

Between What They Are and What They Were: Power Dynamics and Knowledge Production in Fieldwork with Argentine Perpetrators

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Abstract: This article reflects on fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017 with Argentine perpetrators who were tried for crimes against humanity. The majority of these retired officials were interviewed while they were in prison, subject to widespread social condemnation, and no longer held positions of power. Consequently, this article focuses on how these conditions influenced the power dynamics between the interviewees and the researcher, the type of data collected, and the production of knowledge. Additionally, it examines how the emotions that emerged in the interaction with perpetrators affected the researcher and the course of the research.

Keywords: Argentina, perpetrators, prisons, power relations, knowledge production

Introduction

In contemporary ethnographies, setbacks involving the researcher and their field of study often play a prominent role in the development of the research. These incidents are usually episodes that lead to the discovery of new dimensions of the research topic that may not have emerged otherwise. Through reflexivity, such errors, misunderstandings, conflicts, and humiliations can become decisive moments that change the course of research and subsequently invite successful narratives of these setbacks. However, for this to happen, it is important not only for the incident to be productive in generating knowledge but also for the research to move forward and conclude satisfactorily. Phillipe Bourgois's work on crack dealers in East Harlem, New York provides a good example.¹ The author begins his book by

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1 Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

recalling the occasion when he inadvertently humiliated a gang leader by inviting him to read aloud the note of a newspaper that had published some preliminary results of his investigation. In a flash of lucidity, he realized that the gang leader was illiterate.² The bond between the two remained strained for months, but that incident allowed him to grasp in a more sensitive way the system of relationships between crack dealers and how this gang leader had forged his authority in the neighbourhood.

In turn, there are too few of such candid reflections about unfinished or failed studies, where the outcomes did not meet the expectations. Let us think about how much it would benefit researchers to read about the methodological and analytical decisions that by action or omission led to the end of an investigation. Just as successful studies set precedents and trace possible paths for how to do research, reflections on failed investigations could be productive in reflecting on what was missing, what went wrong, and what could have been done differently. My fieldwork experience falls in this second group of investigations that for various reasons did not work out. Between 2015 and 2017, I visited various federal prisons in the province of Buenos Aires to interview perpetrators from the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983). This fieldwork was crucial for my doctoral research, which aimed to reconstruct the personal and professional trajectories of officers from the armed forces who were convicted of crimes against humanity. For almost three years, I had regular contact with detainees, sometimes establishing relationships of relative trust. Most of them had held lower ranks during the dictatorship (ranging from sub-lieutenant to first lieutenant) and retired with the middle rank of lieutenant-colonel at end of their military careers.

By mid-2017, the feeling of not gathering relevant and substantial material led me to interrupt my fieldwork and change the research topic. As a result, the material that was supposed to constitute the core of my dissertation ended up being largely archival. It also became the 'black hole' of my research practices due to the difficulty of convincingly analysing interviews with Argentine perpetrators. Based on the conviction and hope that setbacks and failures in research can lead to useful scholarly contributions, this article reflects on how the degradation of the interviewees' status and their confinement in prison impacted the course of the investigation. It specifically addresses the power

2 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

dynamics that unfolded during the interviews and the challenges of constructing knowledge under such conditions.

One distinctive aspect of the fieldwork was the unique position these state agents were in when I contacted them. Officers who were part of the repressive apparatus during the dictatorship, which caused the disappearance of thousands of people, were being interviewed by me when they had already been sentenced, detained in common instead of military prisons, and had limited possibilities of finding interlocutors who would attend to their claims or listen to them. From regarding themselves as 'the moral reserve of the nation', these state agents were now placed, and seen, in the lowest of moral positions. This process of social degradation spread through Argentine society with the return to democracy in 1983 during the government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) and was reinforced by the memory and human rights policies promoted since 2003 by the governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2011/2011-2015). In 2006, society's moral condemnation found its counterpart in the legal sphere with the reopening of trials for crimes against humanity, which led to the detention of hundreds of officers in ordinary prisons.

In many ways, the interviewees were, at the time of my fieldwork, extremely marginalized individuals in a position of symbolic and material inferiority. This position resulted from the widespread social condemnation and the limitations inherent to being incarcerated. At that time, various studies had already been conducted on the ways in which these new circumstances affected the narratives of officers active during the dictatorship. Valentina Salvi's research shows that the heroic story that pronounced the armed forces as the victors of a war against the revolutionary insurgency, which they called 'the subversion' (*la subversión*), changed into a discourse that defined the military as victims of 'the subversion'.³ Eva van Roekel, on the other hand, demonstrates how some military detainees, without expressing remorse for their actions during the dictatorship, admitted the existence of bad and inappropriate behaviour among the officers who 'fought against the subversion', and even showed a certain lack of understanding towards some repressive policies such as the death flights or the appropriation of babies.⁴

3 Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas: Memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012).

4 Eva van Roekel, 'Getting Close with Perpetrators in Argentina', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 115-136.

