

Before, During and After: Difficulties and Controversies in Fieldwork with Retired Officers from the Argentine Army¹

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Abstract: Between 2004 and 2007, I conducted fieldwork to analyze the memories and commemorative practices of retired officers of the Argentine Army, who were on active duty during the state terrorism executed by the armed forces during the military dictatorship (1976-1983) in Argentina. I conducted a series of open and semi-structured interviews with officers who participated in Operation Independence (Operativo Independencia) in Tucumán Province and made observations during public events in military churches and military clubs that paid tribute to officers who were assassinated by nonstate armed organizations during the 1970s. This ethnographic methodology has allowed me, first, to address the manifestations of the past as constructed, staged, and transmitted by the retired officers; second, to identify the meanings and values that these officers evoke to justify state terrorism; and third, how they constructed a retrospective relationship with violence and dealt with the criticisms they received from society. The aim of this article is to highlight the vicissitudes, difficulties, and controversies that framed my fieldwork with retired officers of the Argentine Army at three moments: before, when I was designing the methodology to delve into the military world; during, when I established contact and conducted the interviews with retired officers; and after, when I presented the results of my work on their memories to colleagues in academia. In sum, the article reflects on the conditions for the production of knowledge about perpetrators in Argentina. I explore the problems related to understanding the memories of the officers and interpreting their words: both what is said and what remains unsaid in the interviews, and how this can contribute to knowledge about processes of mass violence based on the memories of the perpetrators.

Keywords: Perpetrators, Argentina, Fieldwork, Interviews.

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Introduction

Between 2004 and 2007, as part of my doctoral research, I conducted fieldwork to analyze the memories and commemorative practices of retired officers from the Argentine Army who were on active duty during the State terrorism executed by the armed forces during the military dictatorship (1976-1983). I conducted a series of open and semi-structured interviews with officers who participated in Operation Independence (*Operativo Independencia*) in Tucumán Province. I also made observations during public events, held in the squares of Buenos Aires and in military churches and military clubs, that paid tribute to officers who were, as they phrased it, ‘killed by the subversion’ (*muertos por la subversión*) — killed by armed revolutionaries who were called subversives instead of combatants so that they were not protected under the Geneva War Conventions.² This ethnographic methodology has allowed me to delve into the meanings and manifestations of the past as constructed, staged, and transmitted by retired officers.³ Focusing on their memories enabled me to identify the interpretations of the past that these officers presented, and the meanings and values they evoked, reworked, and adjusted in order to justify state terrorism, as well as how they reframed this state terrorism in response to the criticisms from the Argentine society.

This article aims to present the vicissitudes, difficulties, and controversies that framed the fieldwork with retired officers of the Argentine Army during three key moments: before, when I was designing the methodology to delve into the military world; during, when I established contact and conducted the interviews with retired officers; and after, when I shared the results of my work on their memories with colleagues in academia. The reflective turn I propose here will neither

2 ‘*Muertos por la subversión*’ (‘killed by the subversion’) and ‘*lucha contra la subversión*’ (‘fight against the subversion’) are local expressions that will appear in quotation marks throughout the text. The term subversion is part of the language of the counterinsurgency doctrine that, in the context of the Cold War, identified not only guerrilla insurgents but also a wide range of political, social, and cultural practices and beliefs as a threat to Argentina’s Western and Christian order.

3 During my fieldwork, I participated in different activities organized by memory organizations for retired officers, their wives, and sons and daughters. I also conducted group interviews with military personnel at the Defence Ministry and the National Military School (*Colegio Militar de la Nación*) and made observations at events and religious services with retired officers that paid tribute to their fallen comrades. In this article, I focus on interviews conducted with retired officers who participated in regular operations in the jungle of Tucumán Province. Some of them were convicted for crimes against humanity years later.

focus on the feelings or emotions produced by the proximity or direct contact with the retired officers who were on active duty during the dictatorship and who defend the regime's state terrorism, nor on the ethical dilemmas and dangers surrounding the knowledge production process on this subject matter.⁴ Rather, I am interested in discussing the problems related to understanding the memories of the officers and interpreting their words: both what is said and what remains unsaid in the interviews, and how this can contribute to knowledge about processes of mass violence based on the memories of the perpetrators.

My interest in an ethnographic investigation of the memories of retired officers was motivated by the broader objective of critically reviewing perspectives that tend to reproduce what Celso Castro and Piero Leirner refer to as an external view of the military in the Southern Cone of Latin America.⁵ In Argentina, there is an important field of research that focuses on the analysis of various declassified official sources to understand the doctrinal, ideological, and politico-military aspects of the planning and execution of state terrorism by the armed forces. There have been fewer studies that examine the military from the inside through participant-observation.⁶ Such ethnographic approach is also in line with the idea to shift from the focus on perpetrators to *perpetration* or *perpetratorhood* because it allows a more holistic and complex comprehension of the atrocities.⁷ But this comprehension needs as a first methodological step an inside study of the perpetrators, using a qualitative or ethnographic approach that avoids an external view of the military. Based on the fieldwork experience

