on its own. “There is no archive without consignation in an external place that allows for there to be the possibility of repetition, of reproduction or of reimpression” (Derrida 1995, 14). However, what am I understanding for repetition? And, the repetition of what? How does the external place allow for a repetition to be made? Derrida goes back to Freud’s Magic Mystic Pad¹⁷ to explain the way an archive relates with the files archived. For Freud, the Magic Mystic Pad was his example to portrait how the consciousness operates with past events: every experience, every event, is an individual mark captured, however, the mark tends to disappear into the background, “blending in” with the previous marks, making it hard to delimit one mark from the other (Brown 2015, 2). In addition, in the process of gathering more individual marks, some get vanished and other’s blend in —which is in Derrida’s archive theory part of the death drive’s existing within the archive. While proposing the body as an archive, the marks in Derrida’s archive theory are addressed here as life events, as experiences that are the inscription within

¹⁷ Also known as *Magical Writing Pad*, which is a drawing pad for children to play and draw in.

one's archive of the information of such event: when it happened, how it happened, with whom, but more importantly, the mark carries within itself the emotion¹⁸ of such event¹⁹.

Going back to my back's story, I am understanding the event of my stepfather's nonconsensual touching as a mark that was archived within my body, at that moment it was not consciously addressed as nonconsensual, it was also not a mark that I could consciously go back to as such, it had to be repeated, reimpressed within my archive, in order for me to be able to consciously understand it as a mark. Stating the archive theory as a theory of repetition means that the archive's marks live within the archive but are kept alive, are activated, by external elements that recreate the position and atmosphere where a mark was made. Every mark has as one of its main characteristic its iterability, which stands for its capacity to be repeated and therefore, wherever there is a mark there is the inscription for multiple iterable supports — external places linked to a mark within an archive with the possibility to make a reimpression of the mark (Nava 2012, 101). This means that a mark cannot and will not only be activated by one place specifically —its place of origin —but rather, it means that it is the conditions, the atmosphere and the orientation of the body and its surroundings what enable for there to be a reimpression of a mark. The reimpression of a mark occurs outside of someone's control, and therefore, it is inevitable when it occurs and its consequences. Once again, the archive exercises and externalizes authority based on the law dictated through the information it has archived. Me completely freezing over the man's touch that day at the swings is an example of how my body as an archive, as both autonomous and dependent, exercised and externalized the authority that was dictated by the mark made by my stepfathers touching.

Now, why have I explained how the archive and the mark operate? Because the marks gathered within an archive dictate the way the archive will operate and archive in the future. As Derrida explains,

The archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical

¹⁸ Spinoza defines *emotions* as that which shapes what bodies can do, they are “the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished” (1959, 85) and Ahmed adds to this definition that *emotions* shape the very surfaces of bodies through the repetition of actions over time (2014, 4).

¹⁹ This will be further address in the next section of this Chapter with Spinoza's and Ahmed's theory on *affect*.

structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event (1995, 17).

The archive theory proposed by Derrida is like an archive formula of how an archive operates, however the content of the archive and how the content implicates the way in which new content will be saved, that is a gap filled particularly by every and each archive; in this research's case, by every body particularly. Going back to Freud's example of the *Magic Mystic Pad*: it is the sum of drawings —marks— what conform the pad's content itself, one mark over the other, over the other, and so on. The cruciality of this understanding of the *marks* and the archive is that one's archive is conditioned by the marks gathered and, more importantly, it conditions the way future marks will be archived and the importance such marks will have within the archive's operation and law. Hence, although this research focuses on the action of elements that initially fall outside of one's consciousness, already understanding how an archive operates in relation to the *marks* that conform it, positions oneself one step further within the understanding of one's archive.

It is left for me to explain how can a repetition be made in the body as an archive and furthermore, I am in the need to frame the type of *marks* that I will be addressing along this research. In order to do so I will address Spinoza's and Ahmed's theory on *affect* to approach how the repetition of marks are made within the body, Ahmed's theory on *encounters* to address the way *marks* are carried and I will approach a *skin theory* to explain how the body conforms itself as an archive.

Affect, Encounters and Skin

In the section above I explained the way an archive operates, nonetheless, it is left for me to explain how does the body as an archive operate, more specifically, how are *marks* repeated in between a body and the external place of consignment that Derrida mentions. "There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside" (Derrida 1995, 14). The *marks* embedded within the archive, in this case the body, are equally embedded in its place of origin, nonetheless, if such *embeddedment* would only be attached to the archive and its place of origin, then it would be

highly unlikely for the marks to be repeated²⁰ and for the archive to be kept alive. So, how does the act of repetition work then? I understand the link in between a mark, an archive and its place of origin as an atmosphere, an atmosphere that can be unintentionally replicated —activated— provoking for a mark to be repeated. With *atmosphere*, I am proposing that when a *mark* is created, it also creates an atmosphere, an *affect*, that is stuck to it, making it possible for a mark to be repeated in other places besides its place of origin. However, what is an *affect* and how does it work?

Ahmed addresses the contingency that bodies and objects are exposed to throughout life, how they are touched by what is near them, and how they change because of it —how they are affected by their surroundings and what is near them. There is something that links bodies and objects with their surroundings creating a specific effect on them based on how they relate to each other, based on the orientation they have towards their surroundings — their proximity, their position and the moment in time in which they are relating with one another— and also based on how they are perceived by their surrounding (2006, 27). This effect is created within bodies and objects based on how they related to one another, bonding and shaping them based on their proximity and how they are perceived. Ahmed addresses this consequence —the link between bodies, objects and their surroundings— as *affect*, for her *affect* is “sticky”, it is what sticks, sustains and preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects (2010, 29). Therefore, interactions in between bodies and their surrounding will create an *affect* that will stick to the bodies, objects and the surroundings involved. It can be thought that the *mark* in Derrida’s theory is then the *affect* in Ahmed’s, nonetheless, I propose that each mark has an *affect* that sticks to it, bonding it to its place of origin and shaping them both continuously. Therefore, every event in one’s life creates a *mark* and with such mark comes an *affect* that is created and linked to it based on the orientation and approximation the body had to its surroundings. Now, although an *affect* sticks to a body, to a mark, and to its place of origin, there are two main

²⁰ In a further note, thinking about abusive marks, more specifically the ones of childhood sexual abuse, it is highly possible that the place of origin of the mark is the victim’s household. Therefore, the marks are then constantly being repeated, however, this provokes for the such repetition to become the baseline in which children approach the world and understand sexual and interpersonal interactions. When the repetition becomes the baseline, the *mark’s* borders become blurry, and it becomes even harder for such marks to be trace.

elements regarding *affects* that I need to further explain: a.) how does an *affect* operate, and b.) what is an *affect*?

As it has been addressed, one of the main characteristics of an *affect* is that it is sticky, it sticks to bodies and objects, creating then a bond that links them. Nonetheless, being *sticky* does not explain the way an *affect* operates, because addressing an *affect* as sticky only explains how an affect is created and the consequence and purpose such *affect* has: to link bodies, objects and places together. For an *affect* to be sticky means precisely that, that it sticks, that it prevails, however, the fact that it sticks does not necessarily entail that it helps for a mark to be repeated within the archive. *Affects* work through activation, an *affect* can stick to bodies and objects but it is only activated when the situation in which it was created occurs again. “So we may walk into the room and “feel the atmosphere”, but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angered; it is always felt from a specific point” (Ahmed 2010, 37). An infinite number of *affects* are stuck to places, objects and bodies that one comes into contact with on a daily basis. Nonetheless, not all *affects* stuck to them are stuck to us, and even though that would be the case, not all of them would be activated. The activation on an affect does not rely only on the *affects* equally stuck to oneself and external places, but rather it depends on the way one is situated within the space, it depends on one’s orientation and position within a space. “Orientations register the proximity of objects, as well as shape what is proximate to the body.” “To say we love what tastes delightful is not to say that delight causes our love, but that the experience of delight involves a loving orientation towards the object, just as the experience of love registers what is delightful” (Ahmed 2010, 32). This means that the *marks* within our body as an archive, and the *affects* attached to them do perform also as a compass that does orientate the way one places oneself within a space. As an example I think of Audrey Lorde’s experience while the *affect* linked to racism stuck to her for the first time while riding the subway:

On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snow pants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat close to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing

she is seeing on the seat between us —probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she’s looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch.

