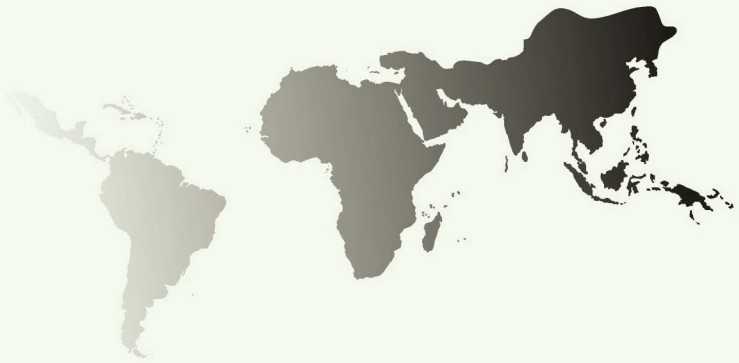


Justice through Transitions

Conflict, Peacemaking,
and Human Rights
in the Global South



César Rodríguez-Garavito
Meghan L. Morris
(Directors)


Human Rights Action Research
from the Global South (*Volume III*)

Dejusticia
Series

JUSTICE THROUGH TRANSITIONS

CONFLICT, PEACEMAKING, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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and Human Rights
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Introduction: Writing Justice through Transitions

*Meghan L. Morris
and César Rodríguez-Garavito*

In August 2015, a group of global South human rights activists and researchers gathered in Colombia for a workshop organized around the theme of transitional justice. The middle of 2015 was a crucial moment for thinking about transitional justice in and from Colombia. The government was in the midst of peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Havana, Cuba, which had been ongoing for nearly three years. A delicate ceasefire had recently broken down, leaving the government and the FARC newly embattled, even as they attempted to come together in dialogues to deescalate once again. Although it had not yet been made public, the two parties were soon to announce an agreement on the question of “transitional justice.”

This agreement focused in broad strokes on a number of key elements: the conditions for laying down arms; the sanctions and sentences that might be applied to demobilized guerrillas; the judicial organs that would determine sentencing; the actors that would be judged; and the reparations that might be available to victims. These elements covered the formal legal conditions of a transition from war to peace.

But transitions from war to peace are often not so simple, nor are they so clean. They are processes that are usually messy and long, riddled with conflicts and plagued by both history and conflicting visions of the future. This messiness is the subject of work on past and present transitional justice processes in societies that have attempted to reach a postconflict peace (see, e.g., McAllister and Nelson 2013; Nelson 2009; Rojas Pérez 2008; Theidon 2014). It is manifest not just in the fact that, as in Colombia, peace processes have setbacks and agreements are hard-won (see, e.g., Uprimny et al. 2014; Uprimny and Sánchez 2017) but also in the very

notion of peace itself—the idea that what an agreement might usher in is something opposite to the violence of war. To many citizens of societies undergoing processes of transitional justice, this idea is fundamentally contradicted by everyday realities of actors in conflict, ongoing violence, and historical, continuing dispossession. As Nelson Camilo Sánchez movingly notes in this volume, debates persist in the field of transitional justice over whether processes must (or must not) take into account issues such as social and economic rights (Haldemann and Kouassi 2014) and how the differential fracturing of societies shapes peace processes and their outcomes (Duthie and Seils 2017). These debates are grounded in the many experiences of the silences and absences of transitional justice processes, as well as their indefinite temporalities.

The chapters in this volume illustrate these and many more complexities of such processes from the perspective of young human rights advocates involved in these struggles, many with their own complicated personal connections to the search for justice. These advocates hail from countries that have divergent relationships with the notion of transitional justice, from places deeply embedded in its norms and processes, such as Argentina and Colombia, to countries undergoing various kinds of transitions on very different terms, such as Turkey and Mexico. All of the chapters, however, write the messiness of seeking justice through transitions, spanning from the personal and intimate to the national and global.