- 4 These aspects of fieldwork with perpetrators are discussed, for example, in Kathleen M. Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research* (New York: Routledge, 2018); and Jeffrey Sluka, 'Managing Danger in Fieldwork with Perpetrators on Political Violence and State Terror', *Conflict and Society*, 1 (2015), 109-124 <<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/conflict-and-society/1/1/air-cs010109.xml>> [accessed 11 July 2023].
- 5 *Antropología dos militares: Reflexões sobre pesquisa de campo*, ed. by Celso Castro and Piero Leirner (Rio de Janeiro: FCV Editora, 2009) p. 8.
- 6 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas: Memorias castrenses sobre el pasado reciente en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012); Eva Van Roekel, *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020); and Analia Goldentul, 'Oficiales organizados: entre el dialoguismo y la normatividad militar', *Izquierdas*, 49 (2020), 4262-4285 <http://www.izquierdas.cl/images/pdf/2020/n49/art201_2241_4261.pdf> [accessed 11 July 2023].
- 7 Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, 'Introduction', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 3-22 (p. 14); and Antonius C.G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 32.

and the analysis of the three research periods, I aim to contribute to a broader discussion regarding, on the one hand, the social and political conditions of knowledge production about violence by focusing on the academic repercussions of studying one's own society, and on the other hand, I want to address the epistemological dimensions related to the construction of an object of study that deals with the memories and experiences of those who have committed heinous acts and how, in face-to-face encounters, they silence, deny, or justify their actions.

Before

The possibility of conducting fieldwork that included interviews with retired officers generated some controversies among my colleagues. My interest arose from my time in Brazilian academia where it was common and acceptable for oral historians, anthropologists, and journalists to engage in conversations with military personnel and publish their discussions about the so-called years of lead (*anos de chumbo*).⁸ As a starting point, I would like to reflect on a comment I received from an Argentine colleague with extensive experience in the social sciences when I told her, around 2003, about the topic and methodology of my research, 'How can you sit at a table with those guys!' ('¿Cómo te vas a sentar en una mesa con esos tipos!').⁹ Beyond the shadow of suspicion cast over my moral integrity and the discouragement contained in this sentence, my intention is to account for the implications of interviews with military personnel as well as those of creating a space for dialogue or even establishing physical contact with those who justify or advocate human rights violations and/or are responsible for them.

What meanings does the image of 'sitting at a table with those guys' entail? What makes it unacceptable and intolerable to engage with retired officers of the dictatorship? To understand some of these issues, it is necessary to look back a bit. The Trial of the Military Juntas in 1985 led to the conviction of the highest officials of the military regime with lengthy prison sentences and the judicial confirmation that the

8 *Visões do golpe*, ed. by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares and Celso Castro (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1994); *Os anos de chumbo*, ed. by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares and Celso Castro (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1994); and *Á volta aos quartéis*, ed. by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares and Celso Castro (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1994).

9 This phrase resonates with another one I often heard, 'What a stomach you have to work on these topics!' ['¡Qué estómago que tenés para trabajar estos temas!']

enforced disappearance system carried out throughout the country was systematic and clandestine. However, this legal accountability did not extend beyond the top echelon of the armed forces because other high-ranking military officers and police could not be prosecuted due to the so-called impunity laws of 1986 and 1987. The 1986 Full Stop Law (Punto Final) and 1987 Due Obedience (Obediencia Debida) laws were the result of the decision by the government of Raúl Alfonsín to reduce the number of defendants accused of human rights violations due to increasing pressures from the armed forces.¹⁰ The judicial avenue sought by the relatives of the disappeared was therefore cut short, with the exception of the crime of ‘baby theft’ involving children born during their mothers’ captivity or who had been abducted together with their parents. Finally, in 1989 and 1990, President Carlos Menem pardoned the former commanders who had been convicted in the Trials of the Military Juntas, as well as other retired officers and former guerrilla insurgents. With all this, a period began that guaranteed impunity to the perpetrators for almost two decades.¹¹

In the mid-1990s, ‘sitting at the table’ with these pardoned and amnestied officers became as sinister as it was commonplace on Argentine television. In the talk shows of the time, a scene was presented in which several guests sat at one or two tables: on one side, there were perpetrators, members of FAMUS (Relatives and Friends of those Killed by the Subversion), and relatives of civilians assassinated by the former guerrilla organizations; on the other side, there were the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, members of human rights organizations, survivors of clandestine detention centers, and former members of ERP (People’s Revolutionary Army), and Montoneros — all brought together to enter into a dialogue. These staged encounters reached their peak when retired police commissioner Miguel Etchecolatz and deputy Alfredo Bravo engaged in a heated argument that almost turned violent. Bravo had

10 The ‘Ley de Punto Final’ (Full Stop Law) aimed to establish a deadline for Federal Courts to take investigative statements from the accused and thus limit the number of criminal cases. However, the law had an unexpected effect, as it resulted in a wave of prosecutions throughout the country. The ‘Ley de Obediencia Debida’ (Due Obedience Law) definitively closed the issue of these new prosecutions by establishing that most personnel from the armed forces and security forces were not punishable for human rights crimes because it was presumed that they acted under superior orders.

