

# Remembering Resistance, Forgetting Torture: *Compromiso* and Gender in Former Political Prisoners' Oral History Narratives in Post-dictatorial Argentina

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on how thirty-nine former political prisoners in Córdoba, Argentina spoke about their *compromiso* (political commitment) to a leftist, socialist-leaning political project during the Cold War. After being imprisoned in the 1970s and 1980s and then marginalized after being freed, they began to formally record their stories in the mid-2000s as part of their political activism. In these thirty-nine oral history narratives, collected in 2008 and 2009, women, by and large, spoke about personal experiences in clandestine detention centres, while the men focused on Argentina's broader history of social and labour movements. This paper theorizes that men interviewed in this study speak about values of solidarity and resistance in broad historic-social terms, while their women counterparts focus on personal experiences; in this regard, men and women both focus on the most salient, and available, site of political commitment for their respective genders. Identifying such a distinction between the stories told by male and female survivors is relevant for the ways in which Argentina's history is told in memorialized spaces, encouraging curators, historians, and archivists to make use of both personal narratives as well as the broadly historical ones, and is crucial to understanding how acts of resistance and solidarity were gendered, even though social transformation is assumed to be "gender-neutral."

**Keywords:** political prisoners, Argentina, transitional justice, memory, gender

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In 2009, the Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba (AEP-PC) published the first volume of its members' personal accounts, stories, and poetry. Titled *Eslabones*, this publication was one of many efforts by the former prisoners to make public their personal histories of being *víctimas del terrorismo de estado* (victims of state terrorism) and, more importantly, activists who were part of labor and populist social movements. Rather than portraying themselves as suffering victims, contributors recounted how they resisted their torturers and prison guards as an expression of their steadfast *compromiso* or "(political) commitment" to *el proyecto* or the "larger political project" during the Cold War in Latin America. In one joint testimony included in the collection, four former political prisoners recalled the time the International Committee of the Red Cross visited Argentina in April 1978 to inspect Prison Unit Number 1 (UP1). The day before the inspection, the Third Army Corps, which was in charge of all military operations in Córdoba Province, transferred fifteen political prisoners from UP1 to the concentration camp La Ribera to torture and threaten them from speaking to the human rights delegates<sup>1</sup>. The military informed the political prisoners that they would be killed if they reported the truth. Once at La Ribera, the blindfolded and handcuffed prisoners were forced to line up against a wall. At that point, the military officials began shouting threats and accusing them of being subversives, and then proceeded to beat them to the ground. Former political prisoner Enzo Sacco believed he was going to be executed; Isabel Giacobbe remembered one of the officers stuck his penis into her tied hands and that they were all forced to scream, "We are all bloody stupid!"<sup>2</sup> Yet, the third former political prisoner Ana Mohamed recalled how the military's attempt to humiliate them backfired. When she asked the others if they remembered being forced by their torturers to sing the national hymn, Sara Waitman, the fourth participant in the joint testimony, responded, "How could we forget? It was marvelous! They made us sing a hymn and we turned it on them"<sup>3</sup>. They started out slowly, Ana said, not wanting to follow orders, but then as a group kept singing the verse over and over again, louder each time, the spontaneous chorus giving them strength. Their torturers shouted at them to stop, but each time they were told to shut up, the prisoners, defiantly, sang even louder.

The writings contained in *Eslabones* reflect the desire on the part of the former political prisoners in Córdoba to be remembered for their acts of resistance and solidarity in prison, and serve to educate the public about the

<sup>1</sup> AEPPC 2009: 225.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes were translated from Spanish to English by the author.

<sup>3</sup> AEPPC 2009: 225.

political reasons behind the military's use of torture and forced imprisonment. In their writings, contributors speak about themselves as freedom fighters at a time of rapid political change and economic uncertainty during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s in Argentina, and in Latin America more generally. Not only do the political prisoners position themselves as important actors in Argentine history, but they also recall events in prison that counter accusations made by families of the *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons) against them. While the disappeared persons remain missing, and have since been valorized for having given themselves to the revolutionary cause through their deaths, the former political prisoners—the survivors—have, in contrast, faced social marginalization both from the general public as left-wing terrorists and the families of the disappeared, accused by the latter of being collaborators with the military<sup>4</sup>. In circulating memories of their resistance and solidarity, then, former political prisoners both define themselves as heroic figures in recent history and reassert their steadfast ( *muy solidario*) commitment as activists.

However, what has gone largely unexamined, despite numerous scholarly works on memory in Argentina (Perelli 1992; Jelin 1994; da Silva Catela 2001; Kaiser 2002; Bosco 2004; Tandeciarz 2007), is how gender plays a factor in the transmission of memories. More specifically, the time period, location, scope, and voice all shape the gendered memories recalled by Córdobaese women and men political prisoners in their oral history interviews. In *Eslabones*, both men and women wrote about their attempts to escape the military, the torture they endured during interrogation sessions, and memories of murdered compañeros. Yet, as I created the AEPPC's first oral life history archive in 2008 and 2009—the same time as *Eslabones* was being put together—I found that these men and women spoke about the past in different and gendered ways in their interviews. In general, the men recounted grand historical narratives about historical events in Argentina or in the labor movements, while women told of very specific, personal moments from prison. I argue that the ways in which political prisoners speak about resistance and solidarity during the dictatorial era reveal how members of each gender, in hindsight, define their political commitments in the past. The combination of these gendered memories enables the Córdobaese former political prisoners as a collective to create a fuller picture of resistance and solidarity that is crucial to the ways in which they seek to be remembered in collective memories of the past.

What this memory-making process reveals is that the acts that constitute social transformation—an aborted transformation in Argentina's case, as the military's dismantling of guerrilla groups effectively ended any Marxist-inspired revolution there—are far from gender neutral<sup>5</sup>. Comparing the oral histories of men and women reveals that women were more likely to speak

<sup>4</sup> Longoni 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Gal and Kligman 2000.

about prison when recalling their acts of resistance and solidarity and men were more likely to speak about Argentina's history of resistance. In their narratives, the women identified the most salient site that establishes themselves as committed activists: their resistance and solidarity within the prison walls. In contrast, the men linked their own lives to Argentina's longer history of social change, reasserting their assumed role in history-at-large. Though the manner of storytelling employed by former political prisoners did not always break down along gender lines (particularly not in contributions to *Eslabones*), the tendency for Córdobaese political prisoners of each gender to select particular sorts of narratives to recall informs us of how memories, and even experiences, of broader social transformation processes are gendered.