Learning to write justice through narrative was part of the collective project on which this group embarked in 2015. In his eloquent account in this volume of the group and its work together, Nelson Fredy Padilla—a longtime teacher, mentor, and crucial collaborator on this project—begins with Kafka’s statement that literature is an “expedition in search of truth.” “But is there a greater mystery than the truth?,” Kafka is reported to have inquired (Janouch 2012). Amidst the opacities and mysteries of the truth in the contexts in which these advocates live and work, we asked them to write from the richness of the people, struggles, and communities they know intimately, to write narratives grounded in the truths of their experience rather than attempt to find a truth about justice that might be universal.

Ana Daneri and Horacio Coutaz offer us two compelling accounts of Argentina more than forty years after the end of the country's military dictatorship. They each approach questions of justice and memory, asking what these might mean for victims, human rights advocates, and themselves as they revisit the violence of the dictatorship and the ongoing struggles for justice and against impunity. Both justice and memory emerge as ambivalent and fragile, as well as critically important for the personal and professional struggles they recount.

Meyatzin Velasco narrates a story of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa, Mexico, not just as a contemporary problem but as an entry point into layered histories of violence, which demonstrate continuities across time and space as history repeats itself within a single family. The chapters by Enis Köstepen and Adebayo Okeowo, alongside Velasco's, illustrate how impunity sits with places—from the family to the international sphere—and haunts them over decades. These historical forms of impunity, along with the efforts to combat it, generate a sense of simultaneous hope and disappointment, as well as deep uncertainty about the future. Contradictions between hope and disappointment also manifest themselves clearly in Hussein Baoumi's account of Egypt after the Arab Spring. He narrates the struggles over power of the moment, and how they are rooted in historical conflicts, political polarizations, and cultural notions of justice, retribution, and revolution.

Richard O'Diana and Nina Chaparro write of the many inequalities undergirding conflict through narratives of an urban indigenous community in Peru (O'Diana) and feminists in Colombia (Chaparro). Their narratives suggest that the possibilities for justice depend not just on achieving something called peace but also on working against underlying inequalities and finding unity within difference. The chapter by Isadora Vasconcelos of Brazil, alongside O'Diana's, illustrates how longstanding inequalities manifest themselves in land conflicts and historical displacements, such that people in countries purportedly at peace find themselves in cycles of violence and dispossession that are difficult to name.

Finally, Vani Sathisan narrates a story of personal transitions and how those transitions can build one's sense of justice. As

becomes clear in her chapter, justice emerges not in the abstract but through personal encounters and by keeping open one's eyes, ears, and heart.

Together, these chapters beautifully illustrate both the pain and the political possibilities that come from the inability to leave history in the past, as well as the creativity of individual and collective efforts to seek justice through transitions. They also demonstrate the beauty of speaking, working, and writing justice from the heart.

The Origin of the Book

This volume is part of a long-term project undertaken by Dejusticia as part of its international work. The project revolves around the Global Action-Research Workshop for Young Human Rights Advocates that Dejusticia organizes annually to foster connections among and train a new generation of action researchers from the global South.

For eight days, Dejusticia brings approximately twenty participants and expert instructors to Colombia for a series of interactive sessions on research, narrative writing, multimedia communication, and strategic reflection on the future of human rights. The aim is to strengthen participants' capacity to produce texts in a narrative style that are grounded in their research, such that their writing is at once rigorous and appealing to wide audiences. Participants are selected on the basis of an article proposal, which is then discussed during the workshop and subsequently developed with the mentorship of a workshop instructor over ten months, until a publishable version is achieved. The pieces developed by participants in the 2015 Global Workshop are the chapters that make up this volume—the third in the series of Global Workshop books published annually.

The workshop also offers participants the opportunity to take advantage of new technologies and translate the results of their research and activism into diverse formats, from blogs, videos, and multimedia to social network communications and academic articles. In addition to the annual volume comprising participants' texts and instructors' reflections, the workshop produces a blog in Spanish and English that features weekly entries by workshop alumni, written in the style described above. The title of the

blog—*Amphibious Accounts: Human Rights Stories from the Global South*—owes itself to the fact that action research is “amphibious” in that its practitioners move between different environments and worlds, from academic and political circles to local communities, media outlets, and state entities (Rodríguez-Garavito 2015a, 2015b). For those who are dedicated to the promotion of human rights, this often implies navigating these worlds in the global North and South alike.

