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# On the Dangers of Empathy with the Military in Argentina

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## ABSTRACT

Empathy is an intersubjective process that transpires during ethnographic fieldwork. This article deals with the ethics of empathy during fieldwork with Argentinian military officers indicted for crimes against humanity. Failed attempts of empathy were not the consequences of the ethnographer's inner shortcomings to bridge existential differences between self and other(s) or proffered resistance on behalf of the military officers but essentially arose out a desire of otherness with the indicted military. In a social context where psychic content is a profoundly social matter, feelings and thoughts that stick through intense engagements. Otherness, then, is not an existential fact but arises from everyday warnings and social practices of avoidance. By introducing the notion of 'sticky empathy', I investigate in this article how the daily engagements with indicted military officers defy the fundamental idea that an ethnographer is different or separated from its object of study.

**KEYWORDS** Military; crimes against humanity; empathy; otherness; Argentina

In 2009, I travelled to Buenos Aires on a first field trip to study the transitional justice practices concerning the military dictatorship (1976–1983) in Argentina from the perspective of both the victim and the perpetrator. During that period, thousands of Argentinians were captured, tortured, assassinated, or disappeared. These crimes were carried out clandestinely in small and autonomous task forces that were under the command of the military authorities and consisted of military officers, and to a lesser extent, police officers and civilian intelligence agents. In 2005, the Supreme Court in Argentina annulled two amnesty laws that had protected members of the armed forces for two decades. Once more, hundreds of military personnel faced prosecution for crimes against humanity, such as torture, child appropriation, and the infamous death flights above the South Atlantic. The courtrooms were my initial focus. During the legal proceedings, victims repeatedly demanded truth and a sign of remorse from the indicted officers. The indicted officers, in return, kept silent or emphasised their

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innocence. I became intrigued with the contrasting gamut of feelings.<sup>1</sup> Why have they been silent for so many years? Why were these men incapable of expressing remorse? The decision to study feelings, including those of the accused military – in this post-conflict field brought various ethical and epistemological challenges to the project.

After a few weeks in the field, a military officer whose brother was on trial for crimes against humanity (namely, assassination and torture) brought me to military prison to meet his brother and the other inmates. The day before my appointment, the brothers convinced me that by introducing me ‘as a friend of the family’ it circumvented the difficult bureaucratic procedures that typically took months to surmount before access to the prison was granted. I remember thinking that there was a risk of losing the opportunity to get in touch with various indicted military officers, who could provide important insights on their experiences of transitional justice if a delay occurred. This realisation gave me pause only briefly before agreeing on paper to ‘become a friend’ of the indicted military officer and his family. The next day I spent a whole day in military prison.

Casual greetings in Argentina include the exchange of a kiss on the cheek, even with strangers. Shall I greet the indicted officers, with a kiss, or not? Shall I eat with them, or not? Shall I look them in the eyes, or not? Shall I drink *yerba mate* (herbal tea) with them, or not? The latter is an intimate ritual wherein a group of people share herbal tea in a cup sipped from a single metal drinking straw. Drinking *yerba mate* has been defined as ‘the national symbol of friendship’, which is ‘highly cherished for the intimacy it brings when people consume it together in *rondas* (circles of friendship)’ (Bowles 2015: 7). For many people I cared for and respected in the field, the daily human exchanges with the indicted military officers were very problematic, and even dirty and immoral.

While trying to get a sense of the lives of military officers indicted for crimes against humanity, questions about epistemology and ethics around the intense engagements between military and civilians became inevitable.<sup>2</sup> How does empathy manifest (or not) in the field? How does a researcher avoid the risk of compassion with the indicted military officers, or worse, a justification of their crimes while examining their lives? For my Argentinian friends and colleagues, the epistemological dilemmas on the limits of feeling seemed irrelevant because the transformative power of otherness through intense engagement with the military was at stake.

Temporarily ‘feeling into’ someone – or undergoing the process of empathy – may result in understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and experiencing the feelings of another. This is not an individual endeavour. Empathy, akin to critique, as Butler puts it (2009), is being moved into a socio-political field to inquire and question (see this introduction). Empathy, then, is a mutual response to bridge differences but carries the risk of decontextualization of moral problems (Boler 1997: 254–255). I am aware that empathy with perpetrators of crimes against humanity is a highly controversial matter. For almost a year I shared meals, kisses, laughter and the Argentinian treat of *yerba mate* with a dozen indicted officers, many of whom my Argentinian friends and interlocutors in the human rights movement consider evil. However, a need to understand the world can sometimes blind one from appreciating the dangers of empathy.

