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Cultivated Collaboration in Transitional Justice Practice and Research: Reflections on Tunisia's Voices of Memory Project

Virginie Ladisch* and Christalla Yakinthou†

ABSTRACT[∞]

The Voices of Memory project started with a fairly simple premise: to highlight women's life experiences under dictatorship. What started as a one-week workshop in 2017 evolved into a collaborative process of co-creation – the Voices of Memory project – using creative means of expression to help raise awareness of the impact of repression on Tunisian women. A formative principle, and primary contribution of this project, was a fully collaborative methodology. In this article, we reflect on and make explicit an approach we adopted intuitively and experimentally, drawing also on best practice in participatory action research and methods of co-creation.

KEYWORDS: art activism, Tunisia, co-creation, women

Six years after the Tunisian revolution, Najet, founder of a victims' association, told us she had to leave her country to feel free. She was one of 10 women activists we invited to spend a week at the University of Birmingham (UoB) for a workshop co-organized with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), focused on using personal narratives, particularly stories of women's experiences of repression in Tunisia, to advance greater equality and respect for women's rights. At the start of the workshop the participants self-segregated themselves by age: the older women who had themselves or whose loved ones had been political prisoners on one side, and the younger activists, who had less direct experience of the dictatorship-era repression, on another. This was a stark reflection of current political conditions in Tunisia. Over the course of the week, however, the group grew closer, exchanging ideas, stories,

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songs and tears. The life experiences of the older women were complemented by the younger women's initiative and cultural/media savvy. Buoyed by hope and youthful enthusiasm, at the end of the week, with a vision of joint work to carry forward, Najet reflected: 'For the first time in my life, I feel I am not a victim anymore but a leader.'

When this collaboration began in 2017 not a single book had been published by a Tunisian woman about her experience of repression. We thus started with a fairly simple premise: to prepare a publication of women's testimonies to fill this gap. Acknowledging the importance of the written word to anchor narratives in the Tunisian collective memory, we also reflected on text's limitations and explored different mediums to share untold stories. What began as a one-week workshop evolved into a two-year collaborative process of co-creation. At a time when transitional justice (TJ) in Tunisia was facing severe criticism and a lack of legitimacy, particularly among younger activists, we wanted to use a participatory, process-focused approach to help infuse engagement around principles of TJ and move beyond standard institutional measures. We were interested in artistic approaches as a way to encourage victim-survivor/activist engagement on their own terms, and to sidestep the predefined rules of engagement between 'experts' and 'victims.'

By 2018 the group had given itself the name 'the Voices of Memory Collective.' Guided by their ideas, the project led to a much bigger collection of work than originally anticipated: a book of testimonies by 19 women titled *Salt Journals*;¹ a graphic novel, *Carrying the Basket* (Figure 1); an interactive art exhibition of women's experiences of the dictatorship, shown in four Tunisian cities and attracting over 1,500 visitors; a podcast series broadcast across six regions of Tunisia; and a website housing all four aspects of the work, including a virtual replica of the exhibition.²

We found where there is a lack of political will to genuinely address past violations or where there are multiple layers of silencing as a result of authoritarianism, co-creative processes can yield innovative ways to sidestep political obstacles and open public dialogue around past violations. A formative principle of this project was a fully collaborative methodology, where the group itself drove the work's vision. Driven by a clear sense of the underlying goals, the specificities of how to achieve those goals shifted as new ideas emerged, new partners were brought on board and in response to the increasingly tense political context. In this article we reflect on and make explicit an approach we adopted intuitively and experimentally, drawing also on participatory action research (PAR) and methods of co-creation. We extract key elements that led to the project's success and highlight challenges we faced. The article draws on the authors' workshop field notes, interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019 with Collective members, and viewer feedback on the art exhibitions, derived from reflection room cards and exit interviews. The article has been reviewed by all members of the Collective.

1 Haifa Zangana, ed., *Salt Journals* (Tunis: Kalima Publishing, 2019).

2 Voices of Memory, 'Living Memorial for Women Survivors of the Dictatorship,' <https://voicesofmemory.tn/> (accessed 27 November 2019).



Figure 1: Cover image for graphic novel *Carrying the Basket* based on testimonies of the Voices of Memory Collective

CHALLENGES OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

TJ today is a globalized project, and largely accepted as a core part of a healthy transition to democracy. While actors may not always agree on its goals (peacebuilding, conflict prevention or rule of law),³ there is general agreement on the core principles of truth, justice, reparation and nonrecurrence as the rights around which the field turns. Cumulatively, these principles are said to repair harm to victims by affirming

3 See, for synopsis, Thomas Obel Hansen, 'The Vertical and Horizontal Expansion of Transitional Justice: Explanations and Implications for a Contested Field,' in *Transitional Justice Theories*, ed. Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Teresa Koloma Beck, Christian Braun and Friederike Mieth (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

their role as rights-holders within society. However, the way the TJ project has been implemented has led many critics to question whether the needs of victims and survivors are truly prioritized.⁴

As the field of TJ emerged, there was debate around the inclusion of socioeconomic rights. However, for various reasons, the field ended up shaping itself primarily around civil and political rights.⁵ Feminist scholars have critiqued this focus on civil and political rights violations, with little exploration of more intimate forms of violence inflicted in the private sphere, of which women tend to be the primary victims.⁶ Compounding this critique, it is also common for policy makers to speak of TJ as a collection of mechanisms that together (re)build rule of law and a human rights culture.⁷ Conceiving the field in this way can lead to overly mechanistic, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches that do not account for context-specific circumstances and discourage ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking. As a result, TJ ceases being a series of opportunities for ‘socially transformative action against the structures of impunity,’ and instead the standard mechanisms become technical ‘paths to a goal.’⁸ A formulaic approach risks leading to a TJ process that fails to resonate with domestic power struggles and the demands of victims/survivors, and in the worst case, even stifle movements for accountability.⁹

In response to these limitations, through this project, we sought to reclaim TJ approaches as a means to an end, thus emphasizing Virginie Ladisch’s definition of TJ as ‘creative problem solving.’¹⁰ Resultantly, we refocused on the field’s principles, leaving the specifics to be shaped by the Collective. We argue that this reframing of TJ can unlock creative thinking and problem solving in a way that resonates with, and responds to, citizens’ demands.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN TUNISIA

The collapse of French colonial rule in 1956 led to four decades of one-party rule, under Habib Bourguiba between 1957 and 1987, and then under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled until he was overthrown in 2011 in what has become known as

4 Tshepo Madlingozi, ‘On Transitional Justice Entrepreneurs and the Production of Victims,’ *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2(2) (2010): 208–228.

5 Paige Arthur, ‘How “Transitions” Reshaped Human Rights: A Conceptual History of Transitional Justice,’ *Human Rights Quarterly* 31(2) (2009): 321–367.