Each year, the workshop is centered on a particular current issue; in 2015, the topic was transitional justice. In addition to providing coherence to the book and the group of participants, the selected topic determines the workshop site in Colombia, for the sessions are held not in a classroom or convention center but in the middle of the field, in the very communities and places that are witnessing the issue firsthand. The 2015 workshop traveled to the Caribbean region of Colombia, the site of some of the worst episodes of the Colombian armed conflict, as well as of the ongoing efforts of communities of victims to return to their lands and obtain justice, truth, and reparations from perpetrators through the transitional justice mechanisms created by the landmark 2016 peace accord between the government and the FARC.

Acknowledgments

A new and long-term initiative such as this one is more than a collective effort—it requires the support of an entire organization. This text and the ongoing commitment that it represents is an institutional effort of Dejusticia that involves, in one way or another, all of the organization’s members. For the unconditional support that Dejusticia’s staff have dedicated to this project, and for embodying the hybrid of research and action in their daily work, we extend enormous thanks to all of them.

We are particularly indebted to the colleagues and friends who were co-architects of the 2015 workshop and subsequent publication process. Camila Soto supported the development of innumerable aspects of the workshop with patience and insight, from the early days of planning through the final rounds of editing. Eliana Kaimowitz was the workshop’s indefatigable facilitator. Nelson Fredy Padilla, Eliana Kaimowitz, Krizna Gomez, and Claret Vargas served as mentors for participants’ writing processes with

grace and a keen editorial sense, and Camila Soto and Sebastián Villamizar provided invaluable feedback in the final stage of editing the chapters.

At the workshop, significant contributions were made by the instructors, some of whom also served as mentors to participants during the subsequent writing process. We therefore extend our deepest thanks to Barney Afako, Kamarulzaman Askandar, Carlos Andrés Baquero, Aura Bolívar, Doug Johnson, Daniel Marín, Nelson Fredy Padilla, Diana Rodríguez, Nelson Camilo Sánchez, Kathryn Sikkink, Andrew Songa, and Rodrigo Uprimny.

Finally, any initiative of this nature requires considerable logistical and organizational support. William Morales assumed this with an admirable mixture of efficiency, solidarity, and optimism, with the critical support of Ana María Ramírez, Sean Luna McAdams, and Carlos Andrés Baquero. Our local partners in Montes de María welcomed the group with warmth and solidarity, for which we owe special thanks to the members of the Organization of Displaced, Ethnic, and Peasant Populations, as well as 2014 Global Workshop alumna and local activist Leonarda de la Ossa.

During the publication phase, three colleagues were fundamental. Morgan Stoffregen and Sebastián Villamizar went above and beyond their duties as editors and translators, becoming unwavering allies who made continual improvements, proposed alternatives and ideas, and ensured that a polyphonic manuscript was converted into a coherent and legible whole. Elvia Sáenz, in coordinating Dejusticia's publication process, never ceased to demonstrate precision and creativity.

Both Dejusticia's international program and the workshop and book were made possible thanks to the generous and enduring support of the Ford Foundation. Martín Abregú and Louis Bickford were essential counterparts in our efforts: beyond coordinating the foundation's financial support, they served as partners who were at once sympathetic to and independent from our ideas and initiatives, for which we are enormously grateful.

We would like to conclude by recognizing perhaps the most essential players of all: the activist-researchers who authored the chapters in this volume. Both during and after the workshop, they enthusiastically supported our collective commitment to action research and took time from their busy lives to reflect, write, revise,

and write again. If the space that we created for them is helpful in their work to contribute to a more effective, horizontal, and creative human rights movement, this effort will have been worth it.