An *affect* was created between Audre Lorde and the woman, but more specifically, an affect was created in between Audre Lorde and whichever situation in which her existence, orientation and position in relation to her surroundings is related to racism. Such affect will be activated whenever she finds herself in that situation, and the activation of such *affect* is what will then create the repetition of that mark within her archive. Similarly, when the guy at the swing touched my back, the *affect* created with my stepfather’s touch got activated. In that case, it is important to restate that before that encounter with the guy, nonconsensual touching hadn’t had that effect on me —at least not in a conscious way. Once more, it is crucial to understand that the activation of an affect is highly linked to the orientation one has within the current situation. In my case, and as it will be further explained in chapter 2, childhood sexual abuse is characterized for the normalization with which the abuse is lived and experienced by the child, making the abuse the baseline with which the child then approaches further relations with others. Hence, abusive encounters and behaviors are approached by the child as common behaviors —behaviors that do not take them by surprise— within their life. Their orientation towards the *affect* created through abuse makes it impossible for the affect to be “re-activated” because it had never been deactivated in the first place. Before the encounter at the swings nonconsensual touching was a normalized experience for me, so even though the affect was there, linked to a mark in my archive, it only got activated once my orientation towards my surroundings changed. For starters, I was no longer in México, nor in an abusive household, and that actually did change something within me.

I have explained how the *affect* is linked to the *marks* that conform one’s archive, and the way a mark’s repetition occurs within the body as an archive. However, I have yet not defined the concept *affect*, so, what is an *affect*? Spinoza describes *affect* as an atmosphere that is created in the encounter between bodies, as an example, there is an atmosphere that emerges while

entering a Pediatric Ontology Hospital, or a police station. What happens with *affects* is that they are not immediately clear or defined into a specific emotion, they are simply there as an atmosphere that consumes oneself (Brown 2015, 12). Nonetheless, *affects* can be —most likely are— later on, translated into emotions once they are evaluated, which is what happened to me at the swings. What at that moment was an atmosphere of complete emotion and nerve chaos, uncertainty, and the sense of being powerless; later on, while dividing each stage of the encounter, with plenty of effort, I was able to label and link the atmosphere to emotions that I had previously already experienced. “Perhaps we can speak of there being “affective climates” along with “sites of memory”, or even if the impossibility of thinking social memory apart from affect” (Brown 2015, 12). To state *affect* as an atmosphere means to state that when an *affect* is activated, the atmosphere surpasses one’s capacity to rationalize the experience, one is only capable of living the experience and be taken away by what the *affect* stands for. Whenever *affects* are activated, they live within and through our body, they show up by taking over our nervous system, and freezing one’s capability to rationalize the experience at once. *Affects* live in our bodies and operate through our bodies: in the first section of this chapter I addressed bodies as autonomous, referring to the agency bodies have over themselves, in relation to *affects*, they do not only live in one’s body but they also shape and condition one’s bodies. Therefore, the agency a body has over itself is also conditioned and shaped according to the effects the *affects* within the bodies have. More importantly, to say that *affects* shape the body’s agency, equals to say that the effect *affects* have within one’s body also operate outside of our reach of control. Therefore, the consequences *affects* have within one’s body and the way *affects* behave within it, fall into the category under which I am addressing the body as autonomous. The activation of *affects* within the body operates outside of one’s knowledge or control over them: *affects* get stuck in one’s body and while being activated, the body carries such *affects* and enacts upon them, making the body *autonomous*. The body acts, reacts and enacts over itself.

Now, the intensity of *affects*, their characteristic of being an atmosphere, and the impact they have over one’s body, could come across as *affects* being a deterministic element that would fix a person into not being able to ever experience things differently. And to some extent, this is actually the case: the intensity of affects and their characteristic of making it impossible to

rationalize the experience while the affect is activated does condition oneself into a limited frame of emotions and emotional responses. This conditioning is a crucial element throughout the way in which one learns to relate to one's surroundings and to oneself, because one learns to *be* in the world through the way one's affects permeate and live inside the body. The *affect* living in my back linked to nonconsensual touching did determine my experience at the swings and the state of shock, vulnerability and confusion I entered in, and the rationalization of the encounter afterward was and will never be enough to make such *affect* less deterministic. In order for *affects* not to define, delimit and determine one's experience of oneself and the world, there is the need to do something more than just rationalize the experience. To say that *affects* are non-deterministic suggests that "Rationalizing one's emotional responses is unlikely to be sufficient to manage this memory —what needs to be done is to explore ways of feeling a way through the atmosphere differently— to discovering new possibilities in what that atmosphere can offer" (Brown 2015, 13). I propose that one can make an *affect* a non-deterministic element within one's life, through positioning oneself in a different orientation within a space in order for different *affects* to be activated and recreated²¹, but as a first step, one can learn which *affects* is oneself carrying and where do they lie within our bodies.

Although so far I have approached the notion of *affect* in a general sense, for this research I am interested in one specific *affect*, which is the one that later on will be addressed in a broader sense linked to *childhood sexual abuse*—the *affect* of childhood sexual abuse— in chapter 2. This type of *affect* occurs for several reasons, but the reason that they all have in common is that they share the element of "surprise": they are created, in first instance, because the situation they are attached to, is unexpected. Ahmed addresses this "surprise" with the notion of *strange encounters*: the notion of *encounter* being defined as a suggested meeting in between bodies, a meeting that involves a surprise, a meeting that was unexpected by at least one of them (2000, 39); and the notion of *strange encounter* as unexpected encounters in which something that cannot be named is passed between subjects, defining —putting at stake— the contours and boundaries of the body-at-home, based on the way the stranger's co-presence occupies a space

²¹ This will be further explain in Chapter 2 while addressing the notion of *trauma*, and in Chapter 3 by proposing art as a way to gain access to the affects one carries.

(2000, 38). The “surprise” and “strangeness” of these encounters is not necessarily linked to it happening with a stranger, but rather, their main characteristic relies in the unclear communication under which they occur. “What passes is hence not spoken, it is not a transparent form of communication. The sense that something is wrong is communicated, not through words, or even sounds that are voiced, but that through the body of another” (Ahmed 2000, 38). In Lorde’s case, she could tell that something was wrong due to the white woman’s body language “her nose holes and eyes huge”, in my case with my stepfather, it was his closeness, his touch, his proximity and gestures expressed his intentions. The *affect* that situation created got activated during the encounter at the swings because the guy’s intentions and bodily expressions resembled my stepfather’s, as Ahmed explains “The strange encounter is played out *on* the body, and is played out *with* emotions” (2000, 38). The body operates as an archive because it is through the body that situations, encounters and emotions are saved, displayed and performed. It is due to the *affects* attached to the body —the *marks* that conform an archive— and the encounters —strange or not— occurring, that the body updates the formula with which it assess the world.

As previously mentioned, the *marks* within the archive are the ones that determine how the archive will archive future marks. “The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida 1995, 17). Therefore, by proposing the body as an archive, I am proposing that the body is shaped by the way in which it encounters its surroundings and those encounters condition and frame the ways the body will assess and approach future events. And in addition, the cruciality of this matter is that, given the encounter is played out *on* the body, one can initially only feel the encounter, be in the encounter, but not verbalize it until later. Hence, the body as an archive has an agency over oneself, it operates and positions its autonomy over oneself by constantly exposing events of its history —events of one’s history—, events that might have yet not been acknowledged. Now, the remaining question to ask is *how?* How does the body expose these events? How can a strange encounter —an encounter without words—, and affects be played out

on and by the body? I propose the skin, the largest organ of the body (Venus 2010, 469), as one of the displays where the emotions of encounters are registered and where affects get activated.

While talking about *skin*, there are many features to think of; however, for this research, I want to focus on one of skin's main characteristics, which is to delimit and differentiate an "outside" from an "inside" in regards to one's experience of oneself and the world. If I had to breakdown this characteristic, it would look like this: 1. the skin is that which upholds the materiality that enables us to have a phenomenological experience of the world (i.e., our body), allowing us to differentiate between an "I"²² and "otherness". "The skin is also a border, or boundary, supposedly holding or containing the subject within a certain contour, keeping the subject inside, and the other outside" (Fanon 1975, 9). And 2. the skin is the element that tactically —sensorially— connects us to such "otherness". Therefore, this makes the skin that which enables in first hand the contact and connection between oneself and the world. Simultaneously, the skin materializes oneself while also bonding us to the world.