6 See, e.g., Kimberly Theidon, *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Christine Bell and Catherine O’Rourke, ‘Does Feminism Need a Theory of Transitional Justice?’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(1) (2007): 23–44.

7 For example, UN, *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: United Nations Approach to Transitional Justice* (March 2010).

8 Vasuki Nesiiah, ‘Scoping Study: Transitional Justice Practice: Looking Back, Moving Forward,’ Impunity Watch, May 2016, http://www.impunitywatch.org/docs/scoping_study_FINAL.pdf (accessed 10 March 2017), 34.

9 Ibid.; Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf, with Pierre Hazan, eds., *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Rosemary Nagy, ‘Transitional Justice as Global Project: Critical Reflections,’ *Third World Quarterly* 29(2) (2008): 275–289.

10 Virginie Ladisch, ‘Revitalizing Justice: A Cross-Cultural Conversation with Two Youth Activists,’ International Center for Transitional Justice, <https://www.ictj.org/news/revitalizing-justice-cross-cultural-conversation-two-youth-activists> (accessed 14 May 2018).

the 'Jasmine Revolution' – the revolution that sparked the Arab Uprisings. The policies of both Bourguiba and Ben Ali

contributed to the development of the most advanced gender egalitarian society in the Muslim Arab world. At the same time, they contributed in no small part to whitewashing the image of a repressive regime. . . The advancement of women's rights became a trade-off for the oppression of women suspected of supporting Ennahda.¹¹

The state's promotion of gender equality, while groundbreaking, also helped Tunisia construct an image of liberalism 'to endear itself to the West' and provide a buffer for its brutality.¹² As part of this, secular feminist organizations played a privileged role in civil society, while women who were communist, wore the hijab or identified with Ennahda bore the brunt of systemic discrimination and state violence.

What is known as 'Circular 108' illustrates how women's bodies became sites of struggle between a constitution that protected the freedom of religion, and a state that increasingly enforced secularity. Colloquially known as the 'hijab ban,' the 1981 circular prohibited the wearing of 'sectarian dress' by students, teachers and people employed in the public sector when in any state institution. It was reinforced in a second circular in 1986, and again under Ben Ali in 2001. Women who chose to wear the hijab were associated with the banned Islamist party Ennahda (whether supporters or not) and treated as threats to public safety.

Many women were deprived of the right to take up public service and many others were dismissed for their choice of dress, thus deprived of their right to work. Many young women were also deprived of their right to education.¹³

Other forms of repression included 'imprisonment, travel bans, and constant government harassment,' as well as rape and sexual assault.¹⁴ Administrative monitoring – a requirement where suspected Islamists had to report to police stations up to eight times a day – was used to shame and control individuals. The goal was to break both the individual and the community.¹⁵

Secular women's associations failed to speak on behalf of hijabi women being persecuted, in part because they 'viewed Islamism as a serious threat to their conception of women's rights.'¹⁶ As a result, the deep secular–Islamist tear cultivated by the two

11 Doris H. Gray, 'In Search of Righting Wrongs: Women and the Transitional Justice Process in Tunisia,' *E-International Relations*, 13 April 2013 (accessed 11 November 2019).

12 Samir Dilou, interviewed and quoted in Doris H. Gray and Terry Coonan, 'Silence Kills! Women and the Transitional Justice Process in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 7(2) (2013): 351.

13 Anwar Munsir, 'Circular 108,' in Zangana, supra n 1 at 161.

14 Hind Ahmed Zaki, 'Resisting and Redefining State Violence: The Gendered Politics of Transitional Justice in Tunisia,' *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 9(4) (2018): 362.

15 Salwa El Gantri, email to author, 9 November 2019.

16 Gray and Coonan, supra n 12 at 349.

regimes¹⁷ was replicated within Tunisian women's movements.¹⁸ Hind Ahmed Zaki notes that while

the postcolonial Tunisian state... used women's rights as a key legitimizing tool for the authoritarian regime and as testament of its ability to control the private lives of its citizens... the government's postcolonial, pro-women's policies have affected the lives of generations of Tunisian women in positive ways, and paved the ways for more reforms.¹⁹

Tunisians thus had diverging perceptions of the state as a repressive regime or a modernizing force, depending on their identity.

The state's ruthless pursuit of opponents was matched by a broader repression of speech, the press and association.²⁰ This was supported by a vast web of informers, creating a climate of mistrust and fear. 'Secular' Tunisians remained removed from and largely ignorant of the state's brutality against perceived transgressors. Because of the stigma of being targeted by the state's security apparatus, victims themselves did not know the scale of the violations, believing they were suffering in isolation. Teresa Godwin Phelps has noted the purposeful nature of this approach, where victims 'become alienated from each other, and in this silence a national narrative is created by its oppressors.'²¹ This national narrative constructed the Tunisian state as open and liberal, defending the freedom of citizens against Islamist and communist threats, and welcoming of trade and tourism. Yet specific regions – where there was opposition to the state – were purposefully deprived of funding and infrastructure.²²

So when, in December 2010, street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after having his cart confiscated,²³ his death struck a nerve, setting off massive demonstrations, eventually forcing out Ben Ali. This catalyzed a number of reforms, including a shift towards more open governance and, as a tool to get there, a new constitution and the introduction of TJ. By mid-2012, the Ministry of Transitional Justice and Human Rights had called for dialogue on TJ and established a Technical Commission to Manage the National Debate on Transitional Justice. It undertook countrywide consultations through surveys and townhall meetings.²⁴ This informed

17 See, Christopher K. Lamont and H ela Boujneh, 'Transitional Justice in Tunisia: Negotiating Justice during Transition,' *Politi ka misao* 49(5) (2012): 32–49.

18 Zaki, supra n 14.

19 Ibid., 362.

20 Human Rights Watch, 'Tunisia: Country Summary,' January 2013.

21 Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 49.

22 Ministry of Regional Development, 'White Book on Regional Development,' 2011, http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/tunisia/documents/more_info/livreblanc_devreg_nov11_fr.pdf (accessed 11 November 2019).