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PART ONE: STUDIES

CHAPTER 1
Memory Everywhere: Argentina's
Transitional Justice Process in
Tucumán

Ana Daneri
(Argentina)

For modern Argentines, there are certain words that take on a special meaning. Words such as the “process,” the “coup,” the “disappeared,” a “mega trial,” “Mothers,” and “Grandmothers” are emotionally charged and burdened with history. Few Argentines are unaware of the meaning of these words, and debate on their resonance continues to this day. The family members of victims of guerrilla violence want to talk about their relatives who were disappeared, and meanwhile the label “guerrilla fighters” still makes many survivors of state terrorism feel uncomfortable. In Argentina, reference to the “process” does not refer to the passage of time but is instead a euphemism for the dictatorship. A “mega trial” is not used for just any legal proceedings but specifically for a trial for crimes against humanity in the context of Argentina’s transitional justice process. The “Mothers” and “Grandmothers” are not any mother or grandmother; they are the “crazy women wearing white headscarves” who filled the country’s city squares in search of their children and grandchildren, and who changed history.

In 2013, the mega trial known as *Jefatura II-Arsenales II*—a trial for which human rights organizations had been advocating since democracy took hold in the 1980s—was held in the province of Tucumán, in northern Argentina. A judgment was delivered on December 13, 2013, resulting in thirty-seven convictions out of a total of forty-one accused. Four defendants were acquitted. However, of these thirty-seven convictions, only four were sentenced to life in prison, despite the fact that the prosecution had requested life imprisonment for thirty-three defendants. Over the course of the trial, more than 300 witnesses testified, identifying ten locations where clandestine detention centers and killing sites

had operated, as well as clandestine burial sites. Expert testimony revealed the existence of mass graves in the Vargas well, the Miguel de Azcuénaga weapons arsenal, and the cemetery of the town of Tacanas. The bodies of seven of the two hundred fifteen victims whose cases were being tried were also identified. This was the first trial in the province in which the perpetrators were convicted as perpetrators of sexual crimes against women who were held captive in the Jefatura and Arsenales clandestine detention centers.

Some of the hearings were conducted outside of the courtroom in order to identify the sites where crimes had been committed. For these outdoor hearings, we traveled to various rural towns in Tucumán Province, such as Santa Lucía, Monteros, Famaillá, and Caspichango. I was a volunteer for the communications team of the nongovernmental organization ANDHES (Human Rights and Social Studies Lawyers from Northwestern Argentina)—which was representing five victims in that mega trial—and brought my video camera with me to each on-site visit.

We arrived in Santa Lucía around 10 a.m. The judges were already at the main traffic circle, and members of human rights organizations were beginning to hang flags with the faces of the disappeared. One woman with a sign displaying the face of her loved one shouted into the crowd, “Let justice be done for all.”

This was to be the fourth on-site visit of the trial. Here, in this public space, the judges, private prosecutors, and defense counsel, with the assistance of the National Gendarmerie, gathered together so that victims and witnesses could acknowledge the scene where the crimes had been committed.

It was my first time in that town in southern Tucumán, a town whose life had previously revolved around the sugar mill. Tucumán is a province in northern Argentina, surrounded by mountains and dedicated largely to the cultivation of citrus fruits and sugarcane. The province has always played a leading role in Argentinean politics, from the time of the country’s declaration of independence to the military dictatorship. As a northerner, I grew up hearing stories about the mill, such as the legend of the Family Dog. A monstrous, demonic animal that devours workers, its presence is announced by the clanking of its broken chains. It is a dog that is merciless to rebellious workers and that makes them

vanish without a trace—a dog accused of having made many of the town's sugar mill workers disappear during the military dictatorship.

This small town has about 300 houses, one school, a police station, and, of course, a church. Mountains loom on the horizon with their intensely green tropical forest. Santa Lucía seems frozen in time, with its old houses, dirt streets, and open countryside. And in the background, like a silent watcher, stands the smokestack of the mill, a full fifty years after its closing.