Time and again, Argentinian friends and colleagues criticised the potential risk of empathy for the military. Thus, their desire for otherness and keeping the military at bay manifested in multiple warnings and practices of avoidance. For them, empathy could not fail because it was not intrinsically partial or fleeting as a result of basic inner shortcomings. They shared a different understanding of being, in which feelings and thoughts are deeply social matters (Van Roekel 2018). Cognitive matter, such as feelings, opinions, beliefs, and judgments, always sticks by means of intense engagements. Otherness, for that matter, can only be sustained by avoiding contact and mixture. My inability to bridge differences (or otherness) with the military was therefore not arising from the intrinsic origin of being human, but rather from the outcome for a desire for otherness that I shared with many people. By introducing the notion of ‘sticky empathy’, I reflect in this article how the daily engagements with indicted military officers, in combination with the everyday warnings and social practices of avoidance by others in the field, challenge the belief that an ethnographer can maintain a detached relationship with his or her object of study.

## Failed Empathy

The notion of empathy originated in the twentieth century from the Ancient Greek word *empathia*: *em-* ‘in’ + *pathos* ‘feeling’, which is translated as ‘feeling in’ (Stevenson 2010: 574). It means having an ability to understand and share the feelings of someone else. Empathy would be a faithful intent, shifting between nearness and distance, to experience the world from another position. Empathy is not the same as sympathy, which is feeling pity for somebody else’s misfortune (Stevenson 2010). If empathy allows an understanding of other people’s feelings, it should not come as a surprise that many anthropologists have employed empathy in fieldwork (O’Reilly 2012: 33). Undeniably, meaningful information often resides neither in words nor in objects and can only be grasped through ‘empathic processes’ or ‘acts of resonance’ (Wikan 1990: 269; Throop 2010: 772–773).

The role of empathy in ethnography has mainly been a positive one, providing valuable insights into how people experience the world in which they live. There is, however, an emerging awareness of the limits, misunderstandings, and the misleading sides of empathy. Empathy, for instance, can be an active mode of deception with violent purposes (Bubandt & Willerslev 2015: 6). The limits of empathy generally centre on the fallibility and limitations of empathic knowledge in accurately gaining an understanding of other human beings (Hollan & Throop 2011: 5). Empathy is as much about one’s efforts at understanding another as it is about another’s desire to be understood (Throop 2010: 775). When we think to be in a ‘moment of empathic attunement’ we temporarily reduce the irreducibility of another’s self-experience to the self-sameness of one’s being (Throop 2010: 776–777). Consequently, close attention to the vicissitudes of empathy can disclose as much about the possibilities and limits of self-understanding as it can about capacities and incapacities to connect with and understand others (Throop 2010: 780). Empathy would, therefore, be always fleeting, partial, and limited and is as much about one’s self as the other.

It is important to reiterate that ethnographers share a deep-seated belief that empathy is not a field procedure that one implements (or not). Various field practices would only enhance the impetus of empathy: at some moments and with some people, empathic understanding takes place, and at other moments it does not. Empathic attunement can be quite dissimilar. I detected great variations in empathy with the people I worked with in Argentina. Gender, age, professional background, and ideological stances certainly influenced the empathic variations. Overall, I would say that ‘feeling into’ the lives of the indicted military was much more difficult than with the general population. Nevertheless, sometimes it did happen. For example, when I questioned one military officer as to why the armed forces deliberately ‘disappeared’ their opponents by throwing them drugged – yet still alive – out of airplanes above the South Atlantic, he could not give an answer. I could ‘feel into’ his profound discomfort, which he expressed in stutter and then silence (Van Roekel forthcoming). Time and again, I have reflected on the epistemological uncertainties of this empathic attunement.

Another epistemological concern is that those we try to understand do not always appreciate our empathy. ‘The subject one is seeking to empathise with may already have you in their sights, may already consider your position as part of the epistemological terrain rendered problematic by their own experience’ (Hemmings 2012: 153). The implicit expectation of reciprocity central to empathy ignores historical and political reasons, while others may not be able or may not wish to reciprocate (or to be empathised with). Empathy always arises within networks of power and interest. We must, therefore, always ask who benefits and what is gained by empathy? Empathy, then, is rather failed empathy (Hemmings 2012: 152). Failed empathy can equally be deceptive and unconsciously obstruct anthropological understanding. Ethnographic seduction reveals that, while studying violence, ethnographers often mistake seduction with empathy through which ‘we believe ourselves to see the world through the eyes of our interlocutors. Instead, these eyes are looking away from that which we think they are seeing’ (Robben 2012 [1995]: 178). Empathy is hindered when there is an awareness of the protagonism by the interlocutors of the violence under study. These unconscious and conscious practices during fieldwork with victims and perpetrators move the ethnographer away from the subject of his or her understanding without him or her being aware of this shift.