In my case, these conditions influenced how I engaged with my interviewees, under modalities that would hardly have taken place years earlier when Argentina was characterized by a climate of impunity. What power dynamics unfolded during the fieldwork with perpetrators who were deprived of their freedom and whose status, in the terms of Harold Garfinkel, had degraded?⁵ What problems and challenges did these conditions entail for knowledge construction? What were the obstacles that a young female researcher faced in gathering ethnographic knowledge? And, in more general terms, what determined the failure of the research? These are some of the questions I will try to answer in this article. With this purpose in mind, the first section reconstructs the power dynamics of interviews with perpetrators, while the second focuses on the type of data collected and the difficulties in constructing a valuable object of study from them. In both cases, I take inspiration from Kathleen Blee's plea to reflect on the emotions experienced during fieldwork, and in particular to examine what happens to us as researchers when we are actively engaged in acquiring knowledge.⁶

Power Dynamics During Fieldwork

The resumption of the trials for crimes against humanity in Argentina in 2006 was a momentous event after more than twenty years of advances, standstills, and retreats in holding perpetrators accountable for their human rights abuses. In December 1983, following the end of the bloodiest dictatorship in Argentine history, Raúl Alfonsín was elected president, marking a new chapter in the country's political history. Alongside the activism of human rights organizations, state policies implemented by the newly elected government affirmed the value of human rights as a central axis of the new democracy. Towards the end of 1983, Alfonsín decreed the formation of the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) to prepare a report on the human rights violations committed between 1976 and 1983. This report played a fundamental role in raising awareness among broad sectors of Argentine society about the magnitude of the crimes committed by the dictatorial state. Two years later, within the framework of the Trial of the Juntas

5 Harold Garfinkel, 'Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies', *American Journal of Sociology*, 61.5 (1956), 420-424.

6 Kathleen Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 13-20.

(1985), the information provided by the CONADEP report was crucial in convicting the highest military commanders of the forced disappearances, making Argentina the first country to prosecute its armed forces under civilian jurisdiction.

Subsequently, the military institution exerted pressure on Alfonsín's government to prevent the prosecution of the rest of the military officers who had participated in the repressive machinery. Faced with protests in various military barracks throughout the country that revived fears of a new coup d'état, the Full Stop Law (1986) was passed, which set a deadline for presenting incriminating evidence against mid- and low-ranking members of the armed forces. Seven months later, this channel of denunciation was completely closed with the enactment of the Due Obedience Law (1987), which exempted lower-ranking officers from any criminal responsibility on the grounds that they had acted on orders from their superiors.

In 1989, the inauguration of Carlos Menem as Argentina's president (1989-1999) marked a radical change in the treatment of crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship. Up until then, the only individuals convicted by the justice system were the members of the military juntas and other high-ranking officers, who were later pardoned by the new government with the aim of healing the wounds of the past and achieving national reconciliation. Within the human rights movement, the term impunity gained significance in judicial interventions, political demands, and public mobilizations. In 1995, a new generation of activists emerged, composed of children of the disappeared, former militants, and exiles, who gathered under the organization Children for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence or HIJOS (*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio*). Its members developed a novel form of collective action called *escrache* (street happening) that aimed to achieve a 'social condemnation' in the absence of a 'legal condemnation'.⁷ As a cultural and political practice, the *escrache* shifted the focus from the victim to the perpetrator. It sought to expose the participants of state terrorism, as well as their homes, activities, and routines, to their neighbours and society at large. These protests, along with numerous cultural expressions in film, music, literature, and graphic humour, served as 'status degradation ceremonies' of the perpetrators that contributed to their public visibility

7 Santiago Cueto Rúa, *Nacimos en su lucha, viven en la nuestra: Identidad, justicia y memoria en la agrupación HIJOS-La Plata* (La Plata: Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2009).

through markers of otherness that associated them with radical evil and symbolically expelled them from the national community.⁸

With the election in 2003 of Néstor Kirchner as president, policies regarding memory and human rights gained new momentum, visible in the creation of numerous memory sites, the opening and preservation of archives, and public speeches and tributes to the victims and their families.⁹ The convergence between a sector of the human rights movement and the national government reached one of its milestones on 24 March 2004, when the *Escuela Mecánica de la Armada* (Navy Mechanics School) - one of the most emblematic clandestine detention and disappearance centres of the dictatorship - was transformed into a 'space of memory'. In this act of recovery of the premises, Kirchner apologized to its victims in the name of the Argentine State.¹⁰ The following year, the Supreme Court of Justice declared the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws unconstitutional, enabling the reopening of trials for crimes against humanity in the following year.

In the new round of trials that began in 2006, the punitive intent was not limited to the highest military ranks but extended to mid- and low-ranking members of the armed and security forces. This meant that their accountability before the criminal justice system was a turning point in the life trajectories of most former state agents. For hundreds of retired officers and their families, this new stage of transitional justice meant a detachment from the military institution that until then had trained and sheltered them. By 2015, when I began my fieldwork, the number of inmates in regular prisons had reached 542.¹¹ In some prisons, the large number of indicted military personnel led to the assignment of entire pavilions exclusively for their accommodation. This was the case at the Marcos Paz Penitentiary Complex, located forty-six kilometres from Buenos Aires, where I initiated the research that would provide me with the necessary material for my thesis.