Now, to say that the skin enables us to differentiate between oneself and the otherness around us, does not mean then that bodies end at their skin, why should they? (Haraway 1991, 472). Rather, to address the skin as a boundary means to understand the skin as a sensor that is able to assess the proximity, familiarity and strangeness of its surroundings. "The skin allows us to consider how boundary-formation, the marking out of lines of a body, involves an effectivity which already crosses the line. For if the skin is a border, then it is a *border that feels*" (Ahmed 2000, 45). By registering and feeling, the skin enables us to make of the *otherness* either something that can become part of oneself or something that stands as foreign based on the situation. For example: going back to the story at the swings, if it would have been one of my roommates massaging my back, a different affect would have been activated. There is a sharing of myself with my roommates that is not only given by them being familiar to me, but rather because of the *affects* and emotions my skin has registered from their proximity. "Bodies are touched by some bodies differently from other bodies" (Ahmed 2000, 48), and with the skin one can evaluate that *touching*. Hence, within the differentiation in between bodies that the skin

²² The formation of the "I" is addressed by Lacan (1997) through the "mirror stage", where a child recognizes their body as its own through the reflection of its body and the environment in the mirror.

provides —the differentiation in between skins— the skin also links bodies and separates them according to the familiarity, strangeness and safety they provide. It is important to emphasize that there is a distinction between the notions of *familiarity* and *safety*, whereas something that is familiar can simultaneously be unsafe. The entanglement of these two notions can be highly damaging to the body's capacity to assess encounters and define *safety* and *familiarity* separately from one another —*familiarity* can not only be unsafe but also abusive.

To say that the skin is a border that feels also means to say that the *touching* of the skin —by *touching* I mean to be exposed to others, not only through physical touch but also through eye contact, whispers, words, gestures, signaling — is an ongoing stage one's body is constantly going through: there is no time or space in which the body is not equally differentiating in between oneself and the *otherness*, nor there is a moment where the skin is not being touched and opened to the *otherness*. “While the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialization of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others” (Ahmed 2000, 45). The skin does not only provide a visual and material border between bodies and objects, but it also positions boundaries that are constantly assessing where familiarity lies, where strangeness occurs, and when safeness is either at stake or ensured. Thus, the skin is in charge, not only of bordering the “homeland” of the body, but additionally of the co-constitution of oneself and others, based on the *affects* it has previously registered.

The skin is then not only the end, beginning, opening and closing of bodies, but more importantly, it is the element of the body that makes the *embodiment* of a body possible. “To be embodied is to be capable of being affected by other bodies” (Weiss 1999, 162), to affect other bodies and to build oneself through the registration of one's body has been shaped by its exposure to the world. By registering the stickiness of the *affects* that one's body has experienced and by assessing the proximity, intention and effect other bodies and surroundings have had on the body, the skin becomes the element that allows for the repetition of a mark to be made within the body —within the body as an archive. The archive that one's body is, is formed, de-formed and shaped by other bodies through the skin and the openness it provides, allowing for the bodies to be touched and affected. Therefore, if the body is an archive, it is an archive of *affects*, of the

affect's stickiness it has been exposed to and shaped by through the experience of being open and touched by other bodies. The body is an archive in relation to other bodies, in relation to how it has lived and experienced other bodies existence in correlation to itself. Whether it is the *affect* created by my encounter with my stepdad, or any other encounters with other bodies, my body is an archive of the relations and encounters I have had throughout my life: the body is an archive the registers how one has been exposed to the world, to what one has been exposed and the consequences such exposure has had.

Now, there is a need to take some distance from what I have theorized and explained so far in this chapter. Although being *in* the world is how I have felt so far in relation to my abuse and myself within it, while engaging with Spinoza and Ahmed, especially regarding their definition of *body*, *affect*, and *skin*, the possibility of relating differently with my abuse and with myself in relation to it, started to be possible. For Spinoza, a characteristic of the body is that it is constantly *affected* by other bodies while simultaneously *affecting* other bodies (Deleuze 1988, 123), and for Ahmed the skin, as a border that feels, is constantly reconfiguring one's boundaries while relating to the world (Ahmed 2000, 45). Hence, if I also affect other bodies, and if my own boundaries are not fixed through skin but rather, they are constantly being re-formed and reconfigured, then there can be another positionality from where to engage and relate to my abuse, and myself in relation to it. Karen Barad says in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* "It is not so much that I have written this book, as that it has written me. Or rather, "we" have "intra-actively" written each other (intra-actively rather than the usual "interactively" since writing is not a unidirectional practice of creation that flows from author to page, but rather the practice of writing is an iterative and mutually constitutive working out, and reworking, of "book" and "author") (2007, ix-x). Writing this chapter, acknowledging what happened to me, has created a *need* for there to be more to myself than only my abuse, and has simultaneously, slowly but steadily, made my orientation towards my positionality and relationality with my abuse change. Therefore, I aim to approach it differently with the purpose of there being a broader range of possibilities on how to engage and relate to my abuse and myself in relation to it. A possibility where instead of being *in* the world (*in* my abuse), I can be *of* the world, and there can be a reconfiguration of myself where I am not fixed to my abuse, nor my abuse is fixed to me.

Conclusion

After having address the theories that allow for better understanding of the story to be made, I would like now to revisit the story from the beginning and properly put the theory and the story together. The idea of the *body as an archive* came from the specific moment in the story after the guy touched my back and I immediately got paralyzed: my body was highlighting that a boundary had been crossed, and that it was not the first time it had happened. Derrida's definition of the *archive* as the place that exercises and externalizes authority, properly portraits how my body operates as an archive by externalizing and exercising the agency it has over itself; and since I am my body, such agency is also exercised over myself as well. It could be said that my body remembered, however, after engaging with Ahmed's and Derrida's theory it becomes clearer that instead of an act of memory, the body as an archive operates through the repetition—activation— of an *affect* stuck to it. The *affect* stuck to the mark within my body created from the encounter with my stepfather got activated once I was placed in the same orientation towards my surroundings as that afternoon: in both cases the interaction—encounter—I had with those men took me by surprise, I thought I was safe, I did not see it coming. That *affect* was stuck to my back but it was carried throughout my whole skin, throughout my whole body, making of the *affect* not only something that I would feel in my back, but rather as an atmosphere that stuck with me and lived within my body for a long time after the encounter. *Affects*—atmospheres—are carried throughout the skin and the *skin as a border that feels* is the gate through which the *body as an archive* is able to experience its surroundings and to relate to them.

I am now interested in exploring how other parts of one's body carry *affects*, more specifically, how they carry the *affects* caused by CSA. In the same way in which the skin carries the atmosphere of an *affect* and its consequences throughout the body, the brain and nervous system are equally involved and impacted by the consequences of an encounter and also carry the atmosphere of an *affect* within them. Therefore, and given that the marks within an archive do change the way in which an archive archives, and that one's orientation dictates the *affects*

that will be activated within oneself, in the next chapter I will address how the brain can carry the impact of CSA.

Chapter 2. The Brain as an Apparatus

There are many stories with which I could explain and describe the impact childhood sexual abuse had on me, how it shaped me, and how it made me understand the world, myself, and others in a certain way. Nonetheless, if I had to share one, it would be this one:

Oh. My. God! The night has been so perfect. Everything has been just that: perfect. He is just such an amazing guy. I can't believe that this is happening, I feel so peaceful, so joyful. I am so ready to enjoy it all, to live it all. I know it's still very soon, but that is exactly what I want and need: for things to go slow, so I can really enjoy it and not rush into things. Slow, so we can both just breathe, enjoy and give us the time to get to know each other. We are leaving the bar right now, we are going dancing. Can you believe it? Dancing. This is going to be so much fun. We are holding hands now. "You see Iraia, there are still people who just take the time to build things up", I tell myself while walking towards the club. There is no rush, no need to be defensive. No need to overthink. Just breathe. Enjoy it. One step at a time. He is actually taking the time to get to know you. ¡Finally! It was just a matter of time. He is showing you that he is actually seeing more to you than just your body or the sex you can provide to him. So, do it again: breathe. Take air in, and then release it. One more time. We are walking towards the club now, the night is fresh and humid from the winter rain, which typically it would be something I would be very mad about (I hate dutch weather. Really truly, from the bottom of my heart hate it). But today that doesn't matter, tonight that doesn't matter, because tonight is about having fun and letting go, so I won't let the weather interfere with that. Slowly he is showing you that you can start to trust him, so let your body loose, don't be tight, you don't have to be defensive. ¡You are going dancing! On an actual date. Oh my God, it's been so long since I went dancing on a date ¡How exciting! No sex, no private encounters, just normal, public interactions in between two persons that want to have fun and get to know each other. Can life get any better than this? I don't think so. I can just feel how the hope and excitement are painted in my face with a huge smile.