Although psychological limitations, ignored resistance, and deceptive strategies limit one’s ability to ‘feel into’ another, empathy is equally imbricated in the moral perils and political constraints established by other people in the field. Empathy creates a socio-political field of otherness and understanding that not only arises from engagement between the researcher and the individual subject but substantially stems from others in the field, who contest empathy with otherness. Even the potential of empathy creates moral bonds with people and boundaries with others; and is, therefore, implicated in the creation and maintenance of social structures and social identities (Hollan & Throop 2011: 12–13). Empathy is a local inflected political phenomenon, and we should always recognise ourselves as implicated in these social forces (Boler 1997: 257; Bubandt 2009: 565–566). Yet, merely focusing on epistemology carries the risk of ignoring (unintended) dangers that come with empathy (successful or not).

Failed empathy not only obstructs understanding, it also endorses one's self-perception that is different or other from the object of study. This ethnographic desire for otherness exponentially grows when studying deviant subjects.

Moral aversion to empathy with deviant others arises from anxieties about the potential of becoming or already being contaminated by what is immoral (Shoshan 2016: 9). An ethnographer interested in deviant others is logically imbricated in the potential of becoming contaminated with what is immoral in the context of inquiry. One could opt to deliberately not foreground empathy as a mode for anthropological understanding in order to avoid the transformative dangers of compassion and justification (Shoshan 2016: 22). But ignoring empathy as a mode for anthropological understanding and part of the ethnographic practice is equally problematic. We ought to acknowledge the 'sticky' substance of empathy arising from intersubjective engagements in the field.

### Defying Otherness

Western faith in empathy is mainly established on a binary of self/other, whereas empathy would intrinsically require the other's difference in order to consume it as sameness (Boler 1997: 258). This paradox of empathy is thus grounded in similarity with alterity. Many of my Argentinian friends and interlocutors, however, shared a different understanding of the workings of empathy. Empathy was not a temporal identification with the other while insisting on one's otherness. Being empathic (even the potential of it) was a transformative process that involved becoming contaminated with thoughts and feelings that broke down boundaries and identities. The ability to step into someone else's shoes and then step out again (Freud in Bubandt & Willerslev 2015: 7) was basically unimaginable for my Argentinian friends and interlocutors. This 'collapse' was even morally desirable among the victims of state repression and people loyal to their suffering (Van Roekel 2018). Equally, they thought it was inconceivable that 'feeling into' an indicted officer had little or nothing to do with opinions, views, and beliefs (Bubandt & Willerslev 2015: 7). Otherness was only upheld by avoiding contact, contamination, and mixture. Empathy with the indicted military officers did not magically evaporate nor was a separate self-perception restored; each empathic encounter, including viewpoints and beliefs, stuck – and was transformative.

Mary Douglas (2003) also uses stickiness to defy the idea of basic categories and, as such, challenges the boundary between self and otherly matter in an existential sense. Classifications and separations only create imaginary stable systems on the chaotic experience of life. She uses Sartre's notion of the viscosity of honey and one's fingers to exemplify how a state – half way between categories – arises: 'long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness' (Douglas 2003: 47). Honey's stickiness, as it goes, is a trap, and its viscosity attacks the boundaries between self and the material. 'I remain a solid, but to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity' (Douglas 2003). In other words, honey and fingers become a potential one. I think the latter is important to make sense of post-conflict realities and the fear over contamination and mixture. Collective violence

often causes ruptures in entire communities, including families, imposing a fragile system on to who is friend and who is foe. Argentina's past is no exception. Accountability and blame surface as potential within virtually every Argentinian family. Empathic encounters with both the victims and the perpetrators threaten this fragile social order.

We do not passively undergo these categorical breakdowns or a state half way between categories. We often reduce, control, transform, or avoid the ambiguities of disorderly events or persons that arise out of engagement with otherly matter (Douglas 1966: 39–40). Argentinian friends and colleagues allocated my recurrent engagements with the military to the scientific understanding of violence and transitional justice; or, treated with tolerance as the creative production of a short story. The artistic approach allowed the incorporation of empathy with the military and the transformative power of such engagements into a shared and stable realm. My meetings were also treated by avoidance to reaffirm categories, first in terms of laughter and jokes, and finally through conflict that marked a critical transformation in an appreciated field relation.