Santa Lucía seems to be just another rural town on the map, a peaceful haven from the hustle and bustle of the city. For residents of Tucumán Province, however, Santa Lucía has a wholly different meaning. In 1974, the Ramón Rosa Jiménez Mountain Company of the People's Revolutionary Army established its La Dulce and El Niño Perdido camps in the mountains bordering the town. On February 9, 1975, the Argentinean military launched Operation Independence, which involved the arrival of 3,000 soldiers who soon turned the entire town into a military base and imposed a curfew. The bases were subordinate to the 19th Regiment at Tucumán and the 28th Regiment at Tartagal of the Army's III Corps. The mill, previously a symbol of work and prosperity, became a symbol of terror.

Back to the present. The traffic circle was churning with members of the court and human rights organizations. The town where “nothing ever happens” was filled with people. Many onlookers joined us—and before we realized what had happened, we became a crowd.

The presiding judge, Carlos Jiménez Montilla, began the hearing. Without a microphone, he had no choice but to raise his voice. Everyone present was standing up, making it difficult to see what was happening. A witness was called on to testify. Julio Antonio Ahumada made his way past the crowd in order to stand in the center. He said that we must go to the mill, a mere two blocks away, so we set off.

We were far from the comfort of air-conditioned courtrooms, and the early heat of September contrasted with the formal, heavy suits and shoes of the judges and attorneys. Willing to step out of its comfort zone in order to restore public confidence in the courts, the judiciary seemed to be taking its role seriously.

We arrived at the mill's entrance. A street opened up on one side; a thick wall surrounded the factory. I filmed the hearing with my video camera, climbing a wall to secure a better vantage point. As a human rights activist working for a nongovernmental organization—but also as a relative of a disappeared person—recording this historic moment seemed vital to me.

Another witness, Domingo Antonio Jeréz, a lanky and dark-complected campesino, pointed to the perimeter of the former military base that had occupied the mill's territory. Jeréz wore brown coveralls, as if he had just come from a construction site. From the top of the wall, I could see the whole circle, but there was precious little space in the center where the witness was speaking.

He pointed to a shed, noting that it had been the torture room. One of the private prosecutors asked if there was a way to get from the mill to the shed. Of course, explained the witness. The torture room, he said, was below ground level and was connected to the mill through tunnels. He said they called it "the basement" and that they used to hear screams coming from there. We visited the shed, but we could not find any entrance to an underground level. However, one of the witnesses told the judges to jump on the floor in one corner, which revealed it to be hollow inside. Further access was blocked by a concrete floor, but one girl admitted that she knew of another passage but did not want to show it at that moment, in front of everyone, out of fear. On the walls of the shed were inscriptions about truth, justice, and memory.

Someone else raised their hand. "They had me too," he said. "My brother too," said another. The judge ordered their depositions to be taken and recited the oath. Everyone wanted to make a comment, though. In a hearing on the streets, it is more difficult to differentiate the prosecution from the defense; hierarchies between judges, witnesses, and relatives become blurred. The courtroom imposes much clearer parameters for trials: people are seated, a wooden perimeter separates the witness from the audience, the two sides sit on opposite sides of the courtroom, and the judges sit at the front at a higher level than everyone else. No one would ever dare interrupt a witness or say anything while the attorneys ask questions. But hearings in the streets are different. No one knows who is who in the crowd.

One of the private prosecutors called on a historian, Lucía Mercado, to testify about the context. There were too many people, and all were standing, doing their best to see and hear. The historian decided to stay where she was, a bit removed from the center. She held a newspaper in her hand to shield her face from the sun. She began her narrative, only to be interrupted. “You called my father a ‘guerrilla fighter’ in your book, but he wasn’t a ‘guerrilla fighter!’” a man yelled. Shouting began and two attorneys exchanged insults, while the judge tried to establish order. Clearing the courtroom was not a possibility, but he did threaten to adjourn the hearing.