11 Carlos Acuña and others, *Juicio, castigos y memorias: Derechos Humanos y justicia en la política argentina* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1995).

been abducted and tortured during the dictatorship by a task force under the command of General Ramón Camps, Etchecolatz's direct superior.¹²

'Sitting at the table' materialized in those television programs. The ruling idea was that there were two sides, that both sides should be heard, and that perpetrators had the right to express their opinions, which mainly consisted of denying the occurrence of the events and, in particular, the forced disappearances. These staged encounters also meant listening to perpetrators who accused the victims or their families. The victims were treated as perpetrators, casting suspicion on them, just as had occurred during the dictatorship. They were accused of lying and even threatened anew. This involved witnessing journalists who, without any ethical concern, allowed any statement — even those referring to torture, abduction, or forced disappearances — to be treated as a matter of opinion and of trivial relevance.¹³

Around the year 2000, with the increasing judicial summons of retired and active-duty officers to testify in trials related to the stolen babies or in the Truth Trials (*Juicios por la Verdad*),¹⁴ Army Chief Ricardo Brinzoni adopted a corporate defense and focused on the strategy of closing the past through the proposal of a dialogue table. This was a political and extrajudicial means to evade legal responsibilities.

At the time, 'sitting at the table with perpetrators or military personnel' was controversial in whichever setting or situation. But what could happen in an interview situation where a social science researcher asked questions and listened to a retired army officer? What is at stake in this statement is the researcher's subjective position when the purpose of social research is not to attribute motives and intentions to the acts of individuals, as the judicial system does, but to clarify the causes of those acts. Therefore, hidden in my colleague's reservations about 'sitting at the table with those guys' is the fact that the effects of past violence also extend to those who investigate perpetrators of this violence. Indeed, researchers who devote themselves to studying

12 Claudia Feld, 'El imposible "debate" entre víctimas y victimarios: notas sobre las declaraciones televisivas de Miguel Etchecolatz (1997)', *Rubrica Contemporánea*, 5.9 (2016), 77-101 <<https://revistes.uab.cat/rubrica/article/view/v5-n9-feld>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

13 Claudia Feld, 'La construcción del "arrepentimiento": los ex represores en la televisión', *Entre pasados*, 20/21 (2001), 35-54; Feld, 'El imposible "debate" entre víctimas y victimarios'.

14 In the mid-1990s, when the judicial route was closed, the federal courts granted a request from the relatives of the disappeared who, under the right to truth, requested information from the armed forces and security forces regarding the fate of their relatives. This gave rise to a particular type of trial without criminal sanctions called Truth Trials, which were held in various cities throughout the country between 1998 and 2005.

the worldview of perpetrators are seen, in some way, as if they were involved in the violence itself. Oral historian Erin Jessee observes in her study of the Rwandan genocide that ‘engagement in any meaningful way with *généralistes*’ narratives can place researchers at risk of being identified as suspected political subversives’ by the police or government.¹⁵ That is to say, the researchers could be viewed as accomplices or opponents, sympathizers or informants, unlike what happens with research topics where the illusion of the impartial observer can be maintained, or at least, where an investigator is not directly involved in the phenomenon studied. I am not saying that the researcher’s position is impartial and disinterested, or that he or she cannot be directly implicated in a biased position by the social actors being studied, as when the retired officers situated me on one side or the other (as in the abovementioned case of Rwanda). Rather, the researcher studying the worldview of perpetrators can be identified with one of these positions by their colleagues without even knowing the results of their work but simply by wanting to investigate it.¹⁶ Although the results of social research can be mistakenly interpreted as a form of exoneration for the perpetrators, it is true that guilt and causation are not the same, and as Habermas said, ‘a causal explanation can neither condemn nor excuse’,¹⁷ but rather seeks to understand. These tensions take on different dimensions for those studying their own societies compared to those who are interested in other societies. Anderson and Jessee recognize that genocide studies ‘retains a colonial quality [...] dominated by researchers who are not necessarily from the genocide-affected contexts that they study.’¹⁸ So I am interested in the approach of local researchers who are immersed in academic fields that, in many cases, were directly affected by state violence or were shaped by social and political struggles as part of post-dictatorship democratization processes.

15 Erin Jessee, ‘Seeing Monsters, Hearing Victims’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 67-90 (p. 69).

16 Guber analyzes the researcher’s position in the field based on an incident with Native Argentines where she faced an accusation, see Rosana Guber, *La etnografía: Método, campo y reflexividad* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), pp. 101-121. On the other hand, Ginsburg addresses the difficulties of presenting the results of her research to her research population, see Faye Ginsburg, ‘Quand les indigènes sont nos voisins’, *L’Homme*, 32.121 (1992), 129-142.

