

When Objects Refuse Silence: Violence, Resistance and the Re-shaping of Knowledge

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Synopsis

This paper reflects on how [Julia Jude's \(2017\) African Indigenous Oral Traditional Endarkened Feminist Practice](#) and [David Newman's \(2021\) Dictionary of Obscure Experiences](#) influenced my work with women who have experienced partner violence and with institutional representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through a series of workshops, I explored how objects can interrupt dominant ways of knowing and invite witnessing rather than interpretation. Objects were first presented to institutional representatives without accompanying stories, creating space for not knowing and relational engagement. This process led to the creation of *Preplitanje nasilja* (Čerkić, 2026), a practice-based document. The paper reflects on how this work reshaped my understanding of knowledge, language, listening, and decolonising systemic practice.

When I read Julia Jude's (2017) African Indigenous Oral Traditional Endarkened Feminist Practice, I did not think about how to apply it.

Something else happened.

It stayed with me.

Not as a method.

Not as a tool.

But as a disturbance.

Image of the objects on the floor, in a room, private, intimate and personal.

The paper speaks about knowledge that does not belong only to written text, to theory, or to professional language. It points to knowledge that lives in bodies, in relationships, in what is carried, remembered, and often left outside what we recognise as valid.

Citation Link

I began to notice how quickly, in my own work, I move to translate experience.

To make it understandable.

To make it usable.

To make it fit.

And I began to slow down.

This slowing down shifted how I think about violence.

Not only as something visible, documented, and measurable but as something that lives in relationships.

In tone.

In silence.

In objects.

In what is held and what cannot be said.

Objects began to feel important in a way I had not fully allowed before.

As a part of the experience itself.

A locked phone is not just evidence.

Clothes are not just memory.

A photograph is not just something that represents.

They are part of how violence stays.

And also part of how resistance is held.

The relationship between a woman and an object is intimate. It does not need explanation to be real.

Objects do not stand in for experience.

They participate in it.

In one workshop, I invited women who had experienced partner violence to bring an object.

Not something that explains what happened.

But something that represents their resistance.

This felt important.

Because women are often invited to speak about violence *through what was done to them* less often through how they resisted.

The objects that entered the room were very different.

Children's clothes.

Phones.

Photographs.

There was no pressure to speak.

The objects were already saying something.



Objects brought by women as resistance.

And in that space, I began to understand more deeply what it means to take seriously forms of knowing that are not only verbal.

Later in the process, we invited representatives from institutions courts, centres for social work, and safe houses.

All of them were women.

And I was very aware of this.

Women who have experienced violence.

Women who work with violence.

Women who represent institutions that are expected to respond to violence.

Women who are working in this project as well. And still...

Violence that is, in most cases, enacted by men.

But we were not in the same position.

Some women come to institutions asking for protection.

Some women *are the institution*.

And I know that many of them are often placed in a position where they have to defend the system they represent.

It did not feel right to invite them into a space where they would be blamed.

So we tried to create something else.

Not a space of accusation.

Not a space of defence.

A space that is not binary.

A space where we could stay with complexity.

For me, the objects were not first presented to the women who had experienced violence.

They were first presented to the women who represent institutions.

Not as a way to classify or understand the women's experiences.

But as an invitation.

An invitation to stay with not knowing.

Possibly to resist the knowing.

The representatives were not asked to interpret the objects.

They were invited to observe.

To witness.

To stay in silence.

To make their own meaning but without assuming that this meaning belongs to the women who brought them.

In this way, the objects interrupted something very familiar:

The position of knowing.

The position of "we understand what happened".

The same objects were present.

The women who brought them were not.

This absence mattered.

Because it interrupted the expectation that women must explain themselves in order to be understood.

At first, it felt unusual.

Maybe even slightly uncomfortable.

There was something almost strange maybe even a little “too simple” in trying to understand violence through objects.

And yet, they stayed.

There was a pause.

A silence.

And something began to shift.

Without the stories, the objects opened space.

People began to speak differently.

More slowly.

More personally.

Not only as professionals but as women.

For a moment, institutional roles softened.

Not disappeared.

But loosened.

Even without meeting the women, even without hearing their stories, the objects seemed to bring a kind of human closeness into the room.

Almost as if the objects carried something of the women not as information, but as presence.

Not something to be known.

But something to be encountered.

One judge said something that stayed with me.

That maybe change in the system might not begin only with laws or procedures but with something much more subtle:

a softer tone of voice

a pause

a moment that allows a woman to speak

This felt important.

Because it brought attention to something we often overlook:

Violence is also carried in language.

In tempo.

In interruption.

In the way we ask questions.
In the way we listen or do not listen.
And maybe resistance can begin there too.
At one point, I realised I had a choice.
I could explain the objects.
Translate them into something professionally meaningful.
Or I could step back.
I chose not to interpret.
This was not easy.
It meant letting go of a familiar position
the one who understands, explains, and gives meaning.
Instead, I allowed the objects to remain partially unknown.
And something opened in that space.
When objects are not explained, people begin to relate to them differently.
Not through correct interpretation.
But through connection.
Through their own associations.
Their own discomfort.
Their own memories.
Objects became a way of speaking about violence that did not require immediate clarity.
They allowed something more tentative.
More relational.
More human.
And this is where I began to understand decolonising practice differently.
Not as something we add.
But as something we unlearn.
The need to explain.
The need to know.
The need to hold authority over meaning.
From this process, something unexpected emerged.
A document.
Preplitanje nasilja: A Dictionary of Experiences and Understandings of Violence
(Čerkić, 2026)
It was not planned.

It came from what people began to recognise and name together.

From what was felt but did not yet have words.

This document is not a manual.

It is not a professional tool.

It is something alive.

A space where language moves closer to experience.

Before this process, I thought of decolonising practice as something theoretical.

Now I think of it differently.

Maybe it begins here.

When we do not rush to interpret.

When we allow knowledge to come from places we do not control.

When we recognise that institutions are not neutral.

When we notice how language itself can carry violence.

And also: When we recognise that we are not outside of this.

As therapists.

As professionals.

As women.

We are part of the same relational field.

This work does not resolve violence.

It does not offer a clear method.

But it does something else.

It slows things down.

It creates space.

It makes visible what is often unnoticed.

It asks us to stay with discomfort:

Not knowing.

Not explaining.

Not being certain.

And maybe this is where something begins to change.

References

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About the author

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Citation

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