23 See, Mathieu von Rohr, 'The Small Tunisian Town that Sparked the Arab Revolution,' *Der Spiegel*, 18 March 2011.

24 Amine Ghali, 'The Evolution of Transitional Justice in Tunisia, from the Revolution to Today,' in *Rule of Law and Transitional Justice: Towards a Triangular Learning*, ed. Anja Mihr (Venice: European Inter-University Centre for Human Rights and Democratization, 2013); Kora Andrieu, 'Confronting the Dictatorial Past in Tunisia: Human Rights and the Politics of Victimhood in Transitional Justice Discourses since 2011,' *Human Rights Quarterly* 38(2) (2016): 261–293.

the Transitional Justice Law, which set out a comprehensive approach to addressing human rights abuses since 1955. It created the Truth and Dignity Commission (*Instance Vérité et Dignité*, or IVD) and called for reparations, accountability, institutional reform, vetting and national reconciliation. It also created a Fund for the Dignity and Rehabilitation of Victims of Tyranny²⁵ and special chambers to deal with cases of human rights violations.²⁶ The effort to hold broad citizen consultations drew on best practice.²⁷ However, the structure of the consultations tended to lend voice to those who were already empowered within their communities, and literate, further excluding the most marginalized.²⁸ The formalization of revolutionary ideals into a law signalled a parting of ways between the TJ process and the civil society activists (especially youth) who drove the revolution.²⁹

One of the most visible and contested aspects of Tunisia's TJ process has been the IVD, which began operating in 2014 and submitted its final report in 2019. The IVD had a mandate to investigate human rights abuses from July 1955 to 2013, including civil and political rights violations, as well as vote rigging, corruption, embezzlement and forced migration.³⁰ The inclusion of economic crimes was an important innovation and spoke to the unemployment, corruption and economic marginalization that in part drove the revolution. Arguably, both the IVD's process and final report cemented the early fracture between the TJ process and activists. This was astutely reflected by a member of the Collective in our first workshop: 'the problem is that in Tunisia the IVD has become an institution and we have a specific relationship with institutions. They forget it's a revolution.'³¹

Added to the critique of over-institutionalization of TJ was the failure to move on reparations, and the slowness to establish the judicial districts to investigate crimes uncovered by the IVD, leading the general public to perceive the IVD, and by extension TJ, as ineffective and irrelevant. This cynicism about TJ and the broader political context was also reflected within our group:

TJ, thanks to the IVD, has not achieved a lot (at least for now). We can even say it has been a failure. Even if on the surface things seem to have changed, in reality we continue to suffer several forms of social injustice, police brutality, corruption has spread and our institutions are falling apart.³²

25 Rim El Gantri, 'Lessons on Transitioning from Authoritarianism: Pitfalls and Promise from Tunisia's Experience,' in *Routledge Handbook on Human Rights and the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Anthony Tirado Chase (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

26 *Loi Organique 2013-53 Relative à l'Instauration de la Justice Transitionnelle et à Son Organisation*, Journal Officiel de la République Tunisienne 105 (2013).

27 Personal interview, Mohsen Sahbani, senior advisor to minister of transitional justice and human rights, Tunis, Tunisia, 15 April 2013.

28 Christalla Yakinthou and Sky Croeser, 'Transforming Tunisia: Transitional Justice and Internet Governance in a Post-Revolutionary Society,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10(2) (2016): 230–249.

29 Hela Boujnah, Skype interview, 19 December 2019.

30 Instance Vérité et Dignité, www.ivd.tn (accessed 1 October 2019).

31 Hela Boujnah, author notes from workshop, January 2017, University of Birmingham.

32 Mounira Toumi, email message to author, 4 November 2019.

There is also an important disconnect between generations. Young activists were deeply involved in the revolution, the early days of TJ in Tunisia and the development and design of the IVD's mandate. However, as the IVD began to take shape, they felt themselves to be 'delegitimized' and 'closed out.'³³ One younger Collective member involved in the initial TJ process argued that 'at some point the truth commission became a technical thing and especially when they passed the law limiting the age of commissioners, we... as activists, lost hold of the process.'³⁴ Those under the age of 30³⁵ were formally excluded from holding office in the IVD, which many young activists saw as 'pushing us out of the work of official TJ, which they want to keep for themselves.'³⁶ Young Tunisian human rights activists who helped shape the TJ agenda therefore found themselves on the margins of its main institutions.³⁷

In light of this disconnect between generations, we sought to bring together an intergenerational group of women to reflect on how to reinvigorate the transition. The Voices of Memory Collective is composed of nine female human rights activists, including five women over 40: Najet Gabsi, Hasna Ben Abid, Mounira Ben Kaddour Toumi, Khadija Salah and Hana Abdouli.³⁸ Najet, a former political prisoner; Hasna, whose husband was a political prisoner; Khadija and Hana all directly experienced frequent state and police harassment under the Ben Ali regime. In 2011, Mounira helped found a women's association that gathered testimonies of 400 women political prisoners. The younger members, all under 30 when the work began, included Hela Boujnah, Hiba Ben Haj Khalifa, Houneida Jrad and a final participant who wishes to remain anonymous. A fifth younger participant was denied a visa, and so did not take part in the work. Hela and Houneida had direct experience of family members being exposed to harassment. Hiba became a civil society activist during the revolution and was among the first to record statements of women targeted by the regime, while there was still complete silence around the subject. Our anonymous member, with family from the Tunisian Left, recalls a different kind of stigma around their political affiliations.

At our first workshop, members of the Collective shared their disillusionment with TJ, noting that in the beginning, 'Tunisians were very hopeful, and knew exactly what they wanted, but with the growing complexity of the field a certain distance tore apart the aspirations of the citizens and the transitional justice world.' Another member felt 'transitional justice has been confiscated by experts and institutions'³⁹ and, as a result, citizens lost interest. Thus, the project's philosophy was grounded in a response to our group's dissatisfaction with elite-led TJ in Tunisia, as well as our own experiences as TJ practitioners.

33 Boujnah, *supra* n 31.

34 Author notes from workshop, January 2017, University of Birmingham.

35 This was originally 35, but activists led by Hela Boujnah advocated for it to be lowered to 30.

36 Author notes from workshop, January 2017, University of Birmingham.

37 Virginie Ladisch, 'A Catalyst for Change: Engaging Youth in Transitional Justice,' International Center for Transitional Justice, April 2018, <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Briefing-Youth-TJ-2018.pdf> (accessed 27 November 2019).

38 Biographies available at Voices of Memory, *supra* n 2.

39 Author notes from workshop, January 2017, University of Birmingham.

COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PRACTICE

As political scientists and practitioners, we hold the conviction that our field is not populated by ‘neutral actors,’⁴⁰ and that our interventions are shaped by our personal, professional and institutional beliefs and expectations. This was important for us to foreground first, because of our personal experiences with the (self-)presentation of some international TJ practitioners as impartial experts without their own (or institutional) agendas, which is at best not constructive and at worst harmful. Second, and related, we were cautious of critiques such as Rosemary Nagy’s, asking to ‘what extent does transitional justice appear from on high as “saviour”?’⁴¹ These concerns were underlined by several Collective members, who noted that non-Tunisian TJ actors had been coming into Tunisia ‘like schoolmasters [who] came to declaim their lessons. . .so that we were. . .feeling ourselves just like containers to be filled.’⁴²