17 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Goldhagen and the Public Use of History: Why the Democracy Prize for Daniel Goldhagen?’, in *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate*, ed. by Robert Shandley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 263-273 (p. 267).

18 Anderson and Jessee, p. 15.

During

When I was preparing for my fieldwork, I had many doubts about the actual possibilities of carrying it out. To my surprise, the contacts were made relatively easily, and the snowball effect that led me from one retired officer to another happened without major difficulties. The interviews took place between 2004 and early 2007, at a crucial moment in terms of the prosecution of Argentine perpetrators. In 2005, the Supreme Court declared the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws unconstitutional and upheld Law 25,779 through which Congress had invalidated these impunity laws in 2003. This decision by the highest court paved the way for judicial proceedings against military personnel suspected of having committed crimes against humanity. Although the legal conditions were in place to initiate a new cycle of criminal prosecution, the first trials did not begin until 2006. While it was expected that with the removal of the impunity laws retired officers would remain silent and inaccessible, this was not the case. Since 2004, the memory of the so-called 'fight against subversion' had been gaining more public attention and support among comrades. In that context, retired officers accepted the interviews as part of a general strategy to bring visibility to their demand for 'complete memory'.¹⁹

All the retired officers I had access to had participated in regular operations in the jungle of Tucumán Province. If we start from the assumption that the accounts obtained in the interviews cannot be understood outside their context of production, including the political dimensions surrounding the events, we must ask ourselves why the retired officers who took part in Operation Independence agreed to be interviewed and spoke about the repression in Tucumán. Operation Independence was a counterinsurgency campaign carried out by the Argentine Army against the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), which had established a military front in the jungle region of the northwestern province of Tucumán in 1975, a year before the coup d'état in March 1976. The plan relied on direct combat in the jungle and was supported by clandestine and illegal actions in the towns of the

¹⁹ This slogan expresses the shift in memory among the military from being combatants in the 'fight against subversion' – that is, the vindication of the actions taken by the generals and commanders – to being the 'victims of terrorism' – that is, military and civilian individuals killed by nonstate armed organizations during the 1970s. From this perspective, the memory constructed of the disappeared is partial, as it focuses exclusively on the violence committed by the nonstate armed organizations while concealing and diluting the responsibility of the armed forces for the forced disappearances. See Salvi, *De vencedores*, pp. 73–107.

area and the city of San Miguel de Tucumán. This double mission of the counterinsurgency campaign served retired officers to strengthen the image of the army as a lawful force that defended the state against terrorism in the political context of the loss of impunity and the renewed trials for crimes against humanity. The officers' accounts echoed Decree 261, promulgated by President María Estela Martínez de Perón on 5 February 1975, which ordered the offensive operations against the revolutionary combatants in the Province of Tucumán.²⁰ This not only allowed the retired officers to evoke the 'fight against subversion' as a conventional war but also to present their actions in the jungle as a theater of regular operations and thus cleanse the so-called 'dirty war'²¹ of its negative connotation of state terrorism.

During the fieldwork, I conducted interviews with retired officers ranging from the rank of lieutenant to lieutenant colonel; more precisely, two of them were not retired but had been expelled from the force for participating in uprisings against democratically elected governments during the 1980s.²² The interviews were conducted in the officers' homes, their workplaces, or in cafes in Buenos Aires. Most of the interviews, by my own decision, were conducted without a recording device, although many officers had no qualms about being recorded. I took care of my appearance, wearing small earrings, a wristwatch, pastel-colored clothing such as jackets, sweaters, and blouses, and tying my hair in a half ponytail. In all cases, I presented myself as a resident of Brazil, where I was pursuing my doctorate degree, and did not mention that I was a sociologist and professor at the University of Buenos Aires because I believed it could raise suspicion among my interviewees. These decisions regarding my appearance and background reflect my intention to anticipate the expectations of my interlocutors as a way to manage the intersubjective encounters and verbal exchanges.²³ As a counterpart, I had to answer questions about my parents' ac-

20 Decree No. 261/75 - 5 February 1975.

21 'Dirty war' is a euphemism used by the Argentine military to refer to unconventional war. This expression has had significant circulation in English as a misguided translation of state terrorism.

22 These military ranks include both junior officers and mid-level officers with commanding responsibilities. Some of the officers interviewed were later convicted of crimes against humanity for their involvement in task forces, while others have not faced any accusations or judicial citations to date. In most cases, their position within the military hierarchy does not explain their participation in crimes against humanity, as their clandestine actions undermined the organizational structure of the chain of command.

23 Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism*, p. 24.

tivities, whether I had deceased relatives, whether I believed in God, and if I knew about events considered relevant in the history of the 1970s: the assassination of General Aramburu and Captain Viola, the amnesty granted to what they regarded as terrorists by Argentine president Cámpora on 25 May 1973, the attacks on military bases by nonstate armed organizations, and so forth. In general terms, the officers demonstrated an extensive knowledge of world history, political philosophy, twentieth century military history, and the history of the Cold War. They constantly emphasized my supposed lack of knowledge regarding military matters, which, due to my dual status as a civilian and a young woman, I could not possibly have.