The multiple ways people defy categorical breakdowns or a state half way between categories in their everyday lives enrich our experience of the unfamiliar: it teaches us something about one's self and the properties of matter and the interrelation between self and other things (Douglas 2003: 47). I learned that it is a misconception that I (or anybody) could step into someone else's shoes and then step out again without the transformative consequences in terms of positioning, reasoning, and feeling. Failed empathy (and otherness for that matter) with the indicted military arose from the desire to be different than a fundamental feature of being human.

### **Don't Look Them in the Eyes**

Her body quickly shivered, and her eyes expressed anxiety. I had just told Clara Villalba that I would be meeting the now late junta leader ex-general Jorge Rafael Videla in military prison the next morning.<sup>3</sup> I had called Clara earlier that day because I had been worried by not knowing how to prepare for my first visit with a dozen indicted military officers the next morning. We arranged to meet at night, have dinner, and talk about it in detail. Our preparative talks were always insightful. Clara and I had met previously through a mutual friend, who had lived in exile for many years after fleeing the Argentinian repression of the late seventies. Clara had no direct experience with the state atrocities, yet always expressed clear alignment with the victims and the human rights movement in Argentina; however, Clara became an important interlocutor, whose opinions and advice I value highly.

After her initial shiver, Clara responded quickly, and advised: 'Just don't look them in the eyes'. She referenced her work as a psychologist treating severely disturbed patients with whom she also avoided eye contact to maintain a manageable working relation. The comparisons to her therapeutic work with deviant others made the meetings in prison less ambiguous for me. It appeared to be logical advice; and, I was – to a certain extent – aware that the eyes represent the proverbial gateway of people's inner

feelings. The next morning, I did, however, *cruzar miradas* (chance glances) with some of the indicted officers. After sharing a hearty lunch with some of them, I went briefly to the restroom. It was the only time I was alone in prison that day. Watchfully, I looked into the cracked mirror and whispered: ‘do not forget that these officers were the protagonists of the atrocities of the truth commission report *Nunca Más* (Never Again)’. It felt as if I was warning myself not to become too entangled in a ‘wicked military world’. I did not consider Clara’s warnings and my own as a hindrance to my engagement with the indicted military. Still sure that I could be empathic and remain at a distance, I believed that the daily engagements in the prison would only enable constructing a workable relationship with the indicted officers, but would keep (illusionary) desired boundaries intact. I was confident that I would not flow into a ‘pool of stickiness’.

Clara’s caveat against eye contact is key to the implicit understanding of the biology of empathy. The briefest eye contact would heighten empathic feelings, giving people a sense of being drawn together (Lavine 2016). Lack of empathy is grounded in the structural avoidance of eye contact, as research on people with mental disorders, like autism, tries to substantiate (Dadds *et al.* 2012). Clara’s advice helped me to avoid further visual engagement. However, the action of deliberately not looking into the indicted military officers’ eyes could also have produced diminished empathic responses. There is no way to evaluate if, in the absence of such social warnings like avoiding eye contact, the impetus of empathising with the military would have altered substantially. But this is not what interests me. Pondering the dynamic between avoiding eye contact and the epistemology of empathy carries the risk of ignoring a wider field of inquiry, in which empathy arises (or not). Why did Clara advise me to avoid eye contact and on what grounds? What was Clara trying to tell me? Being empathic (or not) is being drawn together into a socio-political field of inquiring and questioning.

## Videla’s Kiss

After several visits in military prison I had become somewhat familiar with exchanging kisses, engaging in difficult ideological conversations about the violence and the trials for crimes against humanity, drinking *yerba mate*, and laughing with the indicted military officers, yet my field notes about the prison visits also expressed worries about these exchanges:

I exchanged kisses with both of them, and again I feel no nausea whatsoever, it was maybe a bit uncomfortable [...]. Every time I come [to military prison] I find it less difficult to kiss and shake hands. I really have to think about these things when I am back [in the Netherlands]. Am I humanizing them more and more? (Field notes, May 2010).

Late May 2010, upon returning from another visit to military prison, I met a Dutch friend who was visiting Buenos Aires. We were at a social gathering with Argentinian friends in a local bar in the city centre. I felt somewhat unclean – and not only due to the long trip back from prison. The now late head of the military junta ex-general Jorge Rafael Videla, indicted for crimes against humanity, and his wife had kissed me ‘hello’ when we met. We had also laughed uncomfortably about a comic, glued on



his cell wall (Van Roekel 2016: 70). The sense of having transgressed had exacerbated. I whispered the casual, nonetheless uncomfortable, psychological contact with the indicted general to my Dutch friend – not wanting other Argentinian friends to overhear our conversation. My friend suppressed a shrieking sound while mimicking an ugly face to express her disgust, which both instantly consolidated my concern of being dirty. I became even more worried with what my Argentinian friends would think.