Before arriving to the club, he stops walking, he takes my hand more firmly, pulls me closer to him and starts kissing me. Our first kiss! And again: Oh. My. God! What a kiss! It's such a good kiss, cute, strong but soft and reassuring. I have this unresearched theory that regardless if people know how to kiss (as if such thing like "knowing how to kiss" exists), a good kiss has to do more with biological chemistry in between the two person's mouths. Like, actual chemistry. You might be very attracted to someone and still, kissing them might not be as good as you expected, and it's no one's fault: it's just chemistry. Anyway, going back to the kiss, I am so lucky, our mouth's chemistry does actually match. I can't believe it! Whenever this doesn't happen, I am usually super bombed by it and, to some degree, it does kill the mood within me. However, this is luckily not the case. We are waiting in the club's cue to get inside, kissing of course, holding

hands, and suddenly he opens his mouth and says “Should we better take this somewhere more private? We can go to my place” I can feel my heart instantly dropping to the ground. I immediately freeze. WHAT! NO! No, no, no, no. Why! What does this mean? I know what it means, it means he wants to have sex with you, that’s what it means. But I thought he saw me, I thought we were taking things slow. I know I don’t want to do it tonight, but I also know he does want it, and I know I should say “no”, but I can’t. I am terrified. As much as I would like and need for the word “no” to come out of my mouth I can’t say it. I am petrified, frozen. The word simply does not come out. I can feel how my body stiffens up from the inside, being very careful for this to not actually show. I have gone through this so many times now that I know what to do in order for it not to show. I also know that if I give him what he wants, the higher my chances for him to actually keep on wanting to spend time with me and then, the higher the chances for him to actually see me and get to know me outside of sex. And that is what I want, right? Yes, that’s exactly what I want. And sadly, in order to get that I am gonna have to have sex with him tonight. This conversation with myself happens in a matter of seconds, and the conclusion is final, there is no other option. I know saying “no” should be an option for me, an option that I am not considering, but for some reason my mind and body are already in the specific, very well known, mindset where saying “no” is out of the equation. Even more, it feels like saying “no” was never in the equation to begin with. It has simply never been one, and I have learned how to live with it, how to live like this. I put a smile on my face and say “Yeah, sure. Let’s go to your place”. I know right after I’ve said those words that I am already in robot mode and that I won’t be able to get out of that mindset until everything is done and I am home, safe.

On the walk towards his place we just keep on talking and laughing, and kissing. And simultaneously I am just preparing myself for what’s about to happen, convincing me that it is going to be alright. You have done it plenty of times before Iraia, this is no different. Besides, this time might be even better, kissing him is super nice, there’s so much chemistry. Hopefully sleeping with him will be as nice. You might be surprised. He might treat you like no one else has, and this might actually be a breakthrough to all the other horrible experiences. It’s not that I don’t want to sleep with him, it is just that I didn’t want for it to happen so soon, so fast, but yeah, I do want to. If I could choose it would be a matter of “eventually”, not a matter of “right now”. He keeps on talking, and I am now spinning in the street, like if we were sort of dancing while walking, it’s actually cute. Just breathe Iraia, it’s going to be okay. We arrive at his place and he’s asking me if I want something to drink, which makes me a bit uncomfortable. Right now I am already in the “let’s get it over with” mindset. But I know I can’t let him notice. This is a “me” problem and it’s something I won’t fix tonight, so one more time won’t make a difference. It’s a secret I tried the best I can to hide from myself. I can’t really tell what’s happening nor what happens next, I just know what I have to do, how I have to move and act. And that’s what I do. My mind is somewhere

else, I've become good enough to tell stories to myself in these situations without losing focus on what I have to do next. I am numb. I move when I read the signs to move, I make sounds whenever I am supposed to, and I'll keep on going until I can be home, safe, and I can allow myself to realize what actually happened tonight.

Introduction

The story shared above is the baseline for this chapter, and hence, the purpose of this chapter is to develop a theoretical framework that allows me to explain what occurred in the story. To be more specific, the questions that I will answer throughout this chapter and the questions that stand behind such a theoretical framework are: What is freezing, and how is *freezing* related to CSA? How does the brain carry the impact of CSA? What *is* the brain? How can the brain be approached in a nondeterministic way so that additionally, the impact of CSA can also be understood as nonfixed? And how can I relate to the world, and hence, to my abuse, differently from the way in which I related to it in the chapter before? I will approach these questions by going through the notions of *freezing*, CSA, and the *brain as an apparatus* through Karen Barad's (2007) *agential realism* theory. In order to do so, I will divide this chapter in the following way: I will first engage with the notion of *freezing* and how the act of freezing is carried by the brain. For the definition of *freezing* and its relation to the brain, I engage with Dr. Bessel van der Kolk's explanation of the brain in relation to trauma and CSA in his book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015). Then I will engage and explain Barad's *agential realism* theory in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) and propose the *brain as an apparatus* from a Baradian perspective, with the aim of approaching the brain in relation to CSA in a nonfixed way. Lastly, I will engage with Barad's notion of *agency, past and future* to explain the shift I had within myself in relation to my abuse and how I passed from relating to it and relating to the world — both as a container— to relate to them in an intra-active and constantly entangled and *becoming* way.

Freezing and the brain

To say that I am *in* the world as much as I am *in* my abuse, that my abuse has been my container, is the best way in which I can address the degree of fixation with which I have been able to relate

myself with my abuse. As it was shared throughout the story, one of the impacts CSA had on me is the act of *freezing* while sexually relating to men, specifically and more so whenever I do not want that sexual act to occur. To *freeze* has meant for me not to be able to escape, not only from the situation itself, but from the freezing within me: what started with me not understanding what was happening (like in the story in chapter 1) and hence, freezing, has turned out into me slowly realizing what *is* happening but, nonetheless, still, such realization not enabling me to move away from the situation, to say “no”. Rather, it has only made me aware of not wanting for the situation to occur while still remaining there while it happens. Being able to realize what is happening with myself while relating to men has terrified me into feeling tramped within myself, more so, it has made me believe that I cannot rely on myself, that any sense of agency is gone, never existed. I first related to the act of *freezing* as an impossibility of moving, as the embodiment of the incapability of doing anything besides *freezing*, as a lack of doing, a lack of possibility within me, as a lack of agency on my side that led to specific things occurring. However, that has now shifted into the terrifying knowledge of being able to move while freezing, but not moving with the intention to leave the situation, but rather to make the situation less annihilating. The question of *why* has haunted me ever since: *why* can I not say “no”? Why has *freezing* changed for me, from not being able to understand what is happening, to now *freezing* while still being able to move within the situation? Will I forever *freeze* while sexually relating to men? Will I eventually be able to leave if I want to? And more so, what is *freezing*? What leads for someone to *freeze*? More specifically, why do I *freeze*? And what has *freezing* to do with CSA?

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk (2015) explains the act of *freezing* through the different levels of brain activity that scans have been able to provide, according to different situations of threat presented. “Trauma is expressed not only as fight or flight but also as shutting down and failing to engage in the present. A different level of brain activity is involved for each response: the mammalian fight-or-flight system, which is protective and keeps us from shutting down, and the reptilian brain, which produces the collapse response” (82). It is based on the possibilities of action each situation presents for oneself, that then a different part of the brain will be activated, and therefore, a different response towards the threat will take place. “When fighting or running

does not take care of the threat, we activate the last resort —the reptilian brain, the ultimate emergency system. This system is most likely to engage when we are physically immobilized, as when we are pinned down by an attacker or when a child has no escape from a terrifying caregiver” (83). In the case of CSA, which is the involvement of someone, in this case a child, in a sexual activity that they cannot comprehend, and hence, they are unable to give informed consent to, or for which the person is not developmentally prepared (World Health Organization 2004), the fight-or-flight response is not an option, not a feasible one.