During the interviews, discretion and seduction proved to be the most frequent attitudes displayed by the retired officers. Both discretion and seduction were deployed as strategies to influence the relationship with a stranger and to shape the dialogue and the conditions of listening. While the former maintains appearances and reinforces distances, the latter seeks complicity and identification. Research interviews constitute auditory situations that are external to the internal channels of memory transmission among retired military personnel, as they introduce otherness in the form of the interviewer. While the officers' speeches during the public events that paid tribute to troops that were killed by the guerrilla insurgency functioned as ritualized repetitions of collectively shared meanings, in the interviews their narratives were challenged by the dialogue with a stranger. Indeed, this specific context influenced the levels of spontaneity, ways of speaking, and the sharing of types of information that the retired officers presented in the interviews I conducted.²⁴

In the ceremonies in churches and military clubs, as well as at the Plaza San Martín in Buenos Aires, the officers who were assassinated by nonstate armed organizations during the 1970s were remembered as 'victims of terrorism', and a heroic and patriotic memory was staged confirming that the officers participated in the 'fight against subversion'. The main organizers of these events were retired officers who had been in active service during the dictatorship. These events were a way of pressuring the current army command to take a political stance on trials for crimes against humanity. Beyond this open promotion of the desire for a 'complete memory', namely the official acknowledgment and commemoration of the military who were killed by the armed insur-

24 Michael Pollak, *Memoria, olvido y silencio: La producción social de identidades frente a situaciones límite* (La Plata: Ediciones al Margen, 2006), p. 61.

gency, the first-person accounts of the officers who participated in Operation Independence gather memories that were kept, as Pollak asserts, in informal structures of communication and transmission.²⁵ Certain aspects of these accounts are shaped by gestures and words that can alter, or even contradict, what was expressed in public speeches.²⁶ Throughout the interviews, meanings, interpretations, and feelings about violent episodes emerged, which, although carefully avoided during the commemorative events, are part of the usual narratives of retired officers. This includes not only the atmosphere of fear and paranoia often expressed in the public memory of the 'fight against subversion', but also feelings of fury, anger, hatred, and revenge that are carefully sidestepped in favor of the portrayal of heroism, patriotism, and sacrifice. While the former are public sentiments and the latter circulate more offstage, both are interconnected and form a whole in the accounts of retired officers.

While discretion constitutes a fearful and cautious reaction to encounters with strangers, it is also a strategy for enunciating personal narratives in interviews. With their secrets, the officers repeatedly sought to exclude me from their inner circle, constantly affirming a distance. The meticulous surveillance over a set of compromising memories expressed the officers' fear of being questioned and incriminated under unfavorable conditions. However, this discretion regarding what was said during the interviews also allowed them to present a certain coherence between their self-image associated with a heroic narrative and the image they seek to present to others. The act of filtering, excluding, and concealing the content of what is transmitted and communicated about their own experiences denotes the presence of secrecy as a protective device. This subjective protection at play during the interviews takes on diverse characteristics compared to the exercise of the constitutional right to remain silent. In the interviews, the shadow of secrecy that looms over the narrative (especially concerning the systematic torture of individuals, the conditions of detainment, the locations where these took place, the names of the officers involved, and the ways in which people were killed) also delineates the boundary between what can be said and what remains unspeakable about the repression in Tucumán Province. The problem of silence or the presence of the unspeakable in perpetrators' accounts raises questions regarding the relationship between narrative, experience, and horror that have

25 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

26 James Scott, *Los dominados y el arte de la resistencia: Discursos ocultos* (México City: Era, 2000), p. 34.

been discussed quite extensively in the context of Holocaust Studies. In this vast literature, I find especially illuminating Ernst Van Alphen's considerations about the impossibility of survivors giving meaning to their traumatic experiences, and that, unlike survivors, perpetrators have the interpretive frameworks to make sense of their experiences.²⁷ In this sense, during the interviews, the retired officers recounted combat in the jungle of Tucumán, spoke about direct clashes with the guerrillas, gave long descriptions of their enemy's behavior, talked about the death or murder of their comrades in arms, and also expressed sentiments of fear and paranoia of being victims of attacks, but they never mentioned their participation in clandestine repressive actions. They were combatants, heroes, victims, or avengers but never torturers. As I will elaborate later, Van Alphen gives suggestions on how to think about what is said and what is not said in perpetrator accounts in relation to their self-image and to the image that society has of them.²⁸

Unlike the distance caused by fear and mistrust, seduction arises from a certain willingness to establish closeness with the interlocutor. As Robben shows, seduction is a strategy to win supporters and to make researchers adopt military interpretations of the recent past.²⁹ By elaborating an enunciative strategy aimed at generating trust and closeness during the interview, the retired officers invited me to participate in and agree with their statements to create intimacy and evoke complicity. Through vague revelations and confessions, they attempted to erase the otherness of my position as the interviewer and control the conditions of listening by appealing to an uncritical identification with their narratives. For example, they used statements like 'as you know' ('como vos sabés') or 'you already know how things were' ('ya sabés como fueron estas cosas'). In this way, the officers included me in an uncritical

27 Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Ernst Van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 24-38.