Over the course of our respective careers, we have both variously participated in and resisted formulaic initiatives and the instrumentalization of TJ to benefit elites and the status quo, instead of advancing victims’ rights or meaningful change.⁴³ In response to a lack of political will at the national level or the instrumentalization of TJ, Virginie has developed a process-focused approach in which she collaborates directly with groups of survivors and/or activists over a sustained period of time, in an effort to have them guide the work so that it is responsive to their needs and realities.⁴⁴ For example, in Côte d’Ivoire, when the official truth commission stopped its work for a few months, Virginie and her colleagues opened a space for youth activists to decide how they wanted to fill that gap and then supported them in producing their own audio ‘truth commission report,’ an idea they came up with and a process they led.⁴⁵ From that experience, she took away the importance of facilitating her work in a way that catalyzes further engagement through a process of co-creation. She also learned to leverage the power of music and art to promote new values and overcome stalled TJ processes. Committed to listening to survivors and problem solving with them to advance effective responses, Virginie seeks to open spaces for broader, more inclusive, and meaningful participation in policy and programming discussions.⁴⁶

Christalla Yakinthou’s background as a TJ practitioner in her own context, and subsequently as an ‘international’ TJ actor, has framed her thinking about the field as an academic. Managing programming in Cyprus and in Lebanon with very rigid donor agencies with restricted budget lines and inhibitive bureaucratic requirements to alter programming shaped her perception that process must be valued over

40 M. Brinton Lykes and Alison Crosby, ‘Feminist Practice of Action and Community Research,’ in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 148.

41 Nagy, *supra* n 9 at 275.

42 Personal interview, Mounira Toumi, Tunis, Tunisia, 4 December 2018.

43 Nesiah, *supra* n 8.

44 Ladisch, *supra* n 37.

45 Virginie Ladisch and Joanna Rice, ‘Addressing the Recent Past in Schools: Reflections from Côte d’Ivoire,’ in *Transitional Justice and Education: Learning Peace*, ed. Clara Ramírez-Barat and Roger Duthie (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2017).

46 See, e.g., Virginie Ladisch and Jacqueline Mutere, ‘Local Inspiration, Global Implementation: Upholding the Rights of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,’ in *Challenging Conceptions: Children Born of Wartime Rape and Sexual Exploitation*, ed. Kimberly Theidon and Dyan Mazurana (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, forthcoming).

deliverables, and that work must be climate-responsive. Working in Cyprus as a Cypriot who grew up in Australia, she witnessed national expertise made subservient to international ‘experts.’ Working subsequently in Lebanon reinforced this discomfort with the ‘international’–‘local’ relationship,⁴⁷ particularly because it was opaque and hierarchical. Her academic work has resultantly focused on efforts to overcome standardized TJ approaches,⁴⁸ including through examining methods grounded in mutual accountability and addressing power differentials.

We both understand TJ as a flexible series of approaches for confronting large-scale injustice. We have come to emphasize the value of working outside ‘top-down’ formats, believing in the principles of horizontality, collaboration, and the need to create space for those directly affected to influence social and political change processes. Thus, we drew on methodologies that capture and help reconsider gaps within TJ practice: co-production and PAR. We were particularly interested in these approaches because they were developed to confront highly unequal power relationships prevalent in ‘post’-authoritarian societies. Pioneer of PAR and critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire has argued that in authoritarian societies, ‘conscientization’ of oppressed populations is a radical act, centred on dislodging the internalized ‘cultural myths of the dominator.’⁴⁹ The goal of those who work towards upending these structures (both institutional and psychological) is therefore to reject those cultural myths on which authoritarian societies have been built, and to nurture the ‘revolutionary vision’⁵⁰ needed to overcome culturally and institutionally embedded authoritarianism. Notably, Freire’s thinking aligned also with many younger Collective members.

As a research approach, PAR has been an effort to resist and respond to positivist social science approaches, arguing that creating knowledge on the basis of testing hypotheses may not be an optimal approach in studying change within societies⁵¹ and that people whose lives are affected by the issue at hand are not simply the subject of research, but also have valuable expertise of their own. PAR focuses on the idea that ‘positive collaborative partnerships are based on trust, transparency of aims and decision making,’⁵² something that resonated with us and the Collective members. Mindful of the critiques of PAR, particularly that it can be paternalistic⁵³ or

47 For a summary of literature that looks at power and agency in TJ, see, Christalla Yakinthou, ‘Reframing Friction: A Four-Lens Framework for Explaining Shifts, Fractures, and Gaps in Transitional Justice,’ in *Transitional Justice, International Assistance, and Civil Society: Missed Connections*, ed. Paige Arthur and Christalla Yakinthou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

48 See especially, Paige Arthur and Christalla Yakinthou, eds., *Transitional Justice, International Assistance, and Civil Society: Missed Connections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Yakinthou and Croeser, *supra* n 28; Paige Arthur and Christalla Yakinthou, ‘Funding Transitional Justice: A Guide for Supporting Civil Society Engagement,’ *Public Action Research* (2015).

49 Paulo Freire, ‘Cultural Action and Conscientization,’ *Harvard Educational Review* 68(4) (1998): 504.

50 *Ibid.*, 515.

51 Peter Checkland and Sue Holwell, ‘Action Research: It’s Nature and Validity,’ *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 11(1) (1998): 9–21.

52 Sian Thomas, ‘Using Participatory and Creative Methods to Research Gender-Based Violence in the Global South and Indigenous Communities: Findings from a Scoping Review’ (unpublished and on file with authors), 17.

53 Rachel Pain, ‘Social Geography: Participatory Research,’ *Progress in Human Geography* 28(5) (2004): 652–663.

used to reaffirm existing power structures and the status quo,⁵⁴ we used the approach to reflect and challenge ourselves to stay true to the principles that inspired us, recognizing when we were pulled into a more directive style due to time pressure, institutional obligations or communication breakdown.

Similar to PAR, co-production begins from the position that ‘citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them.’⁵⁵ Its proponents separate it from PAR by identifying it as an ‘ethos,’⁵⁶ somewhere between a fully-fledged theory and a methodology.⁵⁷ Its focus is on the ‘deliberate intersection of different forms of expertise and experience.’⁵⁸ This intersectionality was important to us and was embodied in the project, which pulled together the professional expertise of artists, journalists, activists, practitioners and academics, layered into the deep expertise of women survivors and activists. Co-production helps frame thinking about visible and invisible power, and the role of ‘knowledge, expertise. . . in shaping, sustaining, subverting, or transforming relations of authority.’⁵⁹ This spirit of a more horizontal, transdisciplinary and reflective approach underpinned our own experimentation with the work described here.

CULTIVATING COLLABORATION: THE VOICES OF MEMORY JOURNEY

Against this backdrop of frustrations and sources of inspiration, we sought to catalyze a process by which women who were victimized or previously marginalized could claim their dignity and their voice, recognize the power and potential of their experiences, and decide how they want to use that power to advance mutually agreed upon objectives. Our approach has three core elements: a flexible funding structure, a participatory process of co-creation and a focus on modes of communication that reach beyond divides and speak to the universality of the human experience.