CSA involves the physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal incapability to understand what is happening, and hence, there is an incapacity to label it, address it, and verbally incorporate it within one’s life. Hence, a child is not only physically unable to *fight* their abuser, nor they are able to *fly* —run away from the abuser, who most likely is a person close to the child’s circle of family members/caregivers (Ferragut 2021, 2)—, because there are more uncertain survival elements to consider if one runs away while being a child. But additionally, a child is unable to fight-or-flight because the abuse exceeds their capacity and ability to integrate it into their habitual way of existing. The abuse is an *excess*, not only due to the harm and pain it causes, but furthermore, because it is unknown how long it may last. The abuse exceeds a child’s capacity to sustain it, overcome it, or survive it; it is an excess of what feels capable of enduring, and as a consequence, the reptilian brain, which produces the collapse response, gets activated, concluding in the child freezing. “Collapse and disengagement are controlled by the DVC (the dorsal vagal complex), an evolutionarily ancient part of the parasympathetic nervous system that is associated with digestive symptoms like diarrhea and nausea. It also slows down the heart and induces shallow breathing. Once this system takes over, other people, and we ourselves, cease to matter. Awareness is shut down, and we may no longer even register physical pain” (van der Kolk 2015, 83). During the story, I shared how I entered what I called *robot mode*, which led to me no longer being able to be present and no longer feeling anything; I was only *aware* enough to follow the cues in order for him not to notice what was going on with me. I was just waiting for the situation to end, for me to be able to leave, so I did everything I had learned how to do over the years during my abuse: how to act, what to say, how to behave in order for my *freezing* not to be noticeable. I did everything I could: I was patient, I waited until I could leave, in order

to eventually be able to understand what had just occurred. As Dr. van der Kolk explains, to *freeze* means to enter a state that allows for the situation to be endured at any cost, and that cost can end up being to not only *physically freeze*, but rather to *freeze* in terms of still being able to move, while reducing the awareness one can have on oneself in order to endure the pain inflicted by the abuse.

Now, the next question that needs to be addressed is: *why* do I keep on freezing while sexually relating to men despite my abuse ending so many years ago? The mainstream scientific understanding of the brain in relation to abuse, trauma, and the impact CSA can have on the brain portrays the capacity of the brain to relate to the world in a pathologizing and fixed way, where the brain appears to operate in a way that is dependent to what it has been used to. This way of describing the operation of the brain is addressed as “use-dependent manner”, which is another way of describing *neuroplasticity* and the discovery that neurons that “fire together, wire together.” “The more frequently a certain pattern of neural activation occurs, the more indelible the internal representation. Experience thus creates a processing template through which all new input is filtered. The more neural network is activated, the more there will be use-dependent internalization of new information needed to promote survival” (Perry et al. 1995, 275). Although I do not aim to say that the network made between neurons within the brain does not get stronger based on experience, I argue that approaching the brain and its possibilities of operating while relating to the world through a use-dependent manner only fixates and pathologizes the possibilities of behaving and relating for those who have, like it is my case, experienced CSA.

It appears to be dismissed that *each* case of CSA is different, each case will have a different impact, and to generalize the way in which the brain can operate in relation to CSA only leads to a fixation, not only of a.) the brain and its possibilities of operating, b.) of how CSA can impact oneself and how that can be experienced, and c.) of the future ahead of those who have experienced CSA. CSA is approached either as a subcategory of sexual abuse or a subcategory of childhood abuse, but even if it would not be approached as a subcategory of either of them, it is still treated as a generalization of many different types of abuse under the common ground of the abuse being executed by someone older and with power over a child that

does not have the capacity to even comprehend the grounds under which the abuse is taken place. Hence, if the “use-dependent” manner would be thoroughly applied, then CSA case studies and their conclusions would not be generalized. Rather they should be additionally differentiated, not only based on different types of abuse such as rape, touch, forcing a child to touch themselves, and so on, but furthermore, the conditions under which the abuse took place should also be analyzed. I cannot emphasize this enough: all cases of CSA are equally brutal, devastating, and life-changing, and still, each case is different. Each case will be differently embodied and differently experienced. Therefore, I argue that if the brain is going to be addressed in relation to CSA in a “use-dependent” manner, while CSA itself is approached in a generalized way, it is highly misleading for the conclusions of such studies to then be approached as fixed and to pathologized people who experienced CSA based on them. As an example, see (De Bellis 2011), (Hailes 2019), and (Alves 2024). More so, not only would the abuse be taken into consideration, but the surroundings of the child as a whole should be considered as well.

With the purpose of not following the mainstream scientific approach towards the brain in relation to CSA, the impact it can have, and how that can be experienced and lived, I propose to address the brain not as something fixed that exclusively operates based on *inputs* and *outputs*—in the mainstream scientific approach the brain has been usually defined and explain through analogies to the latest technological advances of machines and how they operate, such as: telephone, computer, *deep learning*. “With the discovery that nerves respond to electrical stimulation, in the nineteenth century the brain was seen first as some kind of telegraph network and then, following the identification of neurons and synapses, as a telephone exchange, allowing for flexible organisation and output” (Cobb 2020, 11). With these analogies, the brain appears to be understood as a passive organ that only reacts to inputs and that, like a machine, if the inputs are then changed, so will then be the outcome and the operation of the brain according to them. I understand the brain differently, I understand the brain as an organ that is, like the rest of them, *alive*. Hence, regardless of how meticulously fixed and designed the variables under which the brain is being analyzed, while being *alive*, the brain will *act* differently than expected or predicted because it is not a machine with a specific set of rules ready to follow and accomplish. And it is precisely such difference in how the brain can act that I find myself

missing while researching about the impact CSA can have on the brain and the infinite variables and possibilities on how CSA can be embodied and experienced. Therefore, while addressing the brain in this research and with the aim of not defining it as a passive organ that is expected to react in a specific way based on the inputs it receives, along this research, I propose the brain as an *apparatus* based on Karen Barad's (2007) *agential realism* theory.

The brain as an apparatus and CSA

In Barad's *agential realism* theory, the primarily ontological unit of analysis is not an independent one. It is not about independent objects that have fixed properties, boundaries, and behaviors that exist and relate to each other while remaining independently from the rest, with clear, never-missed, and forever fixed boundaries before, during, and after relating. On the contrary, Barad's primarily ontological unit of analysis is what they call *phenomena*, which is the *ontological* inseparability of agentially intra-acting components (2007, 33). *Phenomena* stands for ontological relations in between "agencies", meaning, the primary ontological unit of analysis is how agencies ontologically relate to each other. For the ontological relation between agencies to be the primary ontological unit of analysis in Barad's *agential realism* theory means that there is an epistemological and ontological inseparability between the agencies that are relating. "It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*" (ibid, italics are from the original text). Therefore, there is no independent object with fixed boundaries or properties while relating to each other. To be more specific, there are no separate individual agencies that independently exist nor precede agencies before relating to each other.

For Barad, agencies are ontologically inseparable because they *emerge* from relating to each other, agencies *intra-act* with each other rather than *interact* with one another.

"The notion of *intra-action* (in contrast to the usual "interaction", which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the

components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful” (Barad 2007, 139)

Therefore, agencies are ontologically entangled due to how they emerge from their intra-actions. Agencies *become* from intra-acting. To *intra-act* means that agencies are ontologically changed from each intra-action, and hence, they *emerge* from each one of them. No intra-action is the same, and no agency is ever fixed; rather, agencies are constantly being re(con)figured while *intra-acting*. To apply Barad’s *agential realism* theory to the case studies and research done on CSA would mean to understand that whenever I argue that each case of CSA is different, what I am arguing for is that each case is different because each *intra-action* is different, and the emerging of agencies from each intra-action will be different as well.