28 Van Roekel rightly points out that the silence of the Argentine military is more than a tactic to deny accountability. See 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 (p. 116).

29 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 'The Politics of Truth and Emotion among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence', in *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, ed. by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 81-103 (p. 83).

and accommodating 'us' through a set of implicit understandings that were expressed as if they were shared.

Both attitudes, discretion and seduction, reveal the distance and disagreement that exist between the heroic and victorious narrative of the retired officers as combatants in the 'fight against subversion' or the traumatic narrative of them as victims of subversion on the one hand, and on the other, the political meanings that civil society attributes to the violence perpetrated during the illegal repression. Therefore, the narratives of retired officers are also influenced by the negative perceptions that a substantial part of the Argentine society has of them and their actions, which were confirmed in hundreds of court rulings. Since every utterance, according to Bakhtin,³⁰ is dialogical and populated by the voices of others, retired officers incorporated the marks of what had been socially said about the recent past in the interviews, deploying narrative mechanisms to confront the contradictions that arose between their self-image and the image reflected back to them by society. In this way, a shift from a self-centered narrative to a dissenting narrative occurred, in the sense that, driven by the needs and urgencies of the present (both historical and enunciative), retired officers were compelled to incorporate those other narratives that confronted and even challenged them.

They perceived this discursive shift negatively as a process of denaturalizing the military profession that was manifested in the transition from war to politics. While the officers felt strengthened at war, the same did not happen in politics where they felt resented by society. Consequently, the victorious and vindictory narratives gave way to reproaches and recriminations. Thus, the officers revisited the past to identify what should have been done to prevent them from suffering the political and pending judicial consequences. And due to 'the military's inability to bring the battle won on the military plane into the political realm', the reproaches were directed towards the commanders of the dictatorship, who 'should have made the war public, made the names of the disappeared known' [*tendrían que haber blanqueado la guerra, hecho conocer los nombres de los desaparecidos*].³¹ Indeed, the concern of the retired officers focused on what should have been done to prevent tarnishing the reputation of the Argentine armed forces and to ensure that history would later prove them right. The disagreement

30 Mijail Bajtin, *Estética de la creación verbal* (México City: Siglo XXI, 1999).

31 Raúl, retired captain (interviewed by Valentina Salvi, March 2005).

about the recent past also divided the universe of possible interlocutors between those who were with the army and those who were against the army, between an 'us' who understood and knew what it meant to be in the military and the others who said that the military were genocidal, torturers, murderers, and monsters. Military/genocidal, before/now, war/politics were oppositions that populated the narratives of retired officers, reinforcing their sense of identity and allowing them to perceive the social and moral position that the Argentine society assigned to them.

After

Retired officers evoked the past through the memory of the officers 'killed by the subversion'. This strengthened their belief that the military did not kill to defend the homeland but rather died for it. In other words, it would no longer be about officers who fought against the nation's enemies, but rather about officers who died in its defense. However, within the implications, and implicit understandings of personal memories, narratives about repression emerged that eroded the protective shell of the self-complacent image that retired officers displayed in their public acts. Nevertheless, there was something that the retired officers did not talk about openly: they kept the secret of their direct participation in the illegal repression to themselves. Not only did they not speak about it, but they also sought to downplay the presence of officers who carried out torture among their comrades:

How many military personnel tortured? Not many, but they did not do it out of perversion or sadism; they did it for the homeland and because it was the only way to defeat a cunning enemy who was hidden among the civilian population.

[Los militares que torturaron, ¿cuántos fueron? No muchos, pero no lo hicieron por perversión o sadismo, lo hicieron por la patria y porque era la única manera de vencer a un enemigo artero que se escondía entre la población civil.]³²

32 Ricardo, retired lieutenant-colonel (interviewed by Valentina Salvi, March 2005).

The retired officers sought to distance themselves from the sadistic and perverse torturer as it was unbearable for the image they had of themselves and wanted to portray to society. The statements on television programs made in the 1990s by military and police officers strongly contradicted the image that the retired officers wanted to display publicly and the narratives they wished to hear about themselves. Turco Julián, a torturer who worked in the clandestine detention center El Olimpo, boasted on several occasions about his acts of torture and proudly justified his actions. The naval officer Adolfo Scilingo, on the other hand, also acknowledged on television his participation in death flights and described how he threw people into the sea.³³ These public accounts of torture and assassinations were intolerable for the retired officers because they contradicted their own public and heroic memories and also betrayed the self-complacent image that army officers did not torture or kill but '[fought] for the homeland' and 'died for it', a portrayal performed during the homage acts.