8 Harold Garfinkel conceptualizes status degradation ceremonies as ritual instances that aim to diminish a person's identity and status. According to him, degradation rituals achieve their goal when the degraded person's identity undergoes a radical transformation, and no trace of their former self can persist. Garfinkel, p. 420.

9 Cinthia Balé, *Memoria e identidad durante el kirchnerismo: La "reparación" de legajos laborales de empleados estatales desaparecidos* (La Plata: UNLP, 2018).

10 Elizabeth Jelin, *La lucha por el pasado: Cómo construimos la memoria social* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2017).

11 Centro de Estudios Sociales y Legales, *Derechos Humanos en la Argentina: Informe 2016* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2016).

I gained access to the first interviewee through his son, Esteban Molina,¹² who had become an active member of organizations advocating for the freedom of the detainees since 2010. From the moment I contacted Esteban through social media, he was more than willing to assist. He assured me that his father would be delighted to receive me at the Marcos Paz prison and even offered to accompany me during the visit. On 11 November 2015, I entered the prison for the first time to interview Alberto Molina, a sixty-four-year-old retired lieutenant-colonel who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in 2010 for his involvement in the illegal repression in the province of Mendoza as a sub-lieutenant. From then on, I visited him regularly, with varying frequencies at different times. Additionally, Esteban introduced me to Ricardo Elsesser, a sixty-three-year-old retired lieutenant-colonel who had served during the dictatorship as a sub-lieutenant. Ricardo was neither prosecuted nor suspected of committing crimes against humanity, but he maintained an active commitment to the prisoners due to the detention of his brother, who was also a retired military officer. In this article, I will focus on my dialogues with Alberto and Ricardo, as they were the ones with whom I established more frequent contact, and through them I expanded my network and gained access to other interviewees, eventually leading to a total of ten interviewees.

In the early days of my fieldwork, whenever I had to orally present my research topic at seminars and conferences, some colleagues and peers were surprised and praised my courage, which increased the feeling of making some sort of sacrifice to expand knowledge about perpetrators. The limited number of scholarly investigations on Argentine perpetrators and the fact that I was able to enter a space that was initially thought to be difficult to access strengthened my confidence in the value of the research.¹³ In her study on the participation of women in the Ku Klux Klan, Kathleen Blee rightly draws attention to the 'heroic' position from which some right-wing scholars communicate their

12 The real names of the interviewees have been modified to preserve their identities.

13 In Argentina, while there is not an abundance of studies on perpetrators, there is nevertheless a valuable set of research on the subject, among which the following stand out: Leigh A. Payne, *Testimonios perturbadores: Ni verdad ni reconciliación en las confesiones de violencia de Estado* (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2009); Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 'Seducción Etnográfica, Transferencia, y Resistencia en Diálogos sobre Terror y Violencia en Argentina', *Aletheia*, 1.2 (2011), 1-32 <<https://www.aletheia.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/ATHv01n02a21/17125>> [accessed 11 July 2023]; Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas; Marguerite Feitlowitz, Un léxico del terror* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2015); *Las voces de la represión: Declaraciones de perpetradores de la dictadura Argentina*, ed. by Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2019).

findings, as if they are the only ones willing to delve into objects and actors that no one wants to investigate due to their abject or unpleasant nature.¹⁴ I mention Blee because I am interested in demonstrating that the heroic position I initially assumed would lose its foundation under the conditions in which the fieldwork was conducted and the particular dynamics that these conditions enabled.

First and foremost, the development of the trials and the absolute deprivation of freedom of the detainees provided me with a secure framework in which to conduct interviews in relative comfort, both inside and outside the prison. I remember experiencing anxiety, nervousness, curiosity, and even an adrenaline rush in the moments leading up to each encounter, but not fear. Contrary to Blee's experiences conversing with members of the Ku Klux Klan and supremacist groups that carried weapons in their homes, I never felt that my physical integrity was in danger. This also suggests a difference with the interviews conducted by Valentina Salvi with retired Argentine officers between 2004 and 2007 when the trials were just beginning and threats directed at family members of the disappeared and victim-survivors were common.

By 2015, the majority of the interviewees had been in prison for several years. This translated into fewer resources and less energy to try to reverse their situation, especially in the case of middle-ranking individuals who did not carry emblematic surnames and therefore aroused less interest and curiosity in the public sphere. In February 2017, Alberto Molina went on hunger strike to denounce the living conditions in the prison, which only drew the attention of two small news portals. Stripped of all support and connection with the military institution, the detainees depended to a large extent on strategies mobilized by family members and fellow military officers, who were also rarely heard and seen in the public space.