### *Methods*

Research for this study is based on thirty-nine life history interviews with former political prisoners conducted in 2008 and 2009 with twenty-two men and seventeen women, who ranged in age from fifty-three to seventy-five years old. These former political prisoners all belonged to the AEPPC. Although four women worked as teachers and one woman as a psychoanalyst, the rest worked in factories or trades, and twenty-four of the former prisoners were in labor unions. The level of formal education ranged from primary school to university or technical degrees, though all were well-informed on Marxist theory, national liberation movement, and labor history. While I focus on gender and gendered experiences in this analysis, I do not doubt that other factors such as education and socio-economic background played a role in shaping the individual political prisoner.

Interviews were guided by a list of questions generated by the political prisoners. These questions centered on themes pertaining to life before and after imprisonment, and the ways in which the former prisoners felt that state terrorism had impacted society and themselves as individuals. In each interview, political prisoners were asked to speak about their lives starting with where they were born and how they were raised and continue tracing their histories throughout their political awakening and involvement. From there, the conversations turned to their eventual detention, their experiences in prison, and their lives since.

During my fieldwork, I speculated that the different ways men and women told their stories could be attributed to *my* identity—to my being a “Yankee,” (though, as a Korean-American, I was more often called “Japonesa”). I wondered whether being a woman shaded the interactions with and the comfort levels of the men, who seemed less willing to tell personal stories in recorded conversations. I ruled out this possibility, however, after having a number of informal, unrecorded personal conversations with male former political prisoners, who talked about what they endured in prison. Furthermore, since

other scholars have found a similar pattern to accounts from men and women<sup>6</sup>, I argue that the gendered narrations I collected align with others from elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, and that a similar breakdown would have been apparent even if I were an older Latin American male interviewing these same political prisoners. This gendered analysis does not limit itself to women's accounts of the past, but also considers the men's accounts on the same events of the past. Taken together as a whole, we develop a fuller picture of what compromise meant to political prisoners in Córdoba.

In addition to the interviews, I also engaged in extensive participant observation with the AEPPC members. I attended social gatherings, organizational meetings, rallies, lobbying visits, and trials against former military officials. I also joined subcommittees within the AEPPC, including the editorial committee of *Eslabones*. The strength of this methodological approach is its ability to provide depth to the experiences faced by political prisoners that would be difficult to obtain through a straightforward survey. The long-term qualitative ethnography provided an opportunity to establish trust and a degree of intimacy with each of the political prisoners.

These interviews were not simply for research but are permanent records for the political prisoners. When Deborah Poole established a visual archive of Andean images, she argued that the photographs' value was not limited by their representation of reality or their aesthetic attributes fit for commodification, but that the "images also accrue value through the social processes of accumulation, possession, circulation, and exchange"<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, the oral history archive I created is not only valuable as an historical artifact or an attraction for "trauma tourism"—as termed by Laurie Clark and Leigh Payne—in Argentina (2011). Instead, these recorded testimonials are meaningful to the political prisoners themselves, as they are expressions of their activism and were handed over to them for their own personal use. For instance, after one of the interviewed former political prisoners, Víctor Eduardo Ferraro, passed away in 2011, his partner, another AEPPC member Gladys Regalado, told me how much she valued using his oral history at his memorial service, since it was the only existing record of his role in the labor movement and subsequent imprisonment.

### *Gender and Memory in the Post-Conflict Era*

Within the field of transitional justice, gendered analyses have often translated to investigating sexual violence or focusing only on women. Christine Bell and Catherine O'Rourke suggest that transitional justice is male-oriented with the way decisions are made and the efforts designed, such as ceasefires

<sup>6</sup> Silber 2011; Theidon 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Castro-Klarén et al 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Poole 2011: 11.

rather than discrimination resulting in gender inequalities<sup>9</sup>. Because there are so many different definitions of transitional justice, Bell and O'Rourke argue that instead of producing a feminist framework, efforts would be better spent on improving the material conditions for women<sup>10</sup>. This critique, however, restricts gender analysis to women, however male-dominated transitional justice is perceived to be in practice.

Some scholars have been critical of the narrowing of gendered analysis to the ways in which women experience violence, including Kimberly Theidon (2007), who argues that in Peru, while efforts should be made to document and disseminate reports about the sexual violence done to women, the state and activists should also listen to the ways in which women speak about their experience of war, so that those women are not simply reduced to the crime committed against them. For instance, by including the fact that a woman was raped as a consequence of protecting her family, academics avoid reducing her to the status of an object of sexualized violence, and grants her the role of an active resistor<sup>11</sup>. In *Everyday Revolutionaries* (2011), Irina Silber also argues that former revolutionaries in El Salvador often recall memories in which women are portrayed as bystanders or as being most vulnerable to the threat of rape—but at the same time as being the ones responsible for protecting their families. Both Theidon and Silber bring attention to the fact that sexual violence is used as a weapon of war against women (Weitsman 2008), and that efforts still need to be made in reducing the stigma surrounding rape.

Though many of the women political prisoners I spent time with revealed during personal conversations how they were tortured—such as torturers applying electric current to their breasts and genitals or the fact that women were routinely raped—the majority of the women remained silent about sexual abuses when recording their oral histories. Susan Slyomovics argues that the silences in women's testimonies in Morocco's truth commission are in fact informative of emotions, and that absences in written and oral sources of the past does not mean that particular events did not happen, but rather reminds us of the "corroborative social aspects of giving testimony by more than one victim"<sup>12</sup> to demonstrate the existence of violence against women. Similarly, Fiona Ross found that women who gave testimony in the initial stages of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not speak about their own suffering but rather the violations experienced by others—such as their spouses and relatives—but that their voices as a collective revealed the pain and losses experienced by women under apartheid<sup>13</sup>. Both Slyomovics and Ross make a compelling argument in favor of paying closer attention to

<sup>9</sup> Bell, O'Rourke 2007: 25.

<sup>10</sup> Bell, O'Rourke 2007: 43-44.

<sup>11</sup> Theidon 2007: 474.

<sup>12</sup> Slyomovics 2005: 93.