From the outset, we framed the project’s structure according to co-creative principles. By combining the access and resources of our two organizations, we leveraged our respective assets to design and implement a framework that would support a different type of TJ intervention. Careful to not box ourselves and the group into a rigid plan, we consciously resisted pressures (time, deliverables) that lead to formulaic, top-down approaches. With an emphasis on inquiry and experimentation, the funds from the UofB allowed us a level of freedom unparalleled in the nonprofit funding world, particularly among government donors.⁶⁰ Especially in the early stages of this

54 Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, ‘Bridging the Gap: Citizenship, Partnership and Accountability,’ in *PLA Notes 40: Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Empowerment*, ed. Michel Pimbert and Tom Wakeford (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2001).

55 Catherine Durose and Liz Richardson, *Designing Public Policy for Co-Production: Theory, Practice and Change* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016), 33.

56 Yasminah Beebeejaun, Catherine Durose, James Rees, Jo Richardson and Liz Richardson, ‘“Beyond Text”: Exploring Ethos and Method in Co-Producing Research with Communities,’ *Community Development Journal* 49(1) (2013): 37–53.

57 Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order* (London: Routledge, 2004).

58 Catherine Durose, email message to author, 5 November 2018.

59 Jasanoff, *supra* n 57 at 5.

60 See, Arthur and Yakinthou, 2018, *supra* n 48.

work as we explored how to make the Collective's vision a reality, the UofB funds gave us the flexibility to innovate and take risks. Given its presence in Tunisia since 2012, ICTJ brought context knowledge, a network of activists and matching funds. We thus deliberately created and then protected a flexible funding structure that favoured process over results and allowed for creativity.

With that framework in place we set out to facilitate a space for creative responses to TJ. Central to our approach was a participatory process, where we provided the framework to foster inquiry and reflection, without designing or predicting the outcome. We convened a group of women around a simple idea – filling the void of women's narratives about repression in Tunisia – and then took a step back to see what the response would be. Did they agree that women's narratives needed to be shared more broadly within Tunisia, and even globally? If so, what would be the best way to share those experiences so they resonate with Tunisians? How could this work respond to the challenges facing TJ in Tunisia? We continually revisited these questions and their answers in turn redetermined the project's shape. Thus, a significant amount of time was allocated to speak about the 'why,' which changed as the work progressed: Why these goals, why in this context, and why use art and culture as tools?

Between January 2017 and December 2018, these questions were repeatedly explored over more than 15 meetings and workshops across Tunisia. Not settling for a series of 'activities,' we pushed ourselves and the Collective to move past assumptions and clearly articulate our purpose. While everyone may agree that women's experiences of dictatorship should be acknowledged, we explored *why* it is important, and used this to guide this project. Drawing on their experiences and analysis of the context, the group collectively decided the project goals should be to: break the silence around past abuses; use art to express repression of women and raise public awareness; provide a platform for women to evolve from victims to engaged citizens; and bridge the gap across generations with creative means. Once the group identified the key messages they wanted to communicate through this work, we encouraged them (and ourselves) to think without restrictions about how those messages could most effectively be transmitted to our target audiences. Aware of different target audiences' preferences, the group decided to use four different means to achieve these goals: a book of testimonies, a graphic novel, a podcast series and an exhibition.

Listening to the Collective's political wisdom was a key element of this participatory approach. Some months after our first workshop, we reconvened the Collective to further develop their ideas and a dissemination plan. Since the IVD had just started to broadcast public hearings on television, we suggested that linking to the IVD process could help amplify our work. However, several members of the Collective insisted that this should remain independent. While it was working towards similar aims as the IVD, the Collective did not want to subsume its work to a 'TJ institution.' We therefore maintained distance from official processes. During the exhibition's launch some months later, the IVD was facing a severe legitimacy crisis and was mired in internal politics. Thanks to the Collective's insistence on independence, our exhibition was able to provide a different approach to acknowledging past violations, above the fray of politics. Indeed, a diverse crowd came to the exhibition,

ranging from members of the IVD to young students who had no idea about the IVD or Tunisia's past, to former prisoners, to digital activists and everyday citizens.

Linked to the importance of listening, our process of co-creation relied on a commitment to 'deep consent.' This is an acknowledgement that crafting narratives is very personal and that no part of the work can go ahead without the group's consent. As an antidote to extractive work, where victims' stories are used to advance institutional (fundraising) goals rather than the well-being of the individual, we represented the evolving pieces of work to the group as they were being developed and revised as needed. The consent process took on a number of layers resembling something of a web of connections between different actors. For example, each of the eight artists selected to create works for the exhibition signed a contract, committing to develop a work of art based on the testimonies. We worried whether the works would be able to balance honouring the women's journeys and speaking to external audiences. Fortunately, the works reflected the artists' efforts to understand these experiences and the shared ownership that we believe resulted from the focus on meaningful consent.

For example, Salma Wahida, a textile artist, initially planned a piece depicting women in prison. However, after attending a second workshop with the Collective and spending several hours speaking with the women, she was moved to create a second piece: 'Between the Lines,' an installation based on the stories of secret messages women would sneak into cigarettes or sew into the clothes of their imprisoned loved ones. She later confided that it was only at the workshops with the Collective that she learned about the suffering women experienced and their multiple levels of resilience. Born in 1991, she was too young to have directly witnessed the worst years of repression, and coming from a different background, her family had not been similarly targeted. With time, she had the space to develop a first response as an artist, and then, as a Tunisian woman, create a second response based on her exchanges with the Collective. This second piece drew some of the strongest reactions from the visitors to the exhibition.

Another artist, Nabil Sawabi, fully adopted our co-creative approach by inviting the members of the Collective into his studio to help him create his installation (Figure 2). Women from the Collective helped him paint messages on 23 pots, symbolizing the 23 years of dictatorship. The installation was complemented with a film he produced of the women creating the art and sharing their stories. Reflecting on his work, he noted, 'it's about rendering the invisible visible. Memory becomes meaningful and momentous if it is kept alive as a matrix upon which to build the future and reconcile with the past.'⁶¹

REACHING BEYOND DIVIDES

One of the most unique aspects of the Voices of Memory project was the interactive art exhibition that set aside the written word in favour of an emotional experience mediated through art. The exhibition immersed the visitor in an interactive journey simulating the path of the *quffa* – the traditional Tunisian basket used to bring food to prisoners – with the goal to help the visitor

61 Voices of Memory, supra n 2 at Catalog, 15.



Figure 2: ‘Prison is a liar and who is alive goes away,’ audiovisual installation by Nabil Sawabi with participation by members of the Collective, at the Voices of Memory Exhibition in Kef, October 2018 (Source: Elena Naughton/ICTJ)

learn about a part of Tunisia’s history that is ignored, live the emotional experience of imprisonment, with its oppressive atmosphere. . . With the reflection room at the end of the visit, the goal is to link the past and the present [to] generate ideas on what needs to be done to prevent human rights violations.⁶²