Given this context, my allegedly heroic position gradually diminished as I observed an unfolding dynamic where, rather than being in a subordinate position, I had agency and freedom to engage with actors whose social status had been completely degraded. 'I noticed that you were comfortable', a colleague said to me one day after leaving the prison in March 2017, after I accompanied him to a meeting with Alberto Molina for his ongoing research. His comment - provocative in the best sense - forced me to keep a more conscious record of the potential com-

¹⁴ Blee, p. 57.

fort I was experiencing during fieldwork, which does not mean that the research tasks were entirely devoid of ethical dilemmas.

On the one hand, I would say that I became tense once I got closer to the ethnographic encounter because interviewing individuals convicted of crimes against humanity with apparent ease never ceased to disturb me. In the literature on perpetrators, the cultivation of good rapport is often emphasized as important for interaction and knowledge production. Eva van Roekel's account of her conversations with Argentine perpetrators emphasizes precisely these implications of 'getting close' with these actors. Van Roekel explains that it was by forging a sort of 'professional friendship' with the detained officers that she was able to discover new dimensions of analysis that would not have emerged otherwise. These friendly relations, she emphasizes, were governed by rules that inform the military world: camaraderie, decorum, traditional gender values, and respect for the silence of the interviewees about crimes committed during the dictatorship.¹⁵ Her account assumes that the researcher starts with a moral rejection of the human subjects they study. The challenge lies in overcoming this aversion to amplify the possibilities of understanding and creating empathy for the interviewees.

But in my case, the problem was that I did not have to develop empathy but instead needed to avoid becoming trapped in it. From the beginning of my research, my perception of the interviewees was affected by the material conditions of their existence. As their days in prison increased, the conditions of their confinement were a recurring topic of conversation. They frequently referred to the shortages of and poor access to health care, invoking their advanced age or noting that several of their fellow inmates were senile. As Antonius Robben explains, being or appearing frail is an effective form of seduction, which can override the ethnographer's judgment and critical capacity. Furthermore, as I had no personal ties to the families of the disappeared and no active involvement in the human rights movement, with the emotional commitment that such ties and involvement would entail, there was a permanent risk of being ethnographically seduced by my interlocutors' narratives that sought to evoke favourable impressions and generate feelings of sympathy for their vulnerable position.¹⁶ In addition, although the dictatorship and the crimes the convicted officers had committed were important topics of conversation and the reason for interviewing them, as mutual trust with the interviewees increased

¹⁵ van Roekel, p. 131.

¹⁶ Robben, p. 2.

their crimes tended to lose their significance at times. I could distance myself from them in an unforeseen way at the beginning of the research. Additionally, in most cases, the interview atmosphere was relaxed. I always tried to bring something sweet or savoury to share, and in Alberto's case, he prepared lunch twice when my visit took place at midday. We also drank herbal tea (*mate*) together and made jokes and ironic comments to one another.¹⁷

Consequently, what I began to question during the interviews was not so much the experience of the perpetrators in recalling the terror in which they had been involved, but rather my own experience at these encounters. I was surprised by how my mind produced a sort of cognitive dissociation between the interviewees' present situation and their criminal past. Overall, I felt uncomfortable about my own comfort.

On the other hand, there were also ethnographic encounters that, at the very least, caused bewilderment. Interviewing detainees who mostly came from the military meant dealing with a social order where my gender tended to prevail over my status as a researcher, putting me in a position of inferiority that took on different characteristics depending on the interviewee.

For example, Ricardo Elsesser was married and had three children, which strongly influenced his style of argumentation: 'If you were my daughter and in danger because you were kidnapped, I would not hesitate to do everything in my power to save your life' [*Si vos fueras mi hija y corrieras peligro porque estás secuestrada, yo no dudaría en hacer todo lo que está a mi alcance para salvar tu vida*].¹⁸ Thus, during our conversations, it was common for him to activate his role as a father (protector) and my role as a daughter (vulnerable) to justify the illegal methods of the armed forces, but also to build a relationship as affectionate as it was paternalistic, which influenced the type of data produced. In fact, both Ricardo and the other interviewees avoided narrating themselves in contexts of violence, or at most, they did so by invoking hypothetical situations, as reflected in the dialogue with Ricardo. Celina Albornoz describes something similar in her research on Tacuara, an extreme right-wing Catholic movement that operated in

17 *Mate* is a herbal tea traditionally consumed in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. It is prepared in a gourd that is shared among its consumers.

18 Interview with Ricardo Elsesser, 7 November 2016. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated for the purposes of this publication.

Argentina in the 1950s and 1970s.¹⁹ While her male colleague was able to interview a former member of this organization and obtain gruesome details of beatings, attacks, and harassment, when it was Albornoz's turn with the same interviewee, cordiality, condescension, constant examination, and above all secrecy regarding acts of violence prevailed. It is likely that the sharing of this type of information was associated by the interviewees with a masculine code, making its evocation more likely to occur among men than with women.