<sup>13</sup> Ross 2001: 251.

these silences, as they inform us about particular experiences unique to women. However, in this case, the overall objective of this paper is to focus on the activist identities that the Argentine former political prisoners are circulating about themselves, rather than surmising how as a collective, women speak about specific abuses done to them. (Of course, some female former political prisoners did offer accounts of abuse, in the course of explaining how they resisted their torturers.) Furthermore, the men also did not speak about rape in their interviews. The significance of these silences is beyond the scope of this paper. While women political prisoners in Argentina endured specific acts of violence intended to humiliate them as women, this article contributes to the scholarship on examining the role both women and men played in broader resistance movements.

That memories are gendered is not a new concept but it has not been a primary focus in studies on cultural or collective memory<sup>14</sup>. It should be noted that the gender analysis presented here is not focused on the socialization processes that in turn shape how men and women narrate the past differently, but rather is directed at how a group of men and women spoke about their political commitments in the past differently from each other. Noting this difference is significant for civil society groups operating former sites of terror as memorial museums; the two types of narratives create a more complete picture of how political prisoners expressed their activism prior to and during imprisonment.

In their introduction to the 1996 volume of the *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini and Paul Thompson reveal the consistent finding, based on anecdotal evidence, that memory is gendered (14). Leydesdorff et al. do not draw definitive conclusions on how each sex remembers, but they acknowledge that men and women do remember in ways that create narratives that are clearly gendered:

The categories of experience and language are formulated within the frames of subjectivity and intersubjectivity: hence, when we refer to a woman's experiences as the basis of memories different from a man's, we mean an experience as lived by the individual subject and defined in her terms—an experience reconstructed by the protagonist, and transmitted to others willing to listen<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, I am not attempting to make any universal generalizations on gendered differences on how men and women recall memory; variation exists within each gender as well<sup>16</sup>. Rather, I am taking seriously the finding that the men and women political prisoners reconstructed the past in ways that were clearly different from each other—even at the risk of appearing as if I am reinforcing gender stereotypes, though that is not my intention. Furthermore, I

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch and Smith 2002: 3.

<sup>15</sup> Leydesdorff et al. 1996: 14.

<sup>16</sup> Castro-Klarén et al. 1991.

am explaining how these gendered memories address two different arenas of resistance and solidarity. Argentine former political prisoners' emphasis on solidarity and resistance is tied to their membership in the AEPPC, where their identities as activists are reaffirmed through their association with each other and in collectively emphasizing their survival stories to the public as a group.

### *Survivors of State Terrorism*

The life stories that these political prisoners compose revolve around their prison experiences during the military dictatorship in Argentina between the years 1976 and 1983, and in the years shortly before the coup d'état in 1976, since state repression was a gradual process that began before the official overthrow of the government. During the later years of the Cold War, Latin America became an ideological battleground, and like many other countries in the region, the Argentine military usurped power with the intent to destroy an alleged internal Communist threat. As a result, the military—with the complicity of the Catholic Church and civilian supporters—sought to rid the country of the “Communist cancer” by “disappearing” suspected “subversives”—people believed to have been involved in political activities or leftist movements. Approximately 30,000 were disappeared after being taken to one of the hundreds of secret detention centers, where victims were tortured. Another 10,000 individuals were kidnapped, but were later transferred from the secret camps into regular prisons, and ultimately survived. The vast majority who were abducted were university students, in their early twenties.

After being held in secret detention camps during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), the political prisoners in Córdoba felt that they and other *compañeros* (“comrades”) in other provinces had been marginalized after their release, and only gained public recognition as victims akin to the families of the disappeared starting around the mid-2000s. Thus, even though political prisoners were granted state reparations in the 1990s, they did not perceive that compensation as doing the symbolic work of conferring upon them victim status. Instead, the public acknowledgment of former political prisoners as victims was tied to recent developments in Argentina's transitional justice process nearly three decades after being freed. One of the main reasons for the change in status was the election of former President Néstor Kirchner, and his ardent support for human rights, which the political prisoners believe helped shift the overall political environment such that they became less stigmatized. Elizabeth Jelin suggests that when Kirchner identified himself as a fellow *compañero* to the disappeared and other victims who survived the torture camps, he effectively elevated their status because of his own legitimacy as a popular public figure<sup>17</sup>. Since the mid-2000s, Argentina has opened up memorialized

<sup>17</sup> Jelin 2009: 177.



spaces at sites of former concentration camps and reopened trials against former military officials. As the primary witnesses of the atrocities that took place in those camps and at the hands of those officials, former political prisoners are integral to the success of both efforts.

In recalling the past, the political prisoners repeatedly spoke about their commitment to resistance and solidarity. Resistance is defined here as the ways in which political prisoners continued to stand against oppression even as the military increasingly restricted their freedom in prison. Solidarity, a word that has particular significance in Latin American leftist groups for its expression of commitment to a political project and political actors, is an active form of “being there” for one’s *compañeros*. For example, *compañeros* sought each other out in the most inhumane conditions—after torture sessions, for instance—to offer help or moral support. Similarly, women Chilean prisoners sought each other out after being demeaned sexually by their torturers, as Temma Kaplan wrote, “Reestablishing ties of solidarity to their political allies in prison and outside became an essential part of preserving recollections of former aspirations and of reconnecting with personal identities of which they were proud”<sup>18</sup>. Nearly three decades after their release from prison, the former political prisoners repeatedly emphasized these two values—solidarity and resistance—in tours, at meetings, in writings, during public presentations, and in personal interviews.

### *Historical Breadth Versus Personal Depth*

Every one of the twenty-two men interviewed spoke about Argentine history, doing far more than merely describing the overall political context surrounding the disappearances, as all political prisoners did when talking about when they “fell” (into the hands of the military). For example, former political prisoner Víctor Eduardo Ferraro said, “The [1970s] was an era of landmark social struggles. The Santa Fe province had never experienced such a significant mobilization until then. Lanusse’s government had reduced the salaries of public employees and industrial workers, and the distribution of money became a source of conflict” (Ferraro, April 2009). Victor was from a working class family, and completed his military service in 1970 before studying biochemistry and law at university. In 1976 he was imprisoned for labor union activities, and remained in prison for three years, until he was released under *libertad vigilada* (supervised release, though better understood as house arrest). Even in the cases of seven male political prisoners who spoke at length about their personal trajectories, they shifted to a plural collective identity when giving their life histories. In his interview, Manuel Nieva, a former

<sup>18</sup> Kaplan 2002: 188.

political prisoner, who fell in 1977, said, “We are working to recapture what we were in our generation historically, coming out of Peronism as children, and...our place in the struggle as youth, what we called resistance to the injustices committed by the state since 1955” (Nieva, September 2008). Since he was 16 years old, Manuel had worked for the postal service. He was imprisoned for three years for being part of a labour union.