That same week I met Luis Noguiera, a good friend and critical interlocutor in Buenos Aires, for a late-night dinner. Our dinners were always comforting rituals in which my engagements with the military and my feelings were mutually scrutinised analysed in light of my fieldwork, and also because such shared self-analyses are commonplace for many urban Argentinians (Van Roekel 2018). That night I told Luis what had happened in the military prison that week, including the incident with Videla.<sup>4</sup> He immediately reasoned that I should back off from the military. He concluded that I had already done enough research on the indicted military officers. Studying anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires had allowed Luis to be more lenient with evaluating my proximate engagements with the military. Yet, this time I had apparently reached a limit by exchanging kisses and laughter with the former head of the junta and his wife. Although I agreed that both the kiss and the laughter also made me feel very uncomfortable, I firmly disagreed with his request that I should back off the military. I replied that I had only started to grapple with their experiences of violence and transitional justice. Almost obsessively, Luis began scribbling on the paper tablecloth in front of us about the details of the kiss and the discussion that followed. Luis is a novelist and I, still unaware what the scribbles meant, witnessed the creation of a new short story.

My field notes about that night inferred that, if I wanted to understand how the indicted military felt and why they were incapable of showing remorse, I should be as close as possible to them for as long as possible. While rereading my field notes, perhaps I was mainly convincing myself of the scientific need of the recurrent proximate engagements with the military, including Videla, and my emerging easiness in dealing with it. Months passed, and Luis and I frequently met to talk about the trials, my research, our feelings, his writings and travels to Europe, and life in general. Luis remained interested in my military engagement, and he did not oppose it as he did during that late-night dinner in May.

September 30, 2010, still in the middle of my second fieldwork trip, I received a short email from Luis: 'Sending ... (L). Let me know if it arrived'. After replying that the mail arrived, I opened the attached file with a short story. I read it immediately. Our roles had shifted. Luis had become the interpreter of the stories we had shared about my daily engagements with the military and the feelings arising from it. It was somewhat a relief that Luis wanted to share the story, and it allowed me to sidestep a concern of being the only one interpreting and writing about the military engagements. Not only Videla's kiss but many field stories about the military and the victims of the last dictatorship had become Luis' muse to write fiction about the confusion and anxieties of an imaginary ethnographer by the physical (tangible) practices experienced to learn about torture and disappearance in the field. It was a strange twist in the ethnographic genre: an ethnographic fiction in which Luis held the imaginary power to blend field

experiences with fantasy. Our prior analyses grew to be a fair reciprocal exchange. The story was written in the first person by the fictional ‘Jildo’, as if she was thinking out loud:<sup>5</sup>

There was the prison in which Videla was staying and other soldiers were waiting to be tried for crimes against humanity. Curiously, to enter, I would use an infiltration method used by the armed forces and insurgent forces. That is to say, I would cheat the guards and the (democratic) Argentinian state by pretending that I was a relative of one of the detained militaries.’

...

I still hear the voice of that woman a little older than me (32) in contesting my request to understand [the military], “for us you will always be dirty because you talk to them: those who stole, tortured, and made people disappear”.

...

“Do not gaze them in his eyes, Jildo, just don’t do it”, I kept repeating mentally while preparing my notebook.

...

Just then he [Videla] removed his eyes from mine. I felt as if I was falling apart.

...

Heavy shoulders and my stomach definitely upset. In the university they do not teach you how to overcome nausea. I was not sure how long I lay stretched in bed with my clothes on. Only white, slimy larvae flew in my head. The calm voice of the dictator answering my last question.’

...

July 2010. I no longer feel nauseous being in [military prison]. Yes, anguish. It was a Wednesday. I do not care anymore to put that drinking straw, the *mate*, in my mouth.’

...

That what makes us human is what determines me; it is as if my tolerance has no borders. How does it help me to insult him [Videla]? But the day will come when I look in the mirror and say, Well, Jildo, it cannot be like that, you should have been more straightforward and say [to Videla]: I repudiate you for what you did, and I cannot forgive you for just being human!

Fiction can play an important role in defying transgressions and the potential breakdown of categories. Art, in general, allows to incorporate and harmonise anomalies within the existing patterns (Douglas 1966: 36–37). We enjoy art because it enables us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience. An aesthetic pleasure often arises from perceiving such inarticulate forms (Douglas 1966: 37). Luis’ fiction about the encounters with the military tells a similar story. But this is not what is at stake here atop the dangers of empathy. Reading Luis’ work was pleasurable and concerning at once. While reading the short story in the field, I was provoked by what it meant for Luis to be empathic with the military and turn them into human beings through a desire to understand what and how they felt. It made me acutely aware that I had become implicated in a highly controversial political phenomenon

concerning collective violence and accountability. Empathy (be it failed, deceptive or otherwise) was upending much-needed categories in a post-conflict setting. Even the potential of empathy contaminated the ethnographer with thoughts and feelings transforming the necessary boundaries between them (the military) and us (the victims). Luis' words cautioned me, on an imaginary level, that I had plunged into the pool of stickiness without return, slowly diluting myself into the other.