It is from these references that one can understand the gallantry that Alberto Molina practiced with me during the interviews, as an acceptable form of interaction with the opposite sex. Unlike Ricardo Elsesser, Alberto had been divorced for several years. In his case, reminiscences of his past as a military officer and his present status as a 'political prisoner' alternated with gestures and comments that sought to engage me as a woman to shift the encounter to a more intimate and personal level:

How can it be that you are single? It's incomprehensible!

I don't know if your intention is to continue the interviews or if, on the contrary, you are no longer interested in me.

The last time we met, I noticed you were sad. Was something bothering you?

[¿Cómo puede ser que estés soltera?...iNo se entiende!

No sé si tu idea es continuar las entrevistas o si de lo contrario ya no te intereso más"

La última vez que nos vimos te noté triste, ¿te pasaba algo?]²⁰

Although courtesy, chivalry, and gallantry are ingrained practices in military circles, I could not help but perceive the courtship of a person convicted of crimes against humanity as strange and unusual. Although it never became sexual harassment, Alberto tried to give a

19 Celina Albornoz, 'Una historiadora en el territorio de las extremas derechas: Reflexiones en torno al trabajo de campo', *Sudamérica*, 17 (2023), 350-368 <<https://fh.mdp.edu.ar/revistas/index.php/sudamerica/article/view/6462/6595>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

20 Excerpts from conversations between Alberto Molina and the researcher that took place between 2015 and 2017.

sexual connotation to our fictive kinship. These attitudes, as Sinah Theres Kloß reflects when discussing her male informants during her fieldwork in Guyana, allow them to reaffirm their masculinity, their position of power and authority within the framework of a social order that, in the case of the military, is markedly patriarchal.²¹

It is evident that at times it was difficult to establish boundaries. However, I also had control over many situations and could even subvert some dynamics with which I felt uncomfortable. During a visit to the Marcos Paz prison, Alberto had prearranged my return with the wife of another detainee who had a car. The interviewee, aware of the time it would take me to travel back to Buenos Aires, wanted to take care of me and for me to let him take care of me. Accepting the proposal had two advantages: on the one hand, I would save a long journey and the logistics of combining a train and two buses; on the other hand, I would have the opportunity to converse with the wife of a detainee in an informal context. I was ready to go, but an unexpected situation disrupted the plan. Before I said goodbye, another detainee approached the table where we were talking and whispered a comment to Alberto, at which both of them laughed. Alberto reacted with a knowing smile, and in response to my curiosity, he jokingly commented that his peers teased him, saying, ‘They say we’re ‘amigovios’ [a term combining ‘friends’, *amigos*, and ‘lovers’, *novios*]. They’re outrageous’ [Me dicen que somos amigovios. Son unos guachos]. The situation made me uncomfortable, and when I left the prison I decided to return to Buenos Aires on my own. When I arrived home, Alberto called me to make sure I had arrived safely and reproached me for returning alone. Feeling overwhelmed by the possibility of becoming entangled in a relationship that was taking on more intimate tones, I decided to subvert that dynamic and show my autonomy by traveling alone between Buenos Aires and Marcos Paz prison.

During her participant observation with veterans of the Falklands/Malvinas War, Rosana Guber met an informant who tried to seduce her, which raised the concern about how it could affect the continuity of her work.²² In my case, Alberto’s and other interviewees’ gallantry did not lead me to perceive my presence in the field as a risk. I let some time pass and eventually returned to the prison. I was interested in

21 Sinah Theres Kloß, ‘Sexual(ized) Harassment and Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Silenced Aspect of Social Research’, *Ethnography*, 18.3 (2017), 396–414.

22 Rosana Guber, *La etnografía: Método, campo y reflexividad* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XX, 2014), pp. 118–122.

meeting more interviewees through Alberto and ended up accepting and interpreting his seduction game as one of the few resources he had left with which to cope with life in prison. In other words, just as he tended to prioritize my status as a woman over that of a researcher, I always ended up prioritizing his status as a segregated and detained individual over that of a man and military officer, which, in turn, allowed me to mitigate the effects of his game.

Certainly, the vulnerable condition of the interviewees posed certain dilemmas, especially the difficulty of representing them in Pilar Calveiro's terms as the 'lords of life and death' they were during the dictatorship.²³ However, these same conditions also contributed to the power relations between the interviewees and the researcher having various shades and being somewhat more dynamic, which gave me the possibility of reducing the asymmetry in which they attempted to place me because of my age and gender. As will be seen below, the context of the prison not only enabled a new dynamic but also influenced the ways of gathering data and the possibility of making an original contribution to the field of perpetrator studies in Argentina.