Following a sustained period where citizens cannot freely express themselves, it can be too much or too difficult to directly speak about past violations. In that space, art can be a conduit of expression that allows citizens to reclaim their voice and open new spaces for discussion and reflection.⁶³ In Tunisia, the Collective noted art is valuable because it ‘serves as a catalyst of debate. . . In a tense and polarized context, art and artists, along with intellectuals are a great asset to the preservation of collective memory.’⁶⁴ Particularly in postauthoritarian contexts, where ‘state-imposed silencing is often met by the silence of the people,’⁶⁵ we found that storytelling, as a

62 Olfa Belhassine, interview with Collective members, Tunis, Tunisia, 17 October 2018.

63 See, e.g., Peter D. Rush and Olivera Simić, eds., *The Arts of Transitional Justice: Culture, Activism, and Memory after Atrocity* (New York: Springer, 2014); Clara Ramírez-Barat, ‘Introduction: Transitional Justice and the Public Sphere,’ in *Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach*, ed. Clara Ramírez-Barat (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2014).

64 Olfa Belhassine, interview with Collective members, Tunis, Tunisia, 17 October 2018.

65 In M. Brinton Lykes, ‘Activist Participatory Research among the Maya of Guatemala: Constructing Meanings from Situated Knowledge,’ *Journal of Social Issues* 53(4) (1997): 727.

form of art, can help break through the multiple layers of silence. In putting aside TJ's technical language, the project asked visitors to think critically and emotionally about what happened, and how the dictatorship's legacy continues to affect people. The result was a series of conversations between a cross-section of society about the responsibility to prevent its recurrence.

The choice of art has an additional purpose: the intergenerational divide in Tunisia is vast, and those who were most active in the revolution, as well as democracy watchdogs after the revolution, were young activists. These activists are also heavily engaged in the arts in Tunisia. However, on the whole, they do not feel that the stories of Ben Ali-era repression are relevant to their struggles today, creating a disconnect between TJ processes – which are aimed at understanding past human rights violations – and younger Tunisian citizens concerned with present grievances. The pieces produced by this collaboration therefore aimed to develop narratives about the past in a language spoken by younger Tunisians.

Art's power to communicate the human experience often lies in its abstraction and its ability to focus on the essence of the issue. With that power, however, also comes a risk, especially when working with survivor narratives. There is a delicate balance between abstracting reality to make it accessible to others and appropriating someone's experience as the basis for art in which the survivor may feel used, misunderstood or revictimized. As one former prisoner noted, she was upset upon first viewing of the exhibition, feeling it did not accurately represent her experience: 'there were no colors in prison, it was all black and white and gray. Prison was not a joyful place.' Parts of the exhibition, in contrast, were full of colour and included messages of hope. However, after seeing the exhibition a second time, in Sfax where she herself had been imprisoned, she appreciated the power of the exhibition not as a direct representation of women's experiences, but as a public response to their suffering, courage and resilience.⁶⁶ Even if not true to her personal experience, she witnessed how art moved people. Young people were asking questions, shocked by what they learned, filled with new respect for the older generation.

As we discovered, however, there is a balance to be found between abstraction and respect for accuracy. The younger members of the group were attuned to trying to capture the essence and universality of these experiences and move beyond literal representations of the past, which was harder for survivors. However, at other times, we all realized it was important to accurately represent certain details. *Carrying the Basket* went through several rounds of review with the Collective, first to determine the main message and elements of the story, and then to address the final details. At one point, Najet noted that the female prisoner depicted in the story looked too healthy and the prison beds, especially the pillows, too comfortable: 'We were not that fat in prison! It shouldn't be depicted as a comfortable space.'⁶⁷ The details of the pillow and the prisoner's face were in fact crucial to transmitting the reality of the prison experience.

66 Comments made in a public Facebook post, on file with authors.

67 Field notes from December 2017 retreat, Zaghuan, Tunisia.



Figure 3: Najet's *quffa* on display at the Voices of Memory exhibition in Tunis, September 2018. One of the handles was cut by a prison guard as yet another attempt to make things harder for her and her family (Source: ICTJ)

CREATING A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE

Layered onto the use of art, the Collective selected the *quffa* as a central motif for the Voices of Memory project (Figure 3). Several members of the Collective had been involved in gathering women's testimonies and noticed the omnipresence of the *quffa* in their narratives. Further, the *quffa* is an everyday object that resonates with all Tunisians, a symbol of life and leisure, used to carry groceries or take items to the beach. But for others it became a symbol of repression and humiliation at the hands of state oppressors. As highlighted in *Carrying the Basket*, the *quffa* provides a window into the way the regime attacked the dignity of Tunisian citizens both inside and outside the prison.

In Tunisian dialect, when it comes to food the family brings to the prisoner, we say: 'I'm preparing the basket.' And there begins the difficult journey: finding the money to ensure a proper basket, a whole night of preparations, a long way to go in difficult conditions, to suffer the shouting of the guards before you are granted access, watch them search and turn upside down the food so lovingly prepared, often endure refusal of all or part of the food, and to be at the mercy of the guards, who may ultimately deprive a prisoner of their basket.⁶⁸

Despite these challenges for families, for prisoners the *quffa* was 'a postman carrying love and conveying my family's concern for me; a symbol of my dignity.' But the

68 Voices of Memory, supra n 61 at 2.

quffa had its own layered memories: '[I failed] to realize back then how much of a burden I was on my family.'⁶⁹

This combination of testimonies of suffering and hope together with the everyday use of the *quffa* made it a perfect allegory to transmit Tunisia's difficult past; a powerful visual symbol and a unifying object across political and ideological fractures, since all prisoners received the *quffa*. It helped to open up the space for more stories and to highlight previously invisible violations. After sending out invitations for the exhibition launch in Tunis, Salwa El Gantri shared:

I received answers from people I never realized had been in jail. In meetings people started sharing their stories; one told me he still keeps the basket his mother and sister brought him when he was in jail.⁷⁰

The *quffa* served as a vehicle of both memory and empathy. At the exhibition, when a visitor sees the video installation 'Hand to Hand,'⁷¹ of hands roughly searching food for contraband, the viewer can imagine the humiliation and rage they would feel if a guard destroyed their lovingly prepared meal. It is often the small details that are the most impactful: while comparatively few people have suffered imprisonment, everyone can relate to the sanctity of a meal prepared with love and the devastation of its destruction. The focus on an everyday object was important, both as a way to escape sensational female victims' stories and to highlight the erosion of a woman's rights and the reshaping of her daily life due to repression.⁷²

CHALLENGES OF CO-CREATIVE WORK

The deeply participatory approach led to powerful results, but it was not without difficulties. The same elements that we found to be core to our work also threw up the largest challenges. In this section, we reflect on the challenges inherent in this work, including securing active participation, maintaining open communication and overcoming power differentials.