## A Book Cover

After several months in the field engaging with the indicted military, I also met the Argentinian social scientist Valentina Salvi studying the Argentinian armed forces and memory.<sup>6</sup> It was a welcomed conversation in which we realised that we had engaged with some of the same interlocutors from the armed forces. We principally talked about how difficult it had been to do research on the Argentinian military, and particularly those military officers that had participated in state repression during the last dictatorship. The difficulties arose – not so much because of the restrictions the military established – but because of the reactions of colleagues and friends. The uneasiness of family, friends, and colleagues when doing ethnographic research on the armed forces in Argentina remains widespread (Badaró 2009).

While researching the military and the state repression of the 1970s and early 1980s, Valentina read work from Nicolas Márquez' work, such as *La Mentira Oficial* (The Official Lie) (2006). This historical analysis probes, for instance, the precise and systematic dimension of the practice of appropriating the children of the disappeared Argentinians that were born during illegal detentions. I read the book so I was well aware that this work was controversial and even despised by many victims and people aligned with the human rights organisations in Argentina, including many social scientists studying the violence of the last dictatorship. The book challenges ideas that the state repression perpetrated during the 1970s was dominated by 'genocidal crimes' or 'human rights crimes' which, of course, is the opposing position presented in lay and academic debates on Argentina's violent past. For the most part, books with this standpoint were read by a small conservative and right-wing intellectual milieu in Argentina, including many indicted military officers and their kin. They often urged me to read these books to reach a 'complete understanding' of the military regime and the atrocities committed. To better comprehend their discussions and contextualise their interpretations of the violence of the 1970s, I often followed their advice.

Valentina said that she used to read these books in the metro with a paper cover to avoid revealing the title to others. It was not the first time I heard that Argentinians covered the books that vindicated the military dictatorship before reading them in public space. Valentina explained her concern was that other people might believe she sympathised with the military or belonged to them. She thought being associated with the military and their interpretations of the violent past would cast doubt on her personal ethics as well as her professional ethics. Thus, she would be a bad sociologist (see introduction). Valentina, like me, was not affiliated with any military institution, but engaging with the indicted officers, even by reading opposite views, could

still muddle the boundaries between appropriate scholarship and inappropriate scholarship, according to the generation of scholars who had lived the state repression 'in the flesh'. It was widely believed that these books contaminated the reader with immoral thoughts and wicked reasoning about state repression.

During our talk, we shared the difficulty of engaging with controversial literature on violence perpetrated by the armed forces of the 1970s. Valentina critically questioned why the Argentinian scholarly discussion on the military dictatorship has been engaged in minimal ways with foreign academics, where alternative interpretations of the violence are found (Taylor 1997; Feitlowitz 1998; Robben 2005). We both thought that despite the possible barrier of the English language, fear of contamination blocked a productive cross-cultural discussion on Argentina's past. Studies of the military, particularly those officers that participated in the state repression, are still met with suspicion in Argentina.

That afternoon we casually discussed Mary Douglas' theory of pollution. Intensely engaging in and with military lifeworlds was a 'matter out of place' in local academic circles. Valentina also admitted that she did not want to get too involved with the military. Besides reading their books, she had done some semi-structured interviews with the military and only observed them during public events from a distance. Valentina noted that proximate participation was impossible. It was not that she could not participate. It was rather a moral hindrance that was impeding her to further engage with the military. This hindrance was not bothersome in the sense that it was somehow obstructing or frustrating Valentina in her work; it was instead the opposite. Her desire for knowledge and understanding the military had boundaries.

Valentina's difficulty to engage with the military was to some degree similar to my intent to navigate between ethics and pragmatism in studying things military in Argentina. During my fieldwork, other social scientists (both Argentinian and European) had equally responded that they would be very interested in reading about the military and their evaluations of the past and, in general, their ways of living. Nevertheless, many of them considered it impossible to perform the research in person. Psychically being around the indicted military and building rapport and engendering empathy carried too much risk for contamination, mixture and potentially becoming one.