The Construction of Knowledge within Walls

An important aspect of the fieldwork resided, naturally, in what the retired officers said during the meetings to reverse their segregation and counteract the marks of otherness associated with them as radical evil. Since the resumption of the trials, both they and their family members and comrades-in-arms made public and legal demands that adopted the language of human rights, a lexicon that in Argentina is associated with the struggles against the crimes which, ironically, these retired officers had committed. Making claims in these terms implied having to deal with a series of temporary, symbolic, and material disadvantages. In fact, when the detained officers and their family members began vehemently to adapt their demands to the categories, forms, and tones of a humanitarian logic, there already existed a dense network of institutions, experts, and relatives of the disappeared that held the authority and legitimacy to express themselves in those terms, and who also had strong ties with the State. Given that victims and experts mutually

23 Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2004), p. 5.

constitute each other,²⁴ differential access to capital, networks, and resources resulted in varying degrees of enablement and receptiveness to their demands. ‘They don’t acknowledge you as a victim, which makes everything very difficult’ [No te reconocen como víctima, lo cual hace todo muy difícil], remarked one of the interviewees while describing the difficulties he had faced in being attended to by a doctor when he was ill. Furthermore, I must add that the majority of the retired officers, both detained and free, encounter serious difficulties in incorporating the language culturally expected of a victim, as they continue to justify torture and kidnapping as necessary methods in the so-called fight against subversion.

In the particular cases of Alberto Molina and Ricardo Elsesser, both were desperate to escape the individual and collective ostracism in which they found themselves, and from the beginning they presented themselves to me as military personnel with extraordinary qualities. Alberto was interested in demonstrating his reflective capacity, and perhaps for that reason he frequently recalled that on the day of the coup d’état he voiced criticisms of his superiors. He also often reminisced about his old desire to study psychology, a field that emphasizes listening as a preferred working tool. Similarly, Ricardo made efforts to demonstrate openness and a capacity for dialogue. In contrast to most officers, who evoked a military career as an innate vocation, Ricardo mentioned several times that he enrolled in military school as an obligation to his father rather than an expression of his own desire. He would have liked to become a doctor, and during the period in which our conversations took place he expressed a strong interest in studying sociology or political science. He wanted to have better tools to understand the situation of the detainees, although it is also possible that he was attempting to strengthen his connection with me through a shared interest in the social sciences.

During the course of the fieldwork, I learned that Alberto and Ricardo had initiated a collective action among the detainees to ask for forgiveness from Argentine society for the crimes they had committed, while also expressing their willingness to collaborate in the search for information about the disappeared. As different studies show, *esprit de*

24 As Santiago Cueto Rúa argues: ‘Victims rely on professionals to assert their rights and demands, as well as to position themselves in relation to institutions, to build their activism and associative networks. Meanwhile, experts find in the victim the ethical foundation of the social problem they manage.’ Santiago Cueto Rúa, review of *Un mundo de víctimas*, ed. by Gabriel Gatti (2017), *Anuario de la Escuela de Historia*, 30 (2018), 217-223 <<https://anuariode-historia.unr.edu.ar/index.php/Anuario/article/view/258/277>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

corps is a value that is inculcated from the moment officers begin their military training.²⁵ Individual interventions are generally not well considered and can even mean the person's expulsion from the military family. This was the case with the retired frigate captain Adolfo Scilingo when in 1995 he confessed to his participation in the death flights,²⁶ and made it clear that he suffered from nightmares and depression because of what he had done. Although Ricardo and Alberto also tried to show sensitivity in their interventions, neither of them referred to Scilingo's confession when promoting the initiative. On the contrary, they levelled harsh criticism against him and singled him out for vitriolic insults because he had betrayed the military institution. In line with the values of comradeship, Ricardo and Alberto understood that their pardon project, in order to have legitimacy, had to be collective.

Ricardo drafted the statement and circulated it in Marcos Paz prison and other correctional facilities. While the proposal gained some support, it also generated strong disagreements, which raised my curiosity and led me to consider the possibility of shifting the focus of my research to this initiative. Until then, the prison had provided me with a secure and controlled research environment, but this also had its limitations. Prisons entail a narrow social context where detainees are subject to daily routines, waiting, the deceleration of time, and the dissociation of relations.²⁷ These factors influence what the researcher can hear and observe from the interviewees and their interactions, since they operate under the influence of a total institution that only allows visits on specific days and times. Focusing on the collective action undertaken by Alberto and Ricardo would allow me to reconstruct a web of relations and avoid the methodological individualism that can sometimes arise when attempting to reconstruct life trajectories. It would also give me the opportunity to organize and give meaning to the material that emerged from the interviews, which at times seemed somewhat scattered and disconnected.

Being free, Ricardo Elsesser had greater leeway to promote the initiative within the universe of detainees and to establish connections

25 See for example Eva van Roekel, *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

26 The death flights were a methodology implemented by the dictatorship to dispose of the bodies of disappeared detainees. Victims were thrown into the open sea from military airplanes while under the effects of a drug that made them drowsy.

27 Antonio Viedma Rojas and others, 'Investigar en cárceles: Apuntes para futuros científicos sociales', *Revista de Metodología de las Ciencias Sociales*, 42 (2019), 165-195 <<https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/empiria/article/view/23256/18861>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

with intellectuals and journalists who could give public exposure to the project. On the few occasions when he shared the same space with relatives of the disappeared, he presented himself before them and asked for forgiveness:

I am ashamed of what happened and of my participation in it. I always say it to each affected person. I meet a child of the disappeared and say, 'I apologize for not giving you explanations about the fate of your parents. I don't know where they are. For forty years, I've been saying we should say where they are. I apologize to you for that.'