What did the son of the “guerrilla fighter” hope to vindicate? Behind the term “guerrilla fighter” lies a complex tangle of issues. For that son, defending his father from this much-maligned label represented the opportunity to rewrite history and exonerate the memory of his loved one, casting off a narrative that had long been used to justify state terrorism. For decades, the military narrative in Argentina known as the “theory of the two demons” tried to equate the crimes of the state with those of guerrilla groups, arguing that a “dirty war” had taken place in which no one’s hands were clean. The solution proposed in *Never Again*, the famous report of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons—whose president was writer Ernesto Sábato—spoke of “innocent” victims at a time when it was more important to prove that clandestine detention centers existed and that the state disappeared, tortured, and killed Argentines than it was to analyze the reasons that the state may have had to “eliminate” certain sectors of society.

Everyone interrupts the son, though, each convinced of their right to demand that the courts investigate. Sharing what had happened to them allowed them to claim active roles in history. The state was no longer the all-powerful imparter of justice but rather a servant that received claims and was obliged to address them. Justice with a capital J no longer meant merely sending a repressor to prison; it now seemed to be bound up with the concept of Truth. It meant rewriting history, including the forgotten histories, and endowing the narration of the past with new meaning by exalting one’s own voice and not the voice of the state.

As I talked to my colleagues after the hearing in Santa Lucía, they told me how difficult it was in general to find witnesses willing to testify in the courtroom. People were suspicious, distrustful,

and afraid to speak out. But when justice came to them by literally walking down their streets, that seemed to change. This made me think about the effect of Tucumán's transitional justice trials. With nearly 147 verdicts reached in the country so far and 622 people found guilty, what has been the true impact of these trials in towns like Santa Lucía?

The balance of the repression in Tucumán was 200 political prisoners, 225 assassinated, and at least 660 disappeared. Between 70% and 80% of the recorded disappearances occurred after July 1976, when the guerrillas had essentially ceased to exist. Given the high proportion of the rural population affected by the repression, together with the level of cruelty and the length of time of the repression in the province, it is estimated that the total number of kidnapped persons who passed through various clandestine detention centers is much higher, between 2,000 and 3,000 people. Some of them were released and are survivors. The lack of clear data on victims of state terrorism is due to the destruction and concealment of information by those responsible (Novaro and Palermo 2003).

The report of Tucumán Province's bicameral commission on human rights violations, formed in 1984, identified thirty-six such detention centers that had operated in the province: seventeen in police stations (for example, at the police headquarters, located in the capital city), two in penitentiaries (Villa Urquiza jail and Concepción prison), six in state educational institutions (such as the Diego de Rojas School, located in the town of Famaillá, and the School of Physical Education in the capital), eight in military stations (for example, the Miguel de Azcuénaga weapons arsenal), and at least three in private offices (El Motel) and the facilities of the province's sugar mills (among them the so-called Fronterita tenement, which operated in the private facilities of the mill bearing the same name, and the former Nueva Bavaria mill). According to the same report, 68% of the 507 recorded kidnappings in the province during the dictatorship occurred in 1976 and 1977. During those two years, Antonio Domingo Bussi was commander of the Fifth Infantry Brigade and the de facto military governor of Tucumán, enjoying a unique concentration of power in the country (Comisión Bicameral Investigadora de las Violaciones de Derechos Humanos en la Provincia de Tucumán 1991).

Most records of the disappearances indicate that these disappearances started after the military coup in 1976. However, as mentioned earlier, in February 1975, military forces entered rural areas to fight guerrilla groups in Operation Independence and to establish strict control over the population. They obtained information through kidnappings and torture and treated the entire population as their target, considering local residents as accomplices of the guerrillas. If we take the number of victims cited in the Attorney General's Office request for the trial of Operation Independence (scheduled to begin in May 2016), the operation's victims represent 30% of the total number of victims from the province. This contrasts sharply with the situation of Buenos Aires, where victims from 1975 represent only 8% of the total number of victims from the capital city. This contrast stems from the fact that Tucumán underwent a different process from the rest of the country. The armed forces took the city of Famaillá as the center of their operations area until 1976, when they relocated to the city following the military coup.

For months, I visited these towns and listened to many of the victims who had lived through the repression of the 1970s. The project that took me to those towns was the collection of testimonies for the creation of an oral archive that would provide an account of the military dictatorship, as well as of the struggles of trade unions, workers, and militant groups, which were very strong in those years. This oral archive is supplemented by a document search system for the archive that will hopefully be of use to future researchers interested in the subject.