Understanding the violence and the trials from a military viewpoint was easily received by academics and friends. On the one hand, there was considerable interest in the results; on the other hand, it was contaminated knowledge, which should be dealt with carefully. Perhaps the knowledge would even be excluded from future local academic conversations. However, by emphasising my role as a researcher and the military stories as data did reduce, to some extent, the ambiguity of empathy with the indicted military officers. My research also fit into a new thought pattern of younger Argentinian academics that want understand the violence of the 1970s and early 1980s in Argentina from the perspective of those who perpetrated it, and how this violent past is identified within contemporary Argentinian military institutions (Badaró 2009; Frederic 2012; Salvi 2015). Empathy, however, with the military still sat awkwardly within this new paradigm in which studying 'things military' has become recognisable and acceptable.

Back in the Netherlands in 2013, my encounters with the indicted military officers, particularly the humour and laughter we shared in prison, became a field of critique among Argentinian scholars that were attending an international conference on humour and violence in Latin America (Van Roekel 2016: 69). Openly mentioning that I had laughed with the indicted military officers was a profound insult for two middle-aged Argentinians, who shared noticeable alignment with the victims of the state repression. They judged the laughter as distasteful, offensive, and as not having presented a robust theoretical framework before entering the field; they questioned the working ethics of the research and the appropriateness of the scholarship. I think the research with the military was immoral scholarship to them.

### Take a Shower

Trying to ‘feel into’ the military was also treated by avoidance. I think Isolda Hernandez’ reactions are the most compelling examples of this avoidance. Isolda and I met long before I started my fieldwork while working at a human rights organisation in Caracas. She had exiled to Venezuela in the early years of the civil–military regime like many Argentinians did (Ayala 2014). Isolda was an important gatekeeper to the Argentinian human rights organisations that for decades had been struggling for truth, memory, and justice for the disappeared relatives. When I started fieldwork in 2009, their struggle had finally gained momentum with the re-opening of the trials against the main perpetrators of the crimes. Isolda introduced me to other victims that had survived detention, some of whom became important research participants for the understanding of victims’ feelings of violence and transitional justice.

From the start of my fieldwork, I was transparent with everyone in the human rights movement – and Argentinians that had suffered the violence personally – that I would be engaging with the military. In the beginning, Isolda seemed to accept my request to listen to *ambas campanas* (both bells, meaning both sides). Isolda recognised that listening to both stories would allow a novice researcher to develop an objective stance to the violent national history, which I knew so intimately belonged to Isolda’s personal life. Soon, however, I started to notice that Isolda did not easily tolerate when I was empathic with the military. Her swift laughter and jokes that I should shower and change clothes in-between meetings with the military and Isolda made both of us smile awkwardly. In her creative ways, Isolda kept the military at bay. Her fleeting humour seemed a coping mechanism to deal with a foreign ethnographer with whom she had established a fragile friendship but was now researching the indicted military officers.

When wrapping up my second period of fieldwork in early 2011, I had a late-night dinner with Isolda, her family, and various friends we shared. What began as an easy-going conversation turned into a volatile conflict about my research about Argentina’s violent past and the current trials. The time had come that I had to openly align with the victims and the human rights organisations and cast off my illusionary neutrality as a researcher. I could only stutter some words that I had come to listen to both *campanas*

(bells) and I had not finished my fieldwork yet. It became an emotional quarrel in which I found myself defending the research project in unconvincing ways. At the end of the dispute, Isolda stated that sometimes it was better to keep things quiet.

My field notes from that night were disturbing. I wrote that my inability to align with Isolda had deeply offended her, which made me feel bad and even dirty for trying to understand 'evil'. Isolda's request for silence had also surprised me. It seemed a strange twist in a local ethos about the everyday responsibility to talk about the violence among the victims of the violence vis-à-vis a military ethos to remain quiet (Van Roekel forthcoming). The field notes of that night also described that the inability to align with the victims had become more than a so-called impartial stance. More than twelve months in the field engaging with the military and the victims and survivors of the state repression had rocked my moral compass. I wrote that I found it very difficult, if not impossible, to fully align with the human rights movement and the victims and survivors.

Apparently, the clash had been on my mind as I was writing up the first drafts of chapters for my thesis. It became provisionally part of a methodological section on how such emotional conflicts are important raw moments of non-cognitive modes of learning in the field (Luhmann 2010). I also addressed a section on the symbolic value of feeling disgusted regarding the military to maintain the social order intact. Neither section made it to the final version. I viewed my position as a mere vessel that had transported evil into Isolda's life, which had come to light by means of humour and the conflict. Interestingly, in this early draft, I had not reconsidered my belief that I would be able to step in and step out of the shoes of the indicted officers and continue to be a detached ethnographer. I had not yet processed Isolda's warnings against dilution and the stickiness of empathy.