Agencies are being re(con)figured through intra-actions because, within the ontological entanglement of intra-actions, temporary *cuts* —*agential cuts*— are made that reveal specific differences and boundaries within the phenomena. “It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful” (Barad 2007, 139). What this means is that from each intra-action, a different cut will be made, different boundaries and meanings will be established. *Agential cuts* are not fixed: the boundaries and the meanings that are made from each cut and hence, from each intra-action, are temporary. “These cuts are always temporary and made anew. Intra-actions “cut together apart” in the sense that they temporarily include and exclude certain objects, subjects, and matter, which in turn affects how those specific included objects, subjects, and matter intra-act in their intra-active becoming” (Knoors 2018, 3). The possibilities of meaning, boundary-making, and phenomena to occur are enabled and given by each intra-action. If I theorize with Barad’s *agential realism* theory, how I froze in the story shared in chapter 1 —where I was barely able to understand what was happening when that guy touched my back— in comparison to how I froze in the story shared in chapter 2 —where within my freezing I was able to understand that I *was* freezing and that I would not be able to say “no” and hence, the only way I could get out of the situation was to follow it through— although both stories involve me *freezing*, different meanings, boundaries, and phenomena *emerged* from each intra-action. As Barad explains “Intra-actions reconfigure

both what will be and what will be possible —they change the very possibilities for change and the nature of change” (2007, 391). The specific circumstances of the intra-action with the guy at the swing while being touched by him, are what enabled for specific *cuts* to be made and hence, for specific possibilities to exist in relation to our intra-action. Possibilities are not fixed to agencies, they are not *given*, they cannot be owned, but rather they *emerge* while the agencies *intra-act*. Therefore, for possibilities to not be fixed, means that possibilities are a *doing* that emerges from each intra-action.

Now, how can each intra-action be different? And what does Barad’s *agential realism* have to do with the brain and with how the brain carries the impact of CSA? As I previously mentioned in the Introduction²³ Barad argues against the understanding of *matter* being fixed, and for the approach towards *matter* to imply determinism. “In an agential realism account materiality is an active factor in process of materialization. Matter is not a fixed essence; rather matter is substance in its intra-active becoming —not a thing but a doing, a concealing of agency” (2007, 183-184). *Matter* is not fixed, it is not an inherent property of independent objects, but rather, it is the *materialization* of the phenomena that emerges from each intra-action. “Matter is the material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differently enacted” (ibid, 151). Hence, *matter* cannot be a fixed property because *matter* is constantly being reconfigured, it is constantly being the *materialization* of all the agential cuts that were made while intra-acting.

Each intra-action is different because after each one of them, matter is reconfigured, so the next intra-action cannot be the same because the matter that is intra-acting has already changed and will continue to do so after each intra-action. Intra-actions materialize in matter. Intra-actions reconfigure what will be and what will be possible because *matter* keeps on *becoming*. As Barad explains “Intra-actions are temporal not in the sense that the values of particular properties change in time; rather, which property comes to matter is re(con)figured in the very making/marking of time” (2007, 180). The problem I find in the mainstream scientific research done on CSA in relation to the brain is that it does not consider how *matter* is re(con)figured while intra-acting. It is not considered that the possibilities of *mattering* and

²³ See page 34 of this document

materialization and hence, the possibilities to relate and becoming, are not fixed. It could be thought that for it to be addressed, in the case of neurons and synapses for example, that “neurons that fire together, wire together” (van der Kolk 2015, 56), is a way for mainstream science to address *materialization*, however, I argue that this is not the case. I argue that there is a missing step in how the *materialization* of matter is approached in relation to the brain and the possibilities of the brain behaving and *becoming*. For the *becoming* of matter to be addressed would imply for the conclusions of those studies to not approach CSA and its impact as a generalization, nor for it to be implied that people who experienced CSA will behave and are expected to behave in certain ways due to how their neurons have wired based on their experience. In the Baradian framework, it is *not* that neurons do not operate in the way it is portrayed in mainstream scientific studies, but rather that such a way of behaving is not fixed, it is not closed, it is not generalized, and it is not pathologizing. Neurons, the brain, *matter*, are constantly being re(con)figured, they are constantly *becoming*, and the possibilities of becoming are open. The possibilities of matter *becoming* are not fixed due to how matter has materialized because even such materialization is not fixed, and the possibilities, the agential cuts, and the boundaries of each intra-action are different. Once more, “Intra-actions are temporal not in the sense that the values of particular properties change in time; rather, which property comes to matter is re(con)figured in the very making/marking of time” (2007, 180). Therefore, with the intention of addressing the brain and its possibilities of materialization in a nondeterministic nor fixed way, I propose the brain as an *apparatus*.

As I addressed in the Introduction²⁴, Barad takes the notion of *apparatus* from quantum physicist Niels Bohr in relation to his discovery of the condition on *light* and how it turns out to be the apparatus —meaning, the material conditions under which light is being observed and analyzed by— what determines the behavior light will have depending on each setting. While being observed by one apparatus, *light* behaves like waves, and under another apparatus, *light* behaves like a particle. It was the *apparatus*— which Bohr defines as “macroscopic material arrangements through which particular concepts are given definition and through which particular phenomena with particular determinate physical properties are produced” (Barad 2007,

²⁴ See on page 19 of this document

142)— used in the experiment what determined the light’s behavior and hence, the result of the experiment. Hence, it is not that *any* given material condition then results in either *light* behaving like a particle or a wave, but rather that *specific* material conditions —in Bohr’s experiment addressed as *apparatus*— have a direct impact on the entity observed —in this case, *light*. Barad takes the notion of *apparatus* away from it being a set of instruments that measure entities in a laboratory, and approaches *apparatuses* from an agential realism perspective. Barad defines the notion of *apparatus* as the “*material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering*; they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Apparatuses enact agential cuts that produce determinate boundaries and properties of “entities” within phenomena, where “phenomena” are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components” (2007, 148). As a consequence, in Barad’s *agential realism* framework, *apparatuses* are then not only the material conditions that enact agential cuts, making them boundaries from each intra-action, but additionally, *apparatuses* are not passive while intra-acting: *apparatuses* are part of the phenomena produced from intra-actions, *apparatuses* also materialize and emerge from intra-actions.

To propose the brain as an *apparatus* through Barad’s perspective means to argue against the understanding of the brain as a fixed and passive organ that merely reacts to the world and hence, interacts with it. I argue that the brain *is* alive, the brain *materializes, emerges, becomes*, from each intra-action. The brain as an *apparatus* does not only entail for it to be then the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering, but additionally, it means that the brain is part of the phenomena that is being produced, that *emerges* from intra-acting. The difference between understanding the brain as an apparatus and not as a machine —or any other analogy made based on the latest technological advances (Cobb 2020, 12)— is that in an agential realism understanding of the apparatus, apparatuses are not a “mediating role”, they are not independent from the phenomena being produced, they are not separated agencies that constantly remain the same. “A machine model engineered to explain the influence of social factors on the natural sciences will inevitably be a lopsided device built on a foundational difference between nature and culture. The idea that there are two separate entities or realms of practice influencing one another in determinate regions of overlap is premised on Newtonian conceptions of

causality, dynamics, space, time, and the Newtonian belief in the prior existence of separately determinate bounded and propertied entities and practices” (Barad 2007, 231). While stating that the brain is not fixed, that it is *alive*, I argue that the analogy of the brain as a machine—or any other technological device—is a narrowed, generalized, and deterministic understanding of the brain, where it merely *reacts*—instead of *acting* (intra-acting)—to inputs, and based on such inputs, it gives specific—already given, analyzed, and expected—outcomes. Understanding and approaching the brain that way implies that all brains are the same: all brains, while being brains—and whichever characteristic it has been attributed for them to be—are fixed into reacting in specific—and equally fixed—ways to inputs that are also approached as fixed, e.g., the generalization of CSA (Perry et al. 1995). I argue not only that not all brains are the same, but rather I argue that *each* brain is different. Each brain materializes through intra-actions and therefore, it keeps on *becoming* and being re(con)figured, not only as an *apparatus*, but also as part of the *phenomena* being produced. As Barad explains, “Apparatuses are not mere instruments serving as a system of lenses that magnify and focus our attention on the object world, rather they are laborers that help constitute and are an integral part of the phenomena being investigated. Furthermore, apparatuses do not simply detect differences that are already in place; rather they contribute to the production and reconfiguration of difference” (2007, 232). For the brain to be an *apparatus* means then that the brain is the *boundary-making* material conditions that enable for specific agential cuts to be made, and hence, specific meanings and materialization of the phenomena to emerge. To address the brain as an *apparatus* stands for understanding that the brain *is* alive, it is constantly *becoming*, and through its becoming it enables different possibilities of materialization. Therefore, the brain is not only not fixed, but additionally, the brain is *alive*.