Also, men—more so than women—contemplated the moral obligations one has in joining a social movement, and in contributing to the greater collective, either through political consciousness or mobilizing activists. Jorge “Caballo” Agañaraz, a former political prisoner, said, “A man who possesses particular skills should use his knowledge to obtain other positions, jobs that are in the spirit of solidarity, to share knowledge. It was an honour for a *compañero* to teach others, because it was an opportunity to for us to learn through his experiences” (Agañaraz, September 2008). At the time of his interview, Jorge worked as an electrician, but when he was abducted by the military in 1976, he had been working at the Fiat factory. Imprisoned for his labour union activities, Jorge was released in 1982.

In contrast, only three of the seventeen women interviewed mentioned major historical events as the backdrop to their personal narratives. Instead, the women recounted their kidnappings, the conditions they endured during their imprisonment, and times when they reached out to other prison cellmates and rebelled against the rules in prison. For example, former political prisoner Norma Peralta remembered meeting other cellmates at Penitentiary Unit Number One (UP1) in Córdoba province. She had been isolated and tortured in a concentration camp, and the military then transferred her from to UP1, a “legal” jail, where political prisoners were placed together on the same floor, albeit in individual cells. Norma remembered being welcomed by two cellmates: “Two *compañeras* received me. They asked me about who I was, where I came from, and they said very kind things to me. They told me that the women had organized themselves in prison, and that we were going to study and do recreation” (Peralta, October 2008). Norma had been in medical school, but fell in 1975 for being a member of the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (Workers Revolutionary Party), and never finished her studies. She was released in 1980, and lived in political exile in Germany until 1991, when she returned to Argentina.

Sara Liliana Waitman, who had once been a member of the Communist Party, also recalled seeing her prison cell for the first time at the former torture camp La Ribera, “It was night and they had me carry a cushion. It was a bare cell. There was a cement block, a tiny window, and a little banquet. We slept with the light on 24 hours a day. I entered the cell and told myself, ‘I’m going to die here’” (Waitman, August 2008). Sara screamed to the guards to take her to the bathroom but she remained locked alone inside the cell. The next day, the other women political prisoners began talking to her. “The *compañeras*

began talking to me and telling me things, because they had already organized themselves... We communicated with each other through the peeppholes, where we shared bread and tea. They began to ask, 'What's your name? And what news do you have for us?' (Waitman, August 2008). The women political prisoners had organized themselves in prison, and sought to help each other, defying rules that prohibited them from even speaking to one another. Sara fell with her boyfriend, Carlos Alberto "Nona" D'Ambra, in 1976, who later became a *desaparecido*, and was released at the end of 1979. Sara worked for several decades as a physical education teacher before retiring to become a full-time activist.

Of the men who responded to my question of where they were imprisoned and for how long, only three mentioned a similar kind of organization in prison, or any sharing of specialized knowledge. The men notably spent more time discussing labour leaders and particular social protests that took place in Argentina, often explaining how their lives were connected to these prominent people or events. It was through their support for these public acts of resistance that the male former political prisoners expressed their *compromiso*, as their support and participation in resistance movements was what had landed them in prison. Women, on the other hand, were more forthcoming about their personal experiences in prison, recalling the people they were imprisoned with and what life was like inside. In what follows, I identify the two major sites of resistance and solidarity that emerged in the oral history interviews.

### *The Men*

Generally speaking, the men recounted history in order to explain their life stories. Pedro Gaetán, who was imprisoned for eight and a half years and lost four of his siblings to disappearance by the military, spoke almost entirely about Argentine history in our interview. Pedro worked as a journalist, and was very thorough in his recollection of historical facts. He began his life history narrative with the elimination of the indigenous in 1820, and then proceeded to list major historical moments and movements that included major events in Paraguay and Chile. He spent a lot of time speaking about former President Juan Domingo Perón and earlier dictatorships preceding the 1976 overthrow. To illustrate the importance of larger historical narratives in his interview, consider the way Pedro connected his own life history to Argentina's:

The other issue that relates to my life was when my adolescence was defined by a major transformation in Argentine history, with the multiple coups after '55. In '58 Frondisi won the elections with support from the United States and with support from the national Peronist movement. At this point there were no free elections; it was the opposite. In '59 there was fierce repression against workers, Lisandro Latorre, and the imprisonment of Peronist labour activists,

these things that I lived through and it ended with another government overthrow of Frondisi. It was at that point that I voted for the first time in 1973, when Campora won. My entire adolescence and youth was spent in Buenos Aires, and I lived through these various coups, except for Illia's government (Gaetán, November 2008).

By reacting to events taking place around him, Pedro becomes a part of Argentine history, and his casting a ballot in 1973 was merely one of many actions he mentioned to prove his solidarity with leftist politics. For instance, Pedro described his decision to join the leftist youth organization *Juventud Peronista* (Peronist Youth) after witnessing Argentine experience major labour union protests across the country. Pedro said:

There were also important events that left a mark on us, that led to us becoming more socially conscious. The Argentines see the activities of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) as the major turning point. In my particular case, the point at which I started to actively participate in this movement was when its national leader was (Agustín) Tosco (a labour activist) from Córdoba and when (Raimundo) Ongaro was the secretary-general. The movement was mostly made up of the service guilds. And in our case, we were factory workers who participated in the internal committees and in the grassroots movements. At that time the CGT had already experienced several major conflicts in Argentina: the sugar workers' conflict in Tucumán, the railroad workers' strike in Gallereta, Laguna Paiva, El Chocón, Cerro Colorado. The movement was growing, and the labour unions and political leaders involved made a huge impact on Argentina that lasted for a long time...and what this meant for me personally, was that it moved me to join the *Juventud Peronista* (Gaetán, November 2008).