The active participation of the whole group is key to this approach's effectiveness but is also one of the main methodological challenges. The first issue is how to select the participants and based on what criteria. For the Voices of Memory project, members were selected by Salwa based on their activism in civil society. Upon reflection, Salwa noted, 'I would make much more effort to have one older woman from the secular community.'⁷³ While there was significant diversity of experience within the group, unfortunately, despite our efforts to the contrary, among the older women there was no secular member. This reflected Tunisia's deep historic divide which we were not able to overcome.

69 Ibid., 23.

70 Personal interview, Salwa El Gantri, Tunis, Tunisia, 19 December 2019.

71 Voices of Memory, supra n 61.

72 For a critique of TJ's focus on 'extraordinary' versus 'ordinary harm,' see, Romi Sigsworth and Nahla Valji, 'Continuities of Violence against Women and the Limitations of Transitional Justice: The Case of South Africa,' in *Gender in Transitional Justice*, ed. S. Buckley-Zistel and R. Stanley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

73 Personal interview, Salwa El Gantri, Tunis, Tunisia, 19 December 2019.

A central tenet of our approach was to let the project evolve organically. Yet, at some moments, the fluidity led to confusion, particularly around people's roles. As Hiba noted:

I think it is good to not have planned everything from the start, to have something that was developed along the process, but at the same time it lacked clarity on our roles: are we at the centre of the project or are we the leaders of the project?⁷⁴

As facilitators, we perceived the project to be based on the Collective members' testimonies, but at the same time much larger than any one individual's story. Our project was an effort to provide a complex picture of women's experiences of political violence, including agency and resistance, thus moving beyond the limits of institutional truth-seeking processes that often trap women in specific narratives.⁷⁵ For the most part, the Collective members felt the same way, and acknowledged a shared purpose of having a broader impact on society, particularly around the idea of nonrecurrence. However, there were times when some Collective members or partners narrowed the focus to women's testimonies of imprisonment. The younger women were also affected by the regime in different ways, and their voice and vision were crucial to reaching across the intergenerational divide and linking past violations to present struggles. This was a central point of this work, but one not easily grasped by some of the older women in the group or by some of our implementing partners.

Linked to the idea of deep consent, communication was a crucial aspect of this work. While communication emerged more organically and generally went well when we were together, several members of the Collective criticized us for going silent between workshops.⁷⁶ As a result, they felt disconnected from the project. Upon reflection, we realized that at times we gave priority to donors in reporting back on the project but did not sufficiently report back to the group – falling into a trap we had wanted to avoid.

Communication was also a challenge within the group. The older women shared their stories as the younger women listened and provided insights on how to present those stories to a broad audience. While the older women were open to new ways to represent their experiences, such as with art, they were not open to integrating new topics or present-day struggles raised by younger members of the Collective. We managed to develop a shared vision around the need to raise awareness of women's experiences. But when we tried to push the connection between past repression and current discrimination, we hit the limits of this shared vision. Subjects such as equal inheritance laws or the rights of the LGBTQI community were still off-limits. Deeply imbued in religious and cultural beliefs, Tunisian society is still grappling with these issues;⁷⁷ our small group was not yet ready to tackle them head on. This also

74 Hiba Ben Haj Khalifa, Skype interview, 17 December 2019.

75 See, e.g., Fiona C. Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

76 Field notes from August 2019 retreat, Tunis.

77 For example, Kais Saeid, Tunisia's new president, was elected in large part by young voters drawn to his commitment to fight corruption and advance social justice. Yet he openly shares his views that

highlights the importance of an intersectional feminist analysis and the need to look beyond the category of 'woman' to unpack the different layers of exclusion, including class, race and sexual orientation.⁷⁸

As non-Arabic-speaking outsiders working in liberal western institutions, there were subtleties of the context that we could not immediately perceive. We were both sensitive to gender, religious and cultural norms. However, while we could sense tensions simmering below the surface within the group, we could not understand them quickly enough to manage them constructively. This outsider status often felt like one of the biggest obstacles to this work. Working with simultaneous translation also led to several challenges including mistranslation, language-switching, the difficulty of translating heated discussions, translators' assumptions intervening in the translations, and time-lag. Further, translation is not just about language, but also transnational and transcultural translation of TJ principles, and the field's recreation through 'specific histories of engagement and encounter.'⁷⁹ Our project was thus challenged by literal translation issues as well as translation of TJ concepts.⁸⁰

As M. Brinton Lykes noted in her reflection about PAR in Guatemala, 'partnerships require strategies for sharing power and decision making in a context wherein all stakeholders are not equal.'⁸¹ Throughout the process, we tried to acknowledge power differentials and limit their impact, but upon reflection we would have benefited from having more clearly articulated strategies to overcome the challenges that power differentials brought. Ultimately, we were accountable to meet reporting and spending deadlines (despite our efforts to minimize that pressure). As a result, and at particular moments under a time crunch, we leveraged our power to get something through. Each time we did this it created tension within the group and anger about decisions taken without consent. For example, in one instance, we were rushing to finalize the promotional posters for the exhibition before the launch in Tunis. There had been several exchanges between the group, the graphic designer and us about different images. With the disadvantage of the time difference between New York, the UK and Tunis, we approved a modified poster without first getting final approval from the Collective. The next day, there were several angry posts on our private Facebook group about the final images. Unbeknown to us, a photo that we added to bring more women's faces into the poster was extremely offensive to some members. What appeared to outsiders as women leading a peaceful protest was actually imbued with personalities that evoked the division between secular and religious

'homosexuality is alien to Tunisian society. . .and men and women cannot inherit equally.' Ramy Allahoum, 'Kais Saied: Who Is Tunisia's New President?' *Al Jazeera*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/kais-saied-tunisia-president-191022150707200.html> (accessed 27 November 2019).

78 See, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Eilish Rooney, 'Underenforcement and Intersectionality: Gendered Aspects of Transition for Women,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1(3) (2007): 338–354; Eilish Rooney and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'Transitional Justice from the Margins: Intersections of Identities, Power and Human Rights,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 12(1) (2018): 1–8.

79 Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

80 For more on this concept of translation of TJ, see, Yakinthou, *supra* n 47.

81 Lykes, *supra* n 65 at 733.

Tunisian women. In the end, our efforts to save time led to a crisis in the group and actually took much more time and effort to resolve. We pulled the poster and printed another version with images approved by all.

THE POTENTIAL OF CO-CREATIVE WORK

Despite all these challenges, in response to our collective critique of top-down, formulaic approaches that would not resonate in Tunisia, particularly not with younger Tunisians, we set out to try something different and use artistic means to transmit key messages and open debate. Rather than understand TJ as an institution built on four 'pillars,' the Collective chose to see 'the path of transitional justice like an arc.' Along that path, they highlighted a dark, forgotten space:

the prisoners received reparation, but women who prepared food, everyone has forgotten about them, they have no voice. . .we wanted to travel through paths that were not taken before and to deal with people that the mainstream TJ process has not shed light on.⁸²

In taking a creative approach, the Voices of Memory project managed to open space for marginalized voices, to have those voices acknowledged, and have that acknowledgement lead to empathy and a motivation to act.