In April 2012, during my third field trip, Isolda and I spoke about our last uncomfortable get-together. I noticed that it was still hurtful for both of us. The fight had also been on her mind, Isolda said. I asked her if she would agree to read and comment on what I had written about that night to see if it made sense to her. Without reading it, Isolda gave her interpretation of that night. Because of my previous work at a human rights organisation in Venezuela and researching human rights issues in Argentina, Isolda imagined that I would eventually align with her and her family supporting that what had happened in Argentina was genocide and that the military was evil. At the late-night dinner I had been giving too much room for the grey areas she said, which came as an unpleasant surprise. Still reasoning in the wrong direction, I asked Isolda if I had offended her by my so-called academic rhetoric of being neutral. She said that impartiality had not been the case. Isolda discovered that night that I did not comply (anymore) with the pre-construct that she had made of me. Isolda reasoned that I had too much contact with the indicted military officers and the conservative right in Argentina, which had contaminated and transformed me. That afternoon Isolda again decided that there were some things she simply did not want to talk about; '*Aunque no me gusta decir "de esto no se habla"*' (although I dislike saying 'we shouldn't talk about this').

## Sticky Empathy and the Desire of Otherness

Isolda had been more accurate in her reasoning about the workings of empathy in Argentina than I had been in previous drafts of the thesis. Her interpretation of what happened that night and my ambiguous position as both human rights worker and anthropologist interested in the indicted military in Argentina echoes Mary Douglas' thesis on the defiance of important social categories in a post-conflict setting. In Sartre's words: 'we were in a state-half way between categories'. If such defiance were to be accepted – what belongs to the division and what does not – had to be modified.

The emphasis on the similarity with alterity in much social theorising on empathy often rests on notions (I would say desires) of otherness between ethnographer and those we try to 'feel into'. Much critique and concern about empathy concentrates on the epistemological challenges and deceptive dangers that come with 'feeling into' our objects of study. But whether empathy is imaginable (or not) is not what was at stake during my fieldwork with the indicted military officers. Sharing a different understanding of existence in which feelings and thoughts are deeply social matters (Van Roekel 2018), my Argentinian friends and colleagues were highly attentive to cognitive matter, such as feelings, opinions, beliefs, and judgments, and were aware that feelings and thoughts stick through intense engagements. They warned me, time and again, that my object of study (the indicted officers) and the ethnographer would eventually become one, if I continued my engagement with the military.

I came to realise that empathy is not about momentarily and partially becoming the same while upholding one's alterity. Empathy is about entering a socio-political field that transforms social categories. This connection is not always looked-for. The danger of empathy with the military in Argentina was (and still is) breaking down social categories that people in Argentina anxiously sustain. The idea of otherness is, therefore, not what we should take as the point of departure when we problematise empathy. Otherness and sameness are not natural categories that can only be bridged partially and temporarily; they are more accurately the outcome of social practices and belief systems that sustain and create differences and similarities. Ethnographers inflect and are deeply transformed by these imaginary (and perhaps deceptive) practices.

## Geolocation Information

The ethnographic research presented here was carried out in Argentina. The research was mainly conducted in the cities of Buenos Aires and Córdoba, but also smaller towns in the province of Buenos Aires.

## Notes

1. For more than three decades there have been very few expressions of remorse by the Argentinian indicted officers. Those that did atone have been widely criticised among retired officers (Van Roekel *forthcoming*). Within transitional justice literature 'guilt', 'remorse' and 'forgiveness' are often used to describe the feelings of people whose lives have been affected. But how and why perpetrators and victims experience and interpret these feelings has mostly been absent in this body of literature (Minow 1998; Payne 1999; Doak 2011).

2. Empathy is one mode to learn about feelings. The challenges to study feelings of victims and perpetrators in the field, I partially tackled with what I have coined ‘affective fieldwork’ that combines conventional field methods to study feelings, such as examining gestures, artifacts and silences, with more experimental field procedures, such shared reflexivity, humour, dream analysis and empathy (Van Roekel *forthcoming*). The latter has the main focus in this article.
3. I have changed the names of the interlocutors in this article to protect their anonymity. I did not change the name of Valentina Salvi, as we both agreed to use her real name.
4. Luis and I often spoke about my field experiences and I always remained anonymous about the identity of the people I met. Only well-known persons like Videla or people introduced me with were identified in our talks.
5. I have translated the excerpts of the draft of the short story, which Luis sent me by email in September 2010. Luis has kindly provided written approval by email to use the draft for this article. The entire short story will be published in a Spanish anthology that will appear in 2019.
6. Some of the considerations expressed here arise from personal communication by email with Valentina Salvi.

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