For former political prisoners in Córdoba—the province from which Argentina's labour movement grew—the CGT and the workers' protests were significant to their understanding of the past and their explanations of why they joined resistance movements. By situating themselves within Argentine history, the men spoke about the formation of their compromiso. Although Pedro spoke about being shot in prison and then being rushed to the hospital afterward to be kept alive—the torturers declared that they alone decided who could die and who could live—he spent no more than two minutes recounting that event, and afterwards went on to discuss other historical events for an additional hour.

Rodolfo "Petiso" (Shorty) Novillo also explained his early radicalization in politics. Though he came from an aristocratic family in Argentina, Petiso diverged from his family's more conservative political views. One of ten children, Petiso, and two of his older siblings, were involved in leftist movements. His sister, who was pregnant at the time of her abduction, was disappeared.

Petiso intertwined his personal decision to join the guerrilla group PRT with the national political landscape:

I was very young in 1970. I became a militant in '70. I became involved in PRT (the Worker's Revolutionary Party) because of PRT's clearly defined position. It was 'the most guerrilla organization,' said Peron, a man from the right. As a result PRT never supported—there was no truce when Peron returned from exile, when Cámpora assumed power—when after Cámpora left his presidency which had only lasted five or six months, and who was progressive, but in very little time the struggle that had supported Cámpora assumed Peron's conservative position. But I—my position within PRT was that Peron was center-right. Peron wanted to be in front of the struggle, he wanted to bring together the classes, but it is impossible, even more so when the popular struggles were growing (Novillo, September 2008).

Like Pedro, Rodolfo displays his resistance and solidarity by his decision to join PRT. He was not, in other words, an innocent youth grabbed suddenly by the military and tortured for no reason. He was part of a movement that threatened the military, and he was tortured and imprisoned for seven years because of it.

Rodolfo also, like many of the men political prisoners, discussed strategy and historical events from a broader point of view, beyond his own personal life.

The strategy that one expected was how to accomplish the political project; it was a military matter. The topic of guerrillas emerged out of a conviction and arose after the conclusion that—one that only came after making an analysis—it is possible to take power through non-violence, there are possibilities to build a society properly through the right use of power by elections, you can transform society through elections, like we are doing now with the current government, you can change things. The conclusion we came to is that there was no historical precedent in which a revolutionary group came to power by peaceful means, we said that reality didn't exist. The only experience we had seen at that time was that of Chile, which came to pass through the elections in the 1972, and that had happened with the use of arms. That experience reaffirmed our position that you cannot use peaceful means to get at social change. It wasn't because we were violent... Basically it was about figuring out who had to overcome, who did we have to defeat? You have to build a force more powerful. Now, the goal was not to kill all of them. No, the objective was to neutralize (Novillo, September 2008).

Essentially, Rodolfo was engaged in debates over the decisions made in the upper echelons of the guerrilla organizations, despite not having been involved at such a high level. It is telling that these male rank-and-file members felt ownership or spoke about themselves as having been included in high-level strategic decisions taken by their movements or groups, and that women,

some of whom held higher ranks and might have been involved in such decision-making, failed to mention these in their oral histories.

In postauthoritarian Chile, Macarena Gómez-Barris found that the popular narrative given in classic documentaries, such as Silvio Caiozzi's 1998 film *Fernando ha vuelto* (Fernando Returns), portrayed men as "the main targets of military repression," and in contrast, the "mothers, daughters, and sisters bore the greatest emotional burden of violence's effects"<sup>19</sup>. Thus, Gómez-Barris notes that such depictions reify women subjects as the "sufferers and victims of the nation," and marginalize revolutionary women<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, in Argentina, the revolutionary figure was seen as male, including Córdobese labour leader Atilio López and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, while the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Mother of Plaza de Mayo, or Madres) were cast as the suffering maternal figures searching for their children. Yet, as Gómez-Barris argues, films like Marilú Mallet's 2003 *La cueca sola* (Dancing Alone), may offer a counter narrative. In this film, the main character, Monique Herмосilla, a survivor of the Villa Grimaldi concentration camp in Chile, works through her memories of sexual terror, and is portrayed, among other women, as still being "engaged in the struggle, addressing the psychic, somatic, performative, and activist dimensions of personal trauma"<sup>21</sup>. Thus, even if Córdobese women interviewed in this study omitted discussions about organizational activities and decisions from their narratives, it does not mean a lack of engagement in revolutionary work. The women spoke about their personal experiences in prison, a site of resistance in which they reaffirmed their revolutionary identities.

Other male former political prisoners offered more local histories, such as Juan Carlos "Juanca" Álvarez, who began his story by speaking about the importance of the Catholic Church in creating a broad social movement. By describing the conditions of the small town in Córdoba province where he grew up and the ways Catholic progressives were able to change that town, Juanca explained how he came to join those progressive Catholics in solidarity and actively resisted the increasing capitalization of Argentina's economy. He emphasized the 1955 government overthrow and told the history of anti-Peronism, the rise of Perón, the Catholic workers' movement, and the assassination of Bishop Angellini for his involvement in liberation theology. The closest Juanca came to sharing his personal trajectory was when he described the middle-class youth who had come to organize his community in solidarity with the poor:

They were intellectuals, they gave us certain explanations and tried to understand us because we weren't familiar with this kind of solidarity work. But the intellectual part we understood through their slow, steady and long-term

<sup>19</sup> Gómez-Barris 2009: 106-107.

<sup>20</sup> Gómez-Barris 2009: 107.

<sup>21</sup> Gómez-Barris 2009: 129.

work. This could be seen as evangelism from one point of view, but we knew this. Christ, for example, loved the poor, and this is where the Catholic Church was at, though the Vatican was not with the poor. So it was a double discourse, a hypocrisy. We began to understand this more because we didn't have material things, we didn't read, it was just word of mouth. Afterward came official statements, after around '67, with the Second Vatican Council, in the year 68 and '69, with 18 bishops signing a document known as the Bishops of the Third World (Álvarez, February 2009).

Juan Carlos gave the history of how the people in his town were mobilized by Catholic workers and provided dates on the official institutional changes in the Church outside of his community that helped forge the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America. By speaking of having joined the developing of the Third World Movement, Juan Carlos identified how he resisted the dictatorship and fought in solidarity with the workers' movement by working in a labour union. For his involvement, Juan Carlos spent eight and half years in prison, and another six months living under libertad vigilada.