[Esto que pasó de lo que yo de alguna u otra manera fui partícipe, me avergüenza. Siempre lo digo con cada persona afectada. Me encuentro con un hijo de desaparecidos y le digo 'Te pido perdón por no darte explicaciones sobre el destino de tus padres. No sé dónde están. Hace cuarenta años digo que hay que decir dónde están. Yo te pido perdón por eso.]²⁸

These words often carried an emotional precariousness that accentuated the tone of speech. I remember being moved the first time I heard it. With this ritual of introduction, Ricardo sought to reaffirm his adherence to a set of socially shared values before others and thus distinguish himself from the group of retired officers. According to him, his relations with them were rough: 'Most of them are fools, lacking the will and understanding required for this.'²⁹ Alberto Molina, on the other hand, claimed that several of his comrades had bad intentions and accused them of being traitors. The moral boundaries drawn by Alberto and Ricardo had symbolic effects beyond their potential or actual existence, as it allowed them to establish themselves as legitimate interlocutors who had something relevant to say and were worth listening to.

At the same time, Ricardo's and Alberto's discourse still retained much of the military worldview that had characterized the armed forces when they were still an institution with power and influence in the Argentine political system. Both engaged in a ritualized repetition of justificatory arguments for state terrorism and appealed to the same 'techniques of neutralization' noticed in other studies of Argentine perpetrators: 'It was always others who had done bad things', 'there were

28 Interview with Ricardo Elsesser, 13 March 2017.

29 Interview with Ricardo Elsesser, 7 November 2016.

always others above', and 'they only followed orders'.³⁰ Thus, what separated Alberto and Ricardo from other military personnel was often overshadowed by what united them.

In hindsight, the interviewees attempted different strategies to counteract the loss of status, constantly navigating between what they are and what they were, between the language of human rights and the discourses of the fight against subversion. This duality also influenced my own perceptions of them. While at times I tended to dissociate the interviewees from their criminal past, at other times I encountered narratives that fit the usual discourse of Argentine perpetrators: in addition to their beliefs and worldview about the last dictatorship, they were culturally extremely conservative, devout Catholics, spoke of homosexuality in terms of illness, criticized any progressive movements like feminism, and held very derogatory views of the left.

We can agree that ethnographers aim to restore the complexity of the webs of meanings and relations they investigate, seeking to unveil different forms of action and classification among the actors involved. But in this case, although differences among retired officers existed, they turned out to be less significant, resulting in a network of actors that was not very homogeneous but not heterogeneous either. The difficulties in gathering relevant information or in deriving meaning from the interview material that would allow me to move beyond the exploratory stage increased the challenge of building a valuable object of study. I had managed to enter the universe of detainees for crimes against humanity but was not able to advance in the research. The heroic position I initially assumed was losing more and more sustenance. Towards the end of my visits to the prison, I started to become impatient, as can be seen in one of my last conversations with Alberto:

Anaía: The other day when we were talking on the phone, you asked me if these encounters were useful to me. And the truth is, I kept thinking about it. They are useful, but sometimes I feel like they're not. What you say, I find it coming from other military personnel as well. The phrases, the arguments, they're repeated.

Alberto: Yes, because we all lived through this.

30 David Matza and Gresham Sykes, 'Técnicas de neutralización: Una teoría de la delincuencia', *Caderno do Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Humanidades*, 21.52 (2008), 163-171 <<https://periodicos.ufba.br/index.php/crh/article/view/18960/12318>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

Analia: But even with testimonies that don't refer to Argentina, but to other regional and international processes.

Alberto: Because what happened here happened at a regional and global level as well.

Analia: Yes, but still... I expected to find a more personal narrative.

[Analia: El otro día cuando hablábamos por teléfono me preguntaste si me servían estos encuentros. Y la verdad es que me quedé pensando. Me sirven pero a veces siento que no. Que lo que vos decís lo puedo encontrar en boca de otros militares. Se repiten frases, argumentos.

Alberto: Sí, es que todos vivimos esto.

Analia: Pero incluso con testimonios que no refieren a la Argentina, sino a otros procesos regionales e internacionales.

Alberto: Es que lo que se vivió acá se vivió a nivel regional y mundial.

Analia: Si. Pero yo esperaba encontrar un relato más 'personal'.]³¹

Confronting the interviewee and demanding a more personal narrative is an example of the more dynamic relation enabled by the confinement and deprivation of the detainees. At the same time, the confrontation originated from the fact that the information gathered up to that point was considered not very useful, but also from making conscious a feeling that grew as the meetings went on: boredom with the interviewee's formal narrative. Regarding the effects that these exchanges can have on the researcher, Blee recounts that after interviewing a good number of Ku Klux Klan members, she began to develop a kind of numbness to the gruesome episodes they narrated. She no longer felt anything, and that led her to pause her fieldwork.³² Her reflection is highly useful for rethinking some of the sensations experienced during the interviews, such as boredom, not so much due to becoming accustomed to the horror but as a result of hearing the same justifications over and over again.