Now, what does it entail for the brain to be alive in relation to CSA and the impact it can have on the brain? As it has been mentioned before, specifically in relation to the act of *freezing*, the scientific explanation regarding *what* happens in the brain that leads for someone to *freeze* is based on the assessment the amygdala—which is addressed as the brain’s smoke detector—makes during every situation with the purpose of identifying possible danger that threatens one’s survival (van der Kolk 2015, 60). It is the assessment made by the amygdala what concludes in

either the brain activating a.) the sympathetic nervous system, which mobilizes the muscles, heart, and lungs with the purpose of getting ready to either flight or fight, or b.) the DVC (the dorsal vagal complex) which reduces the body's metabolism making the heart rate plunge, and concluding in oneself *freezing* and disengaging from the situation in order to endure the damage that will be done (ibid, 82). While stating that the brain is not fixed, I do not mean to imply that my brain has not materialized from the abuse I experienced as a child, leading into me *freezing* while sexually relating to men; rather, what I aim to explain is that my brain keeps on *becoming*, it keeps on *emerging*, and it is based on that openness of re(con)figuration that each *freezing* is different. That regardless of there being a part of me that actually wanted to have sex with the guy from the story shared in this chapter, the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of my brain in that specific intra-action made *agential cuts* —boundaries and meanings— that concluded in me *freezing* while intra-acting with him²⁵. As Barad addresses

“According to agential realism, causality is neither a matter of strict determinism nor one of free will. Intra-actions always entail particular exclusions, and exclusions foreclose the possibility of determinism, providing the condition of an open future. But neither are anything and everything possible at any given moment. Indeed, intra-actions iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible —possibilities do not sit still. One way to mark this might be to say that intra-actions *are constraining* but not determining” (2007, 234 *italics by me*).

CSA *does* have an impact on oneself, an impact that does materialize and constrains possibilities of *becoming* while intra-acting. But that does not entail then that such possibilities are fixed and determine my possibilities of keeping on materializing and emerging while intra-acting. “Possibilities aren't narrowed in their realization; new possibilities open up as others that might have been possible are now excluded: possibilities are reconfigured and reconfiguring” (idem). For the brain to be proposed as an *apparatus* means to address how possibilities of becoming and intra-acting are not fixed.

²⁵ I am aware that this is not specifically addressed in Baradian language since I still address the brain and myself as independent objects instead of agencies that intra-act. Nonetheless, the aim of this paragraph is to address the mainstream scientific understanding of the brain and CSA through a Baradian perspective, and that still implies making decisions on language that do not necessarily align with the *agential realism* theory.

For possibilities of becoming and intra-acting to not be fixed does not mean to entail that an impact is not there; *matter* and what comes to matter does materialize from each intra-action, and open and closing possibilities for intra-acting are entangled to how matter has materialized and continues to do so. Nonetheless, what Barad has allowed me to think is that such materialization is not fixed. “Apparatuses are not preexisting or fixed entities; they are themselves constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings”...“The materialization of an apparatus is an open (but nonarbitrary temporal process: apparatuses do not simply change in time; they materialize (through) time. *Apparatuses are themselves material-discursive phenomena, materializing in intra-action with other material-discursive apparatuses*” (ibid, 203 *italics from the original text*). The material conditions —the brain as an *apparatus*— that enable and enact boundaries and meanings, are equally being re(con)figured while intra-acting. To address and engage with the brain as an *apparatus* from a Baradian framework has allowed me to understand that my brain is not fixed to *freezing*, for me to have *frozen* while relating to that guy does not mean to entail that I will perpetually continue to *freeze* while sexually relating to men, or at least, not in the same way, not always and not with all of them. My brain as an *apparatus* is perpetually open to *emerging*, to keep on materializing and hence, to make each and in every intra-action, different *agential cuts* and open and close not only different possibilities of becoming, but more so, different ways of materializing and intra-acting. Each *freezing* is different, and from each one of them, there is a materialization of myself, a re(con)figuration of myself, of my brain, of the *matter* that I am, that opens and excludes possibilities: but such inclusions and exclusions are temporary, they are not fixed to myself.

Agency, past and future

Right after the encounter with the guy in this chapter’s story occurred, one of the things I felt was the shame for not being able to move past the *freezing*, of not being able to say *no*. Since the encounter shared in the story in chapter 1, since I started grasping the understanding of me having experienced CSA, to the point of me realizing that what I experienced *was* CSA, there was a constant blurriness between me not understanding if it had been somehow my fault what

happened to me or not, if it happened because of something I did, if I provoked it. Dr. van der Kolk addresses that in cases of child abuse, specifically CSA, the child suffers from an agonizing shame about the actions it took for them to endure the abuse and maintain a connection with the abuser—it is most likely in the case of CSA that the child is physically and emotionally dependant and/or related to the abuser—and about what they did or did not under those circumstances. As a consequence, while and after experiencing abuse the child cannot distinguish whether they were a willing participant or not in the abuse, which leads to the terrifying bewilderment of living between love and terror, pain and pleasure (2015, 13-14). While writing this thesis, there have been plenty of moments where I have still doubted myself in relation to my abuse, that I have felt shame and ashamed about the impact it has had on myself and what that has led me to experience and live: like the situation shared in this chapter's story. Hence, and with the purpose of having a better understanding of *why* I freeze and *why* have I yet not been able to say “no” during sexual encounters with men, I want to address the notion of *agency* from the Baradian framework in relation to the notion of *freezing*.

While freezing, one of the predominant feelings has been feeling constrained, trapped within myself, unable to speak, move, or leave. Particularly, in relation to this chapter's story, I additionally felt the frustration of not being able to do what I actually would have wished/wanted to: when he proposed to go somewhere private, I instantly knew I did not want to sleep with him that night, but it was precisely that, it was a matter of *when* not a matter of *if*. Because I *did* want to sleep with him, simply not then, and regardless of that will and desire, somehow, I still ended up, not only frozen, but moreover doing something I did not want to. *Why?* Why was my will not enough? And by this, I do not mean “not enough in order for me not to freeze,” no. I mean, why was my will not even enough for me to come out of the freeze, for me to tell him to stop, for stopping myself? I found an answer to these questions in Barad's *agential realism theory*. Barad explains that *agency* is not a given, it is not something that can be owned; rather, *agency* is something that can only emerge from intra-actions. “Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of subjects or objects (as they do not exist as such). ... Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in re-configuring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily

production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices” (Barad 2007, 214). For *agency* to be an enactment, for it to be something that can only *emerge* from intra-actions, it means that *agency* is then a *doing*, it is something that is not fixed, but that *becomes* possible through intra-actions.

Based on Barad’s definition and understanding of *agency* I came to realize that *agency* was simply not part of the possibilities that were open while intra-acting with the guy from the story, nor with the guy at the swings. It is not a matter of *will*, and it is not a matter of me wanting or telling myself to “say no” —although that does not mean I do not still hope for that to occur. Rather, it is a matter of how *matter* has materialized and continues to do so with each intra-action and how my brain as an *apparatus* continues to *emerge* and be part of the material conditions that set the boundaries and meanings that *become* from intra-acting. Additionally, addressing *agency* in relation to this chapter’s story through agential realism allows me to understand that the brain does not react but rather acts, does, and hence, *becomes* in its materialization. For *agency* to be a doing, an *act*, has made me relate to *freezing*, not as a *reaction* but as an *act* as well. Throughout this research and before engaging with Barad’s theory I had only been able to understand *freezing* not only as a *reaction* but furthermore as the opposite of *doing*: I approached and experienced *freezing* as the “lack” of doing, as the impossibility of doing. Nonetheless, it has been in the intra-activity of my abuse that I have re(con)figured my experience with the act of *freezing*. Sara Ahmed explains that “Not doing something is still an action; it might be a technique that is perfected over time. The action being performed is just not the action made explicit by the utterance. ... Many actions might be necessary in order for something not to be done or for an attempt to transform something not to lead to a transformation of something. And the reproduction of an existing order might depend on the failure to modify that order” (2016, 2). What was not being explicit through words to me was that through the act of *freezing*, I was actually preventing further and more extensive damage from being made. I can approach my *freezing* now as an *act* made with the understanding that verbally and physically resisting might result in me experiencing a new and more extensive, “an even more” damaging, abuse in comparison to the abuse I was already used to and already knew how to endure.