What I have attempted to show with these excerpts are ways that the men focused their testimonies on local and national histories—beyond their own lifetimes—and that their life histories extended beyond themselves as individuals. Their life histories link up to broader social movements that they see themselves as having been part of, and they therefore speak with through a collective identity, using “we” rather than “I” at certain parts of their narratives. They reference places of important historical gatherings and protests—outside of their own particular provinces, labour unions, and prisons—because these places form an integral part of how they view their lives.

### *The Women*

The women I interviewed shared intimate stories about their kidnapping, torture, and imprisonment. In recounting these harrowing experiences, the women emphasized how they refused to “sing,” or give away information about their compañeros while under torture, and how they maintained their sanity when alone and helped other fellow women prisoners from their prison cells. Former political prisoner, Alicia Staps, had grown up in an upper middle-class family and had engaged in volunteer work in various poor neighbourhoods during graduate school. She fell in 1971 and was released in 1973, and lived underground during the entire dictatorial period between 1976 and 1983 to escape the military. Similar to Juan Carlos, Alicia was influenced by her Catholic roots, but she did not situate her activism in the context of the development of the Third World Movement. Instead, when talking about the prisons in which she was held, Alicia recalled her time in one particular prison, Rawson, the highest-security prison in Argentina, located in the Southern

part, where the cold was itself a form of torture, that slowly kill many prisoners. In her interview, Alicia said:

In November of '72 they punished me because I had climbed up to see—there was, at the top, a vent where you could see some trees in the distance, but far, but I couldn't see anything. So I had climbed up to see, and they punished me by sending me to the punishment cell. They punished me for three months, but I had seen the trees. You don't know how significant this was, being isolated from the world, not seeing anyone, in a tiny space without anything, without anything to do but to see what was far away. Because it had just turned spring — well I don't know if it was spring or what—but the trees were green. To see the leaves, there in the distance, like 200 meters, to see the treetops! You have no idea, Rebekah, I saw these treetops and it connected me to life, I felt alive. They took me to the punishment cell and I was happy because I felt alive, I had seen the treetops. It was something very important that I don't know if it can be understood unless you've lived through it (Staps, September 2008).

This part of Alicia's interview captures how women recalled their feelings and experiences in surviving their isolation and enduring various forms of torture, by finding ways to keep sane when there was nothing for them to do and when they were prohibited from having any social contact.

Another former political prisoner, Élica "Ely" Eichenberger, who defined herself as an artist first, and was imprisoned from 1976 to 1979 for her documentary film work and for owning an allegedly subversive bookstore, also recalled her own manner of resistance in prison:

I did theatre inside prison. I directed the theatre. I was taken to the punishment cells for doing theatre. We did theatre on Saturdays in the showers. In the showers, the showers were, more or less, a large space. The showers were separated into stalls but there was a big space where we left our towels. That's where the audience sat. And in the space where it opened up to the showers we did plays. So we were like 80 people in each cell. So we had four groups, twenty, twenty, twenty, twenty. And Elba [a fellow political prisoner]—you know the one who was at Congress the other day—I had to create an entire security structure so that she could do theatre! But it was important for the compañeras to learn and do theatre (Eichenberger, October 2008).

Political prisoners were not allowed to talk or touch each other and were held in solitary confinement. However, in the moments in which they were corralled for showers or for their daily twenty-minute break outside, they found ways to connect with each other.

Women often spoke at length about their relationships with their fellow cellmates. For example, political prisoner Viviana "Vivi" Vergara remembered the way she and other female prisoners held classes in prison as way to educate



each other on topics deemed subversive, but also as a way to resist rules prohibiting them from speaking with each other and pass time with each other:

We held classes in a particular way in prison. We sought them out in the mornings. There was a writer. There was a girl who was a student of film and knew a lot about film. There was another who was a professor of languages. Another one knew about accounting. We hid under our blankets, and one person would give a class when the guards were far away. Only one person would give a class to everyone else. The person's voice would pass through the hallway because the individual cells were next to each other. There were twenty on one side and twenty on the other. So the person spoke in a loud voice and everyone listened... There was a lecture about books that I had never read in my life but I know through the stories of these compañeras, books by Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Arlt, Joseph Maréchal, and also I know about movies that I have never seen through what the compañeras had told me. It was all done orally. We had absolutely nothing, except combs (Vergara, August 2008).

The military considered the types of books and movies Vivi mentions in her interview to be “subversive;” as such, it was precisely by circulating forbidden knowledge that political prisoners actively resisted the dictatorship's ideologies from their prison cells. Vivi herself had been in the process of getting her teaching credentials before she was imprisoned for four years and half, and then another six months under *libertad vigilada*.

Women's life histories focused largely on their abduction, time in prison, and recovering their freedom. The excerpts presented here are all drawn from the parts of the interviews where they discussed how they survived prison; stories of this type were noticeably absent among the men's testimonies. Life in prison was a major theme that cut across the women's interviews, and they spoke about their own personal experience, rather than the larger social movements in which they once participated. These stories of their time in prison illustrated their commitment to the struggle by their ability to break the rules, withstand torture and cruel treatment, and seek camaraderie among other fellow prisoners.

In recording the meetings of a group of women political prisoners in Buenos Aires in 1986, Julie Taylor found that the women had engaged in gendered practices of “political inclusion, mutual nurturance, and artistic creation” while in the prison called Villa Devoto (2001, 107). The women political prisoners viewed their practices of bringing fellow prisoners together, caring for each other physically and emotionally, and performing theatre as acts of resistance against the dictatorship's values of “rationalism, social atomization, and highly individualistic values” (Taylor 2001, 107). While Taylor has emphasized how women political prisoners found specific gendered ways to construct their subjectivity or agency in prison, I suggest that the focus on them in prison reinforces their identities as activists and not simply as

rape victims or sufferers for their male relatives or spouses. The women I interviewed did not, after all, speak about their other domestic duties or the private sphere.