When I presented some of these conclusions at an academic conference, a colleague made the following comment: 'The officers are unable to say that they killed, to see themselves as murderers, because that possibility had already been taken from them by the extermination machinery itself' ('Los militares son incapaces de decir que mataron, de verse a sí mismos como asesinos, porque esa posibilidad ya les fue sustraída por la propia maquinaria de exterminio'). This comment falls within the literature on the crisis of narration of Walter Benjamin about the muted soldier who returned from the First World War. Benjamin explains that the horrifying experience is unknowable and unspeakable, because the experience itself — in my colleague's words — is missing.³⁴ From this perspective, the possibility of meaningfully elaborating on what was experienced and recognizing oneself in it has been lost. My colleague thought that 'the horror has been possible because its experience was alienated from the perpetrating agents due to the advancement of techno-rational mediations that place bodies in a disappearance machinery, which functions beyond the men who

33 Luciana Messina, 'Reflexiones en torno a la figura del torturador: el caso del "Turco Julián"', in *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), pp. 153-172; and Feld, 'La construcción del "arrepentimiento"', pp. 35-54.

34 Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskóv', *International Journal of Oral History*, 2-3 (1981), 195-204.

created it'. In this sense, the actions of the perpetrators are explained as the result of a machinery that destroys any moral inhibitions about criminal acts and the suffering of others. The weakening of experience contributes to the euphemistic and denigrating character of the narratives of the individuals who operated the machinery of death and disappearance. What is absent is not simply the narrative of what was lived, but the experience itself as a knowable and understandable event since the conditions of experience are in ruins.

While my colleague's comment raises concerns about the social conditions of the exercise of violence, his argument tends to confirm that there is no sense in interviewing retired military personnel who participated in Operation Independence. This comment opens a new debate. What is the value of the words of perpetrators in spite of the silence? What is the relevance of an ethnographic inquiry even when the statements of the interviewees are filled with intrigues, secrets, silences, and even lies? Moreover, is there anything that the officers say or evoke that can help clarify the conditions of their experience and, therefore, the violence in which they were active participants? Van Alphen establishes that 'the problem is not the nature of the event' but 'the forms of representation with which the event can be (re)experienced'.³⁵ This distinction allows me to avoid my colleague's idea that the silence is explained by the absence of the perpetrators' experience or that the experience itself is in ruins. Although van Alphen developed these considerations to examine the problem of victims' testimonies, it provides a very interesting insight to shift the focus from silence as a consequence of criminal acts to other aspects of the narrative frameworks of the statements and self-representations made by perpetrators.³⁶ Therefore, it is not so much the content of the narrative — the facts, names, or activities, and not just because many of them are systematically denied and concealed — but the strategies of self-representation and the narrative modes of naturalizing violence that the retired officers mobilize when recalling the past that can be investigated. Anderson and Jessee open a very interesting methodological analysis helped by Paul Ricoeur's differentiation between narratives: *objective* (positive facts), *subjective* (a particular perspective or interpretation), and *constitutive* (identity making).³⁷ Subjective and constitutive narratives obtained in interviews draw attention to how perpetrators represent themselves

35 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 44.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 41-64.

37 Anderson and Jessee, p. 16.

and how they naturalize past violence through narrative frameworks available to them as officers trained in counterinsurgency war.

The study of memories enables an analysis of how retired officers account for the strategies deployed to elaborate their self-image in relation to the image reflected back to them by society. In this way, they utilize their narrative frameworks to recount the violent experiences in which they took part.³⁸ Making strategies of self-representation and the relation between violence and camaraderie the objects of analysis implies questioning the problem of the relation between subjectivity and violence and its forms of representation. The narratives I encountered when the retired officers spoke did not provide immediate access to their lifeworld — even though speech is often interpreted by Western epistemology, as well as judicial investigations, as a kind of privileged access to experience. Speaking about experiences in these terms leads us, as Joan Scott argues, to take the existence of individuals for granted (experiences as something people have) rather than asking how conceptions of the self (of subjects and their identities) are socially produced.³⁹ In this sense, what I heard in the interviews was a narrative voice through which a subjectivity/identity was constructed, to the extent that this self-conception retrospectively constructs the past experience through socially shared narrative frameworks. Certainly, what we can account for in ethnographic research are the interpretive frameworks with which retired officers make sense of their experiences, even though these are permeated by a veneer of secrecy and self-protection. Therefore, violence becomes knowable and understandable because it is integrated within available interpretive frameworks such as war, the rationality of victory, the fight against the enemy, the conception of the terrorist, the value of camaraderie, masculinity, loyalty, predestination, the ethos of the combatant, normative conceptions of good and evil, and legality and illegality. In sum, focusing on self-representation and interpretive frameworks could open a way to shift from perpetrators to perpetration or perpetratorhood, as Robben and Hinton have proposed.⁴⁰

38 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 58.

39 Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.4 (1991), 773–97 (p. 782). See also van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity', pp. 24–38.