I returned to Santa Lucía convinced of the importance of the trials and their contribution to memory and historical reparation. My memory of the mega trial remained vivid: of judges walking the streets and of people daring to interrupt them to tell their personal story. It led me to imagine that the lives of Santa Lucía residents had changed drastically with the arrival of justice in 2013. However, as I walked through the town's streets and interviewed residents, those beliefs crumbled. Santa Lucía had no memory of the judges who had come to its streets only two years before, but it did have a deep memory of the repression. While the dictatorship occurred forty years ago and the mill closed fifty years ago, for Santa Lucía it was as if they had happened yesterday.

Roberto Balcarce, María Segura, and Papi Coronel vividly remember the military's arrival in Santa Lucía in 1975. The hours drifted away as we talked about that time, the worst of their lives. Graciela Cortés, one of the women I interviewed in Famaillá, took me to María's house. There, I was welcomed with *café con leche* and homemade bread.

Before each recording, I would meet with my interview subjects to get to know them and better prepare the questions according to their life stories. These chats were typically one-on-one in order to foster a climate of trust and intimacy, as well as to help relax them before the camera started rolling. But at this particular meeting, there were several people present: María, her husband, Graciela, Papi, and Roberto. I told them about the project and what the interview would be like—and, as always happens, they asked if I was working for the government. The tremendous expectations about reparations and compensation for those who suffered kidnapping, torture, and illegal detention were always at the center of attention. Most of the people I interviewed were of limited means, with little or no formal education. The majority held low-paying informal jobs.

The conversation moved along naturally. I listened quietly and requested their permission to take notes. Papi was the most talkative of the group and the first to tell me his story. All had been kidnapped and had survived state terrorism. María frequently became teary eyed. She then showed me a picture in which a beautiful girl with black hair danced with a young man. "That was my brother," she said. Showing me another picture, she said, "Here we are in the GRAFA."¹ In this photo was an enormous table covered with sandwiches and plastic cups, surrounded by people who were smiling, eating, having fun.

GRAFANOR was a familiar name to me: a textile company that many say was an accomplice of the dictatorship, denouncing union workers and even lending vehicles to transport the kidnapped. María worked there as a seamstress during the years of the dictatorship until 1982, when she was kidnapped. She was eight months pregnant at the time. It was around 5 a.m. and she was walking to a bus stop with a coworker when a military

1 Interview with María Segura, October 2015, Santa Lucía.

assault vehicle stopped them and asked for their IDs. In a moment of confusion, María handed them her bus card. “You think you’re so clever?” yelled the soldier. As she desperately tried to explain that it had been a mistake, she was struck in the stomach with a rifle butt, which took her breath away. She fell to her knees as they continued to beat her. “Do you know what it’s like to have them kill your child?” she said between sobs. It was impossible to answer her question because it has no answer. I could not know how it feels to have my child killed, nor should anyone have to know that.

I returned to my house with the sensation of having glimpsed but a small hint of the horror. These people’s past would be enormously difficult to counterbalance with judicial actions. There can be no adequate amends for someone whose child was ripped from her womb; justice will always be found wanting. María is one of hundreds of pregnant women who were kidnapped. The dictatorship’s repression included one of the most perverse actions imaginable: the theft and kidnapping of babies. Thanks to the tireless work of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, today 119 men and women have regained their true identity.

As I went down the highway connecting the southern towns with the capital city of Tucumán, the kilometers stretched out into years. It crossed my mind that Santa Lucía was a ghost town inhabited by dead people who walked around without knowing that we were now in our thirty-third year of democracy. First the closing of the mill and then the nightmare that was the dictatorship bore down on them, taking almost everything they had. In my mind, I heard Papi Coronel. He had been only twelve years old when they closed the Santa Lucía mill, but he remembered it well. His father was a factory worker, and as a boy Papi would visit him and play among the bags of sugar. The musky smell, the heat given off by the boilers, the bell calling employees to work. Fifty years had passed since the bells last rang in the town, but Papi recalled that time as the best years of Santa Lucía.