### *Locating Compromiso in Gendered Lives*

Though all of the political prisoners spoke about the significance of past political movements in their oral history interviews, the women spoke about it from the perspective of their own lives, while the men, many of them using the pronoun “we,” spoke in grand narratives, in which they played a part in the larger history of the nation. As a result, the more specific stories of resistance, humour, and solidarity in prison all came from the women. But I did find that men, in their own ways, spoke about their lives in relation to other *compañeros*. The men employed their sense of a collective—by being part of the larger trajectory of history—but when recalling horrific moments from prison, they spoke as solitary individuals, observing the suffering of others. The men, in speaking in such grand narrative terms, placed themselves in solidarity with others within the larger social movement. It was the opposite, generally speaking, with the women. The women spoke about their time in prison as if they were always part of a community. Grand national, historical narratives rarely played a part in the women’s shaping and ordering of their pasts: some spoke about the bigger political project that the left was involved in during the 1970s and 1980s, but they always rooted that history within their own, very personal lives. While women professed to share a more collective sense of identity with other women prisoners, they also spoke in ways that asserted their individualized identities during other parts of the interview.

In analysing survivor narratives given by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Margerete Feinstein found that while men often debated Zionism or spoke about the conflict with Allied officials over immigration policies, women spoke about their roles as mothers, particularly after liberation<sup>22</sup>. In their narrations of life in concentration camps, men did not mention their role as protective figures or as fathers, despite evidence that they did perform these roles, whereas women emphasized their maternal roles during and after the concentration camps<sup>23</sup>. Although Argentine women political prisoners did not talk about their roles as maternal figures, the divide between men speaking about contextual factors and women speaking about the personal is similar. Feinstein offers three explanations for these gendered accounts of the past. First, Feinstein suggests that because women were more likely to go to gas chambers with their children, the male survivors may have perceived themselves as having “failed” in their parental role, and therefore remained silent

<sup>22</sup> Feinstein 2007: 156.

<sup>23</sup> Feinstein 2007: 157.

about their roles as fathers. Second, men and women spoke in stereotypical gendered patterns because of the way they had been socialized into language and have different ranges of available models to speak about their identities. Third, after liberation, women inhabited the private sphere as mothers responsible for childrearing while men were in the public sphere providing for the family<sup>24</sup>. In citing Jill Conway, Feinstein explains that “the Western literary tradition encourages men to present their lives as heroic tales of action, while women are taught to view themselves as passive, romantic heroines whose lives happen to them and acquire meaning through love and family”<sup>25</sup>.

All three explanations given by Feinstein could be applied to the Argentine political prisoners, but they do not theorize how gendered accounts reflect how they understood their political commitments. Pedro’s interview is representative of all the men, in that it illustrates his political commitment as being in reaction to or part of the larger historical context in Argentina. Men demonstrate their *compromiso* in relation to their roles in history. Women, on the other hand, saw their acts of protest in prison as how they demonstrated their resistance and solidarity. While Ely speaks about defying the rules by performing and directing theatrical shows, and enduring psychological torture in the punishment cells afterward; Pedro speaks about key historical events and how he voted and lived through this history, inhabiting the role of an active citizen by joining popular struggles. These expressions of solidarity and resistance either in social movements or in prison were how political prisoners enacted their militant identities.

If anti-imperialist struggles, inspired by Marxism, were falsely gender-neutral<sup>26</sup>, and failed to eradicate the male revolutionary figure as stereotypically imaged in the Latin American resistance movements (Saldaña-Portillo 2003), then the portrayal of women as sufferer or victim would betray the actual role women revolutionaries played in labour and social movements—their participation in those movements is the reason for their imprisonment. In the wake of Argentina’s dictatorship, it is the suffering Madres, who mourn their missing children, and grandmother of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, or Abuelas), who search for their stolen grandchildren born in captivity and then given away to military families and their sympathizers, that have established the role of women in human rights activism. I found that the women political prisoners speaking of their time in prison—even with their themes of “feminine” community-building and bodily care—refocus the attention to their revolutionary character. The prison cell and torture sessions are precisely the place where women can claim equal recognition for their resistance to the military.

<sup>24</sup> Feinstein 2007: 157.

<sup>25</sup> Feinstein 2007: 166.

<sup>26</sup> Klarén et al 1991: 232.

Asking how men and women conceptualize their compromise maintains the focus on the political prisoners' activist pasts. Most stories that are solicited from survivors of violence in transitional justice processes are about torture. For example, truth commissions list testimonies of human rights abuses. But this focus on violence and torture is counterproductive to the broader political project of remaining critical of societal conditions and remembering the political motivations behind the violations (Leebaw 2011). Remembering the political militancy reminds us of those political tensions, whereas remembering torture erases the dialogue on political opposition. For instance, in his essay on Uruguayan political prisoner Carlos Liscano's 2001 testimonio of his 13 years of imprisonment and experience with torture in *Truck of Fools*, Eugenio Di Stefano observes that Liscano speaks about his youth and even life after imprisonment, but is silent on his affiliation with the MLN Tupamaros, a popular urban guerrilla movement in the Southern Cone during the 70s and 80s<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, Liscano details his torture in explicit detail and continually reinforces the point that torture is a pointless, meaningless task. Di Stefano argues that the silence on militant pasts and focus on torture both lead to the forgetting of why Liscano and others were imprisoned in the first place and why they were tortured.

Taking it a step further, Di Stefano argues that the constant remembrance of torture, or the national obligation to remember these kinds of human rights abuses, makes former activists complicit with the state's turn toward neoliberalism, because remembering a decontextualized act of torture detaches actors from political critique. In Uruguay's post-dictatorship era, the Left has re-emerged in a neoliberal form, with once revolutionary political actors taking the presidency but continuing the neoliberal policies of their predecessors, including free trade agreements that make Uruguay more welcoming for foreign capital. The left in post-dictatorship Uruguay is no longer defined by its commitment to socialism but by what it remembers of the past. Those in favour of forgetting argued that Uruguay would be more stable if it did not live in the past and solicit threats from the military, while the prominent leftist thinkers, on the other hand, argued that remembering the past is what ensures democracy. Thus, the right is defined by forgetting, and the left, by remembering. In short, there is no critique of economic inequalities through the politics of remembering and healing. This is also seen in Argentina, with kin-based human rights groups constantly performing memory work, conjuring up images of the disappeared, and conservative politicians and their supporters stating that the society needs to move on and forget the past.