³¹ Interview with Alberto Molina, 1 December 2016.

³² Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism*, p. 16.

On emotions in fieldwork with perpetrators, Antonius Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton explain that researchers cannot always handle them, so it is important not to repress or ignore these emotions, as they ‘can reveal new layers of cultural understanding’.³³ In my case, my emotions revealed different methodological issues.

The first of these has to do with the construction of the research problem. It is common for researchers to construct their topic in dialogue with the research participants. However, in my case the prison context, the limitations of the visiting hours and, above all, my lack of experience caused this approach to reduce the fieldwork’s potential.

Secondly, it was extremely difficult to work with stereotyped narratives, by which I mean narratives that appeal to an existing repertoire of arguments. I sense that this is not just my problem. In her research, van Roekel had to conduct detailed interpretive work by observing and attending to small gestures and silences. In other words, she had to improvise to uncover the nonverbal meanings of interviewees who constantly repeated the same deceptive phrases and arguments.

In general, scholarly research is expected to problematize the stereotypes projected by society onto a particular phenomenon or actor and provide elements for a better understanding. But in my case, I encountered interviewees who, in several aspects, resembled the social representation of the perpetrator, although in a more down-to-earth and less spectacular version. And those who aimed to break that stereotype and tried to reverse their loss of status, like Alberto and Ricardo, did not have the intellectual or material resources to achieve it. Their initiative to ask Argentine society for forgiveness never materialized. Some intellectuals and journalists who were contacted by Ricardo became initially enthusiastic but later dismissed the project, considering that it didn’t say anything new or that it said more of the same. Something similar happened to the fate of my research. I stopped going to the Marcos Paz prison because I became interested in the children of perpetrators. The generational transition had enabled more interesting perspectives, and like someone chasing novelty, I ended up shifting my attention to these emerging actors.

33 Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity’s Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 23.

Conclusions

Starting from the need to reflect on dead ends and research paths that do not lead anywhere, this article sought to uncover some dynamics in the fieldwork with Argentine officers convicted of crimes against humanity. This interest was not solely focused on perpetrators. Perpetrator studies has made valuable contributions in this regard by studying what these actors say, about what they remain silent, and what they omit, or by reflecting on the meaning of this controversial concept.³⁴ In this article, the focus was rather on the historical, material, and symbolic conditions in which the interviews took place and how these conditions influenced me and the course of my research.

Fieldwork with perpetrators involved placing my relationships with them in a historical context marked by the development in Argentina of the trials for crimes against humanity, the imprisonment of perpetrators in regular instead of military prisons, and, in general terms, the strong deterioration of their status and reputation. These elements were enabling and conditioning factors. I was able to access the interviewees because they longed to be heard and reverse their segregation. However, this element also posed one of the main challenges of the investigation: how to account for the deterioration in their material and symbolic conditions of existence without victimizing or exculpating them from their crimes? How to account for the emotions they experienced from that position of inferiority, such as despair and anguish, without undermining the subject position of the researcher?

Perpetrators, both inside and outside Argentina, are often of interest for what they did when they held power, but a dialogue with them generally occurs only when their position of authority has deteriorated. In my fieldwork, this deterioration did not mean for the interviewees an absolute loss of power. As I demonstrated in this article, the interviewees often made me feel very conscious of my age and my status as a woman. This means that, in various ways, the officers sought to resurrect past hierarchies despite the fact that prison is not the best place for producing asymmetrical relations with interlocutors that live beyond the prison walls.

34 Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (London: Vintage, 1983); Sibylle Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony?', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 85-104 <<https://jpr.winchesteruniversitypress.org/articles/10.21039/jpr.v1i1.38>> [accessed 11 July 2023]; Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas*; Feld and Salvi (eds.) *Las voces de la represión*.

Even so, the transitory nature of the positions these perpetrators occupy affects their narratives as well as their self-perception and their relations with those interested in them. How to restore such variability that is constitutive of the perpetrator as an interviewee? How to produce knowledge considering the combination of what they are and what they have been? In his study on the fate of East German officers after Germany's reunification in 1989 to 1990, Andrew Bickford shows how these military personnel were absorbed into another state - West Germany - which considered them enemies.³⁵ They had been part of a military elite and had enjoyed all the accompanying benefits, but overnight their legitimacy and power were greatly diminished. The process of interviewing these agents entangled Bickford in bonds of trust and friendship, even though he knew that many of them had committed serious human rights violations. In my case, continuing to investigate the degradation of the status of perpetrators could have been a privileged path to understanding the broader political and cultural phenomena that framed this cleavage. At least during the fieldwork period, approaching the perspective of military retirees and temporarily entering their world allowed me to grasp the magnitude of the effects that memory and justice policies had on their modes of existence, providing me with a suggestive angle to analyse the strategies and resources they mobilized to deal with their new position.

35 Andrew Bickford, *Fallen Elites: The Military Other in Post-Unification Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

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