This work put forward previously silenced and overlooked narratives in a way that resonated with others: 'I truly cannot express what I felt when I entered the exhibition which enabled me to realize and imagine the life of female political prisoners during the 1990s, the injustice, persecution, the oppression that used to be and that still continue in our country,' reflected one visitor to the exhibition in Kef.⁸³ The motif of the *quffa* resonated with visitors from Iraq, Algeria and Eritrea. The complex emotions transmitted through a care package for prisoners interrupted by the dehumanization at the hands of prison guards is unfortunately an experience shared by prisoners around the world.

For many members of the Collective, participation in the Voices of Memory project provided a sense of acknowledgement and symbolic reparations. As one member noted:

At the exhibition. . .in the eyes of the participants and victims. . .I saw a certain satisfaction, a certain level of comfort to see that history has not forgotten them, that there are people, who through the works of art could feel empathy for them, regardless of their political opinion. . .it is recognition. I think this project was beneficial to victims in saying, 'you have your place in the history of Tunisia.'⁸⁴

Those who suffered under the previous regime compared participation in the project to a form of therapy. After the exhibition, Hasna, whose husband was

82 Personal interview, Najet Gabsi, Sfax, Tunisia, 25 November 2018.

83 Reflection room cards, on file with authors.

84 Hiba Ben Haj Khalifa, Skype interview, 17 December 2019.

imprisoned, shared, 'I got rid of a burden and this makes me feel really free. Before we were afraid to say anything. But now we can voice our opinion.'⁸⁵

Not only was this project an important experience for the older women, it also served to open new conversations. It was 'a learning experience for the young women. . . learning to listen to others, to understand and to have empathy.'⁸⁶ That learning and listening among the nonvictim women in the group led them to ask more questions and have further discussions with their family and friends. 'I spoke with my mother and she revealed things I didn't know,' Houneida said. 'She told me she suffered, but I hadn't believed everything; I thought she was exaggerating. But once I spoke to all these other women, then I was able to understand.'⁸⁷ Even for those who lived through the repression, the engagement with different women from different regions also shed light on new facets of the repression that were unknown or forbidden topics. 'The project opened up many windows and doors and allowed us to see many violations that we were not able to see before,' commented Hana.⁸⁸

Several visitors noted the exhibition opened space to talk about things that people were too afraid to talk about and would have been unthinkable to discuss in a public space. 'The most important thing today for Tunisians is to have time of reflection, to think together and then to act together,' noted Hela, 'because the dictatorship broke the bridge between generations, the bridge between people in terms of communication and acceptance of the other.'⁸⁹ In Kef, a teacher brought her class to the exhibition and gave them an assignment about it. Reflecting on the tight control over information under the dictatorship that characterized her school years, one member noted: 'These students are lucky. . . 15 years ago this would have been inconceivable for students to speak of lived experiences of repression suffered by Tunisians.'⁹⁰ The students expressed a range of emotions from sadness to shock, pausing to ask, 'Is this true? Are you serious?' While people know about the past regime, there are many gaps in their knowledge, particularly around women's experiences.

All too often, women's narratives are muffled by the blanket of patriarchy. 'Talking about these kinds of experiences is still taboo in Tunisia,' but having 'the stories transformed into art make it a safe space. . . because it's through a different medium I feel free to speak about it.'⁹¹ Art is open to interpretation and invites multiple perspectives, a crucial aspect of breaking the silence and bringing multiple voices into the public sphere. Particularly in contexts like Tunisia, where state-sponsored violence sought to destroy individual dignity, storytelling can help move the survivor from a 'personal tragedy towards a shared experience with the other.'⁹² This, in turn, can help create a sense of 'collective responsibility.'⁹³

85 Personal interview, Hasna Ben Abid, Sfax, Tunisia, 25 November 2018.

86 Hela Boujnah, Skype interview with authors, 19 December 2019.

87 Houneida Jrad, Skype interview, 12 December 2018.

88 Personal interview, Hana Abdouli, Sfax, Tunisia, 25 November 2018.

89 Hela Boujnah, Skype interview with authors, 19 December 2019.

90 Hiba Ben Haj Khalifa, Skype interview, 17 December 2019.

91 Nadia Jmal, Skype interview, 22 May 2019.

92 Lykes, *supra* n 65 at 730.

93 Nadia Jmal, Skype interview, 22 May 2019.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to *Salt Journals*, Shukri Mabkhout, Tunisian academic and literary critic, notes that in Tunisia ‘there exists a memory that brims with painful details. . .and these things were not known to readers like me, other than in some foggy twilight zone that lay between the believable and the invented.’⁹⁴ In narrating these stories through art, differently to the institutionalized historical testimony of the IVD, the Voices of Memory project injected the idea that

truth is no longer a single, imposed text with a unified meaning which has been trimmed and sifted through and picked over by abstracted bodies like the state or the party, or other ideological apparatuses, but has been transformed by the direct relationship between the speaker (the victim) and the reader [and viewer] (which could be anybody in society) into a collaborative project.⁹⁵

Holder of both everyday and extraordinary stories of life, suffering, love and resilience, the *quffa* provided a medium to explore Tunisia’s past from a women’s perspective in a way that resonated across gender, class, race, religion and nationality.⁹⁶ Art helped us escape the trappings of circumscribed testimonies. Through the Voices of Memory project, the *quffa* once again became a carrier of messages, a vehicle to unsilence women’s stories, moving beyond the personal and reaching a broad cross-section of Tunisian society. It helped break a taboo and planted seeds for new conversations and future initiatives both within Tunisia and beyond. Women’s groups in Tunisia and Lebanon requested Haifa Zangana’s help to undertake similar book projects, and activists from other Tunisian cities have asked to host the exhibition (planned for 2020).

Within the country, the project may give rise to similar work which helps build a new collective identity as the basis for a more just society. More immediately though, at a time when the Tunisian TJ process is leaving victims wondering whether they will ever receive concrete acknowledgement or reparations, the Voices of Memory project provided the Collective space to exercise agency in crafting their own form of acknowledgement. As one Collective member noted, ‘knowing that the next generation will discover women’s stories, is in itself a form of reparation.’⁹⁷ In particular, the co-creative element helped ensure the project remained relevant in a tense time and the use of art proved to be a particularly powerful way to break silences.

94 Zangana, *supra* n 1 at 27.

95 *Ibid.*

96 Personal interview, Salwa El Gantri, Tunis, Tunisia, 19 December 2019.

97 Phone interview, Khadija Salah, 5 November 2019.