Liscano's focus on torture and the body's resistance to it is how he explains who survives and who does not. This resistance is dependent upon dignity, not ideology. Di Stefano argues that "insisting on the primacy of the body and

<sup>27</sup> Di Stefano 2011: 166.

dignity in Liscano's testimonio eliminates the 'ideological' distinction between the imprisoned Tupamaro and the imprisoned common criminal"<sup>28</sup>. The differences drawn between the torturer and the victim is one of psychological dimensions, in which torture has no point; it is banal.

In contrast, the Argentine political prisoners I interviewed, who organized explicitly as those with activist identities, insist upon their resistance as a form of militancy, whether it is through their support of and place within larger historical movements toward the left or their defiance of the rules in prison meant to break them down as individuals and prevent unity. This is partly in response to the fact that, apart from my work with them, stories of torture are the only ones solicited from the former political prisoners. Over the course of my fieldwork with the AEPPC, I observed that the only outside assistance offered to them came from psychologists willing to give free sessions to talk about the trauma they suffered in secret detention camps. Since I left the field, the AEPPC has managed to procure health assistance for those among them that cannot afford specialized medical attention, and more recently, in November 2013, Congress passed a new reparation law providing pensions. Both of these events took place because of the efforts and campaigns led by the political prisoners, rather than the work of general human rights groups' advocacy on their behalf.

### *Conclusion*

Argentine political prisoners are departing from previous survivor accounts by speaking about their activist pasts, as a conscious decision to emphasize the political reasons for their imprisonment and to position themselves as actors in history rather than victims. The accounts of men, generally speaking, differed significantly from those offered by women. Men and women told their life histories in consistently different ways, and emphasized different types of memories in their interviews. I posit that the gendered accounts are about compromise and where it is located. Women defined their compromise in their personal acts of resistance in prison; they resisted the oppressive conditions, they say, by refusing to give up information or to collaborate. The men, instead of talking about their personal experiences in prison, saw their compromise located in these large-scale movements of which they were a part, that they played a role in this larger history.

In addition, building upon Feinstein's theory that the range of societal roles available to men and women shaped how Holocaust survivors felt that they could present their stories, I suggest that the available models of political resistance in Argentina has had a role in how men and women political

<sup>28</sup> Di Stefano 2011: 173.

prisoners speak about their own resistance. The male role models for these particular political prisoners are labour union leaders Agustín Tosco and Atilio López. Córdoba, where my fieldwork took place, is the birthplace of the labour movement and the province where the Cordobazo, significant rebellion in 1969 when students and labour activists united for the first time and successfully brought down the city for a few days in protest of the Livingstone dictatorship. The men political prisoners view themselves as part of the lineage of which Tosco and López were a part. The women, on the other hand, speak about the ways in which they built solidarity and expressed support for each other in prison, and how they staged acts of resistance as a collective. In many ways, they resemble the Madres and Abuelas who—as women—stuck together, enabling each other to resist the dictatorship and share a common goal of seeking justice for their children. The women prisoners respect the Madres and Abuelas, but it would be inappropriate to suggest that they view them as role models that inspired their activism, since the prisoners were already politically engaged when the families started organizing around their missing relatives. While some of the Madres have become radicalized, the origin narrative begins with their child's disappearance. The women prisoners found their radicalization in social protest movements that then landed them in prison, where their compromise was tested. The women prisoners resisted the guards and joined together in solidarity to provide support for each other. While women were part of labour unions, they did not speak about the labour movements and about Tosco and López being formative figures like the men did. And while the male political prisoners speak positively of the Madres and Abuelas, they do not detail the history of these women or speak about their resistance in the way these mothers built their movement.

Gendered analyses in transitional justice are not limited to understanding how women experienced particular sexual forms of violence, or even how men tried to uphold their sense of masculinity. Rather, I argue that it is about the types of stories told to the public in various contexts that political prisoners are seeking to convey. In many ways the political prisoners are splitting the labours of memory along gendered lines. The women contest the notion that survivors were collaborators or that they did something morally questionable to survive, such as engaging in sexual relations with their torturers. By telling stories of how they expressed solidarity with fellow prisoners, they articulate how they defied the rules set by their captures even at the risk of enduring more torture, even death. They were not passive; they resisted the rules and found ways to seek community, despite extreme and degrading conditions. The men, by giving their versions of Argentine history and inserting themselves into the history, keep the focus on the political context and explain why they joined armed guerrilla movements and popular struggles. Unlike Liscano, they speak about their militancy and they explain their imprisonment and torture as a result of being part of the resistance. By giving the larger historical

context, the men resist the myopic view of imprisonment as the most significant part of the politics of memory, or that the last military dictatorship was the only relevant period to examine and explain the social movements they joined. In this way, men suggest that the most significant human rights abuse of the dictatorship was the destruction of the labour and national liberation movements. Both men and women political prisoners are contesting the image of passive victims by remaining silent on torture, and choosing to speak about their resistance and solidarity. But these accounts are not gender neutral. They instead reflect how women and men locate their compromise in the past.

The focus on compromise in these former political prisoners' life histories is not only about re-politicizing them as victims of state terrorism; it is also about establishing them as steadfast activists. As explained earlier, former political prisoners have been blamed for the deaths of others and have been accused of being traitors to the revolutionary cause. While the central argument in their defence has been that it is difficult to know how anyone would act in the same circumstances, I argue that the memories of activism and imprisonment circulated by the former political prisoners increase their sense of dignity and valorisation as committed activists. However, it would not be sufficient to end there, because the memories also betray a difference between how men and women saw where they stakes were for each of them. Men, as Feinstein points out, could readily see themselves in positions of power and part of the larger historical narrative for social, cultural, and political reasons (Ortner 1972); women did not have the same access to those positions in resistance movements. By knowing and connecting themselves to history, men are showing their compromise. For women, however, the place where the stakes were the highest, where they proved themselves as activists, was in prison and during interrogation sessions. Unlike the Madres and Abuelas, the women political prisoners were not visible resisters in the post-dictatorship era, and they did not figure into the male-dominated historical narratives of labour unions and university movements. The women resisted and expressed solidarity in prison. Both narratives are crucial to our understanding of the past, and how we construct narratives at memorial museums that pay attention to the gendered aspects of violence and memory. The production of memories is not just politicized and reflective of the desires for the future, but also gendered both in the past and in the present.

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