For me to be able to re(con)figure the understanding I have of my *freezing* in relation to my abuse, and to this chapter's story, does not take away the experience I had with it over the years while intra-acting with it. It is not a matter of only one understanding of my abuse and my freezing to be able to exist in the present: it is no one understanding or the other, they do not contradict each other. Rather, they both coexist within the embodiment of my abuse, they are entangled in the *becoming* and *emerging* of the materialization of *matter* from each intra-acting. From an *agential realism* perspective,

“The point is not that time leaves its mark as it were and marches on, leaving a trail of sedimentation to witness the effects of the external forces of change. Sedimenting is an ongoing process of differential mattering. The past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming” (Barad 2007, 181).

The past being open and for the future to not be what will come means that the positionality in the understanding and relating I have from my abuse after engaging with Barad does not end and does not erase or close the relationality I had with it before. What I aim to make clear is that *freezing* is not something to overcome, the impact of CSA is not fixed, but they will keep on materializing the possibilities for boundaries, meanings and the *becoming* of matter's iterative emerging. For me to re(con)figure the understanding I have of my past while intra-acting does not mean it is then left behind me, I carry it with me, in how I have materialized from intra-acting with it, and from the possibilities and impossibilities, the exclusions and inclusions, my constantly becoming is intra-actively enfolding. Nonetheless, if there is anything left for me to say is that yet, still, I can now relate to my abuse differently: it is not *containing* me in the world anymore. Rather, myself, the materiality and its materialization and becoming that I am, are entangled with the world, positioning me now as being *of* my abuse, and hence, *of* the world and being part of its constant re(con)figuration and *becoming*. To approach the brain as an apparatus and the act of freezing through Barad's *agential realism* means, not only that the brain is not fixed, but more so, that the impact is also not fixed. The way in which the impact materializes is also becoming, it is also emerging. The impact will not only *not* be the same for each person who experiences CSA, but furthermore, it will not be the same for one specific person either over

time: for matter to re(con)figure, for possibilities to be opened and closed differently on each intra-action, means that the way in which I froze in this chapter's story will also not be the way in which I can freeze in future intra-actions. The cruciality of this is to understand that the abuse is not fixed because the way it impacts oneself is not fixed either.

Conclusion

As a child who lived Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA), there was a need for a different theorization being done while relating and explaining the impact CSA can have on oneself, more specifically on the brain, and how such impact can be carried. After having addressed the theories that allow for a better understanding of the story shared at the beginning of this chapter, I would like to revisit the story and put the theory and story together. *Freezing* is an act that occurs whenever the options of fighting or flying (escaping or running away) from a situation of danger are no longer, or not even, a possibility. In the case of CSA, the options of fighting or running away are less likely to be possible, and hence, *freezing* becomes a possibility for a child to endure the abuse by disengaging from it. For me to have frozen while relating to the guy in the story is scientifically explained through what happens in the brain and how the entanglement between neurons predisposes for specific actions and assessments of situations to be reinforced. Although I do not aim to argue against CSA having an impact on the brain, the scientific conclusion of such impact fixates and pathologizes the possibilities of behaving and relating for someone who experienced CSA, and what can be expected to be experienced long after the abuse has ended. By proposing the brain as an *apparatus* through a Baradian framework, a new understanding of the brain became possible, leading to engaging with the brain not as a machine but as the material conditions that keep on being re(con)figured. For the brain to be an *apparatus* means to say that not everyone who experiences CSA will then embody, experience and carry the abuse in the same way. Each act of *freezing* is different; my freezing from the story shared in chapter 1 and the one shared in this chapter are not the same. The brain *materializes* while intra-acting, enabling for different possibilities of *intra-action* to take place and different meanings and boundaries to be made. Lastly, to approach the brain and the impact CSA can have on it through *agential realism* theory allows for *freezing* to be understood not as a reaction set from a

brain that is fixed in its ways of operating but rather as an act that prevents further damage from being made. To theorize about CSA and its impact on the brain through Barad's *agential realism* theory is to propose a different possibility of embodying the abuse, of relating to it, and of not understanding the abuse as forever fixed, as pathologizing, and hence, as closed.

Conclusion

As someone who experienced CSA, throughout this thesis I aimed to portray two different theoretical frameworks from which CSA can be embodied, explained and approached. As I explained in the introduction, I engaged with my own experience with CSA with the purpose of not approaching it and its impact in a generalized way. I used two different and contradictory theoretical frameworks to approach the impact CSA can have on someone throughout more than only one point in time. I first used a phenomenological framework based on *Merleau-Ponty's* theory of perception, because it allowed me to address and explain how I embodied the realization of having experienced CSA and what it meant for me to *be* my body, and to relate to my abuse, myself, and the world in a fixed, and constraining way. In chapter 1 this framework particularly takes account of the way in which my abuse *appeared* to me, how I came to realize that I had experienced CSA, and how, through that realization, I came to understand how my body, the materiality that I am, had carried so far the impact of such abuse. I used Barad's *agential realism* theory as my second theoretical framework with the intention of portraying more than one point in time on how my abuse had impacted me, and hence, I aimed to theorize how the impact of CSA is not fixed, but rather, it can be re(con)figured through intra-actions. This second framework particularly takes into account how *matter*, particularly the brain, is not only not a machine, but additionally, it is not fixed, nor does it have a fixed way of being, operating, and relating, which I delineated in chapter 2. Importantly, by having two different and contradictory theoretical frameworks, I argued that the embodiment of the impact of CSA is not linear, nor coherent, much less fixed. Through engaging with *agential realism* theory, I concluded that while intra-acting with my abuse, different possibilities of embodiment and understanding of such emerged, making for the impact of CSA on myself something that is not fixed to me but rather, it is constantly *becoming* and being re(con)figured with me.

I read Derrida's theorization on the notion of *archive* to address the body as an archive, and Ahmed's theorization on the notion of *affect* alongside one another, in order to explain why I do not approach the realization of my abuse through memory theory, but rather, through the repetition of *affects* that are stuck in the body and in an external place of consignment. I argued that the body operates as an archive and hence, it deletes information due to the archive's *fever*,

and it is through the *affects* that stuck in both, the body and the place of consignment of such *affect*, that information that has shaped the archive is restored. All of this, I explained while simultaneously addressing and engaging with the story of how I realized I had experienced CSA, which was shared at the beginning of chapter 1. Later on, in chapter 2, I explicitly engage with the act of *freezing* while engaging with Dr. van der Kolk's theory on trauma and the impact it has on the brain while simultaneously proposing the brain as an apparatus through Barad's *agential realism* theory. I argued that the brain is not fixed, it is not a passive organ, but rather, that the brain is alive. I proposed the brain as an *apparatus* to explain that the understanding of the brain so far has led to a pathologization of CSA and the impact it can have on whoever experiences it, which I argue is inaccurate and narrowed. I did so while simultaneously engaging with the story shared at the beginning of chapter 2 where I explain how I have *froze* while sexually relating to men.

The research questions of this thesis were as follows:

*How can the body and the brain carry the impact of childhood sexual abuse?
And how does theorizing about one's abuse can lead to a development in the way oneself relates
to one's abuse?*

To answer these questions, understanding that the embodiment and impact of CSA is not fixed nor linear, nor can be generalized, indicates that the impact will not only be differently embodied by whoever experiences the abuse, but additionally, that the embodiment and impact of such abuse will change throughout one's person lifetime while intra-acting with it. To address the impact CSA has had on myself and how theorizing about it has changed the positionality with which I relate to my abuse, the world, and myself, deconstructs the generalization around what CSA *is*, its possible impacts, and opens up the framework under which CSA is usually explained. To engage, not only with one story in relation to my experience with CSA, but with two, and for those to be stories that are parted in time, allowed me to realize and theorize from different positionalities, and hence, enabled me to understand that I am no longer my abuse, but rather I am constantly *emerging* with it, as it does with me. "The past matters and so does the future, but

the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming" (Barad 2007, 181). My aim while theorizing with my own story in relation to CSA abuse was not only for me to be able to understand *what* happened to me and *why* I emerged in that specific way, but additionally, for there to be new possibilities with which to address, approach and engage with CSA. I do not wish for my experience to be generalized, but rather, I can only hope for whoever reads this that has also experienced CSA abuse, to have a different way to address and intra-act with their own experience. For further research, it is needed for there to be a theorization on the *body as an apparatus*, given that the brain as an apparatus is part of the body itself.

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