In 1966—the first year of a previous military dictatorship, that of Juan Carlos Onganía—eleven sugar mills in Tucumán Province were closed. This had an irreparable impact on the regional economy and an inestimably high cost for the livelihood of towns such as Santa Lucía, which depended exclusively on the mill.

"The grass in the town grew higher and higher, garbage piled up, and houses were abandoned. It looked like a ghost town," Papi explained.² Approximately 200,000 people are estimated to have been forced to leave the province in search of work. Papi recalled that his father kept the money from his severance package and decided to stay. When their food started running low, they were forced to accept meals at the small soup kitchens that had been set up in the town. The closing of the mills was tinder for the fragile political climate, and the country's unemployment, hunger, and social struggles set the conditions for the 1976 dictatorship.

Memories from the Provinces: Between Struggle and Pain

After listening to hundreds of hours of testimony from victims of the dictatorship, I had to wonder if the mechanisms of delayed justice and the processes of memory restoration have achieved their goal of delivering justice and reparation. My initial impression of Santa Lucía contrasted with the heartfelt accounts of victims.

When I interviewed survivors and militants of the dictatorship in 2015, I perceived a vast difference in testimonies. On one side were those of people from the capital city of Tucumán Province and who had been engaged in active militancy either before, during, or after the dictatorship; on the other side were the testimonies of people from other towns in the province. I believe that this difference is due to two factors. First, most residents of the capital city belonged or still belong to a community organization, which gives a transcendent meaning to suffering. This meaning is greater than the individual, allowing for emotional and moral forbearance of hardships. Second, the reparation processes have been more extensive in capital cities. In many cases, the victims themselves have initiated these processes, in which the first step involved meeting with others who shared their pain. Accordingly—sometimes in parallel and largely in response to calls from human rights organizations—the state has responded more quickly to those living in these cities (first in Buenos Aires and then in the capital cities of the provinces). Due to the clustering of the state's presence in these

2 Interview with Papi Coronel, November 2015, Santa Lucía.

cities, victims living in more remote areas have been rendered invisible and marginalized from the collective memory processes.

The dictatorship, however, was not so discriminating. The fundamental goal of the state's terrorism was to destroy the social fabric, sow fear and distrust among neighbors, and cut off any possibility of constructive social bonds. Unlike the processes of justice and reparation, this plan was implemented in rural areas and cities alike. Operation Independence is a clear example of this. In 1975, in the middle of a democratic government, military troops occupied the outlying towns of Tucumán Province and spread out among the civilians. These soldiers formed a parallel army in collusion with the police force to kidnap and torture in search of information. The curfew and extreme control effectively isolated local residents. There were daily surprise raids on people's houses and inspections of even the amount of food they had, owing to the military's suspicion that anyone could be an accomplice to the guerrillas. Merely selling a slice of bread to a "subversive" was to be seen as a "collaborator."

The psychological warfare that the military itself admitted to consisted of censorship of the press and clandestine actions of persecution, torture, and assassinations. Such actions simultaneously created the illusion of order and generated terror. Many of these discourses have persisted in the collective imagination to this day. The vindication of the dictatorship's crimes through the phrase "They must have done something" — the infamous words uttered by the president of the military junta, Jorge Rafael Videla, to justify the arrests of apparently innocent people — is still upheld by broad sectors of society. In the face of this panorama, the question is, what is needed to make a memory process truly effective?

When we think of justice in the abstract, we may forget that the overturning of the amnesty laws that had been impeding the prosecution of crimes was, while part of state policy, largely the result of the efforts of human rights organizations. Thus, for a large majority, these trials represent a hard-fought victory. Nevertheless, this is not the reality in the outlying areas of Tucumán. There, justice has yet to come for many, and economic oppression (due largely to the legacy of the dictatorship's economic policies and the labor discrimination suffered after kidnappings) has recently motivated survivors to organize under the reparations laws.