40 Robben and Hinton, p. 32.

Final ideas

Based on the analysis of the vicissitudes, difficulties, and questions that framed the before, during, and after of ethnographic fieldwork with retired officers of the Argentine Army, this article addresses the debate on the social and political constraints that frame the investigation of violent pasts and the circulation of research findings. Although this reflection arises from concrete experiences in post-dictatorship Argentina, it provides elements to think about social research in other academic fields. There is a common sense prevailing in the academic world that science advances into unexplored territories due to a pre-existing void.⁴¹ This view, which is sometimes emphasized in the study of perpetrators, overlooks the fact that social research is immersed in a territory of ongoing social and political debates and is part of a space of enunciation that conditions its practices and findings. Following Trouillot, I highlight the value of analytical perspectives that, 'situated in their historicity', reflexively consider the context of enunciation in which they arise and intervene to analyze how their effects and tensions impact both the design and execution of the research and the possibilities of understanding mass violence.⁴²

Different political post-violence contexts determine a moral topography about what to investigate and how to do it. The study of perpetrators does not always start from the same issues. Contrary to what Blee argues, there is neither always an ethically positive assessment of this type of research, nor are its benefits taken for granted.⁴³ This moral topography has its peculiarities depending on the different contexts and affects of local and foreign researchers because the latter do not have to deal with suspicions of betrayal or contamination by their own colleagues which do not directly affect their reputation in their academic field. Faced with this situation, addressing the network of relations that violence brings about requires constructing a new type of research agency, one that avoids placing the researcher in a specific position. The position of someone investigating state processes or political violence

41 Rosana Guber, oral presentation in October 2018, at an academic colloquium at IDES, Buenos Aires.

42 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness', in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. by Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), pp. 17-44 (p. 19).

43 Kathleen Blee, 'Methods, Interpretation, and Ethics in the Study of White Supremacist Perpetrators', *Conflict and Society*, 1 (2015), 9-22 (p. 16) <<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/conflict-and-society/1/1/air-cs010103.xml?rskey=qHkFIR&result=1>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

requires the creation of a set of conceptual, epistemological, and methodological mediations about their controversial subject of study to make the moral topography, its conflicts, and its effects on academic work conscious and comprehensible. It is useful here to return to Anderson's positional approach: 'who is the perpetrator for me?'.⁴⁴ But being aware of this moral topography requires a shift from me to us (as researchers who came from different contexts, local or foreign) in order to improve the reflection, suggested by Anderson, on 'our understanding of perpetrators'.⁴⁵

When studying the memories of perpetrators based on the narratives produced in interviews, as I mentioned earlier, the question arises whether it is possible to know where silence, concealment, and even lies take a central place in the oral exchange. Despite this, the narratives can be revealing of the understanding, vision, and expression of the interviewee's trajectory as a fable which is told over and over again. Therefore, in the interviews, trajectories appear as various masked voices whose owners claim to be heroes, combatants, avengers, victors, and even victims. However, these narratives are not constructed in isolation; they are constituted in the presence of others: the others invoked in the narrative, the others who accuse them, the others for whom they speak, and the others with whom they converse in the interview situation. Their narratives are also influenced by other narratives that confirm or confront them, and the social discourse that the narrator adopts. In short, these first-person narratives allow glimpses of a life and its lived events, shedding light on their belonging to a generation of army officers and their relationship with a specific social and cultural context. These narratives also manifest the need to respond, negotiate, and publicly reconstruct their meanings and representations in conflict with what is said by other social actors.⁴⁶ It is here where what is denied or silenced appears surreptitiously in the voices of those others and acquires a place in the oral exchange, thus straining the self-image.

Along this same line, the study of perpetrators of state violence encompasses a paradox that relates to its chiaroscuro as an object of study. The massive crime, the abhorrent ways in which it was carried out, and the deliberate actions of concealment and denial undoubtedly situate the perpetrator's agency in a historical process of political

44 Kjell Anderson, 'The Perpetrator Imaginary: Representing Perpetrators of Genocide', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23-48 (p. 23).

45 Ibid.

46 Robben, 'The Politics of Truth and Emotion', p. 82.

violence. However, the factual demonstration of the criminal actions committed in the past, whether through legal evidence or historiographic reconstruction, does not necessarily lead to the acknowledgement on the part of those responsible. This has ethical implications, but above all, epistemological implications for research because this lack of acknowledgement demands a problematization of the notion of experience that is commonly used in social research. Indeed, pursuing the epiphany of experience as something that our research participants have — and that perpetrators have — does not allow for problematizing the tension that arises between what is said and what is not said by them. This relation between subject and experience, which is taken for granted in many research studies, needs to be revisited to construct knowledge that acknowledges that perpetrators are not only producers of violence (as subjects with experience)⁴⁷ but are also produced by the experience of violence for which they are responsible (as subjects of experience). This epistemological difference highlights the radical difference between social research and judicial investigation when studying the agency of perpetrators.

⁴⁷ Anderson and Jessee write that there is a kind of 'near-universal phenomenon that the perpetrator is perceived primarily as a producer of harm' dislocating their violent performance from the society where they emerged. See Anderson and Jessee, p. 11.

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