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**The Boundaries of Sisterhood: Gender and Class in
the Mothers and Grandmothers of the
Plaza de Mayo¹**

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On May 25, 2006, Hebe de Bonafini, the president of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and Estella de Carlotto, the most visible figure from the organization Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, shared the balcony of the “casa rosada” with Néstor Kirchner, in a political demonstration that was also a celebration of his first

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at a symposium, “The Challenge of Women’s Movements in the Americas Today,” organized by the Hemispheric Institute on the Americas-HIA at the University of California, Davis, on November 3, 2006. I would like to thank Tom Holloway for organizing this event and Lisa Stenmark, Victoria Langland and Luz Mena for their insightful comments.

three years as president. By proclaiming that we are all the children of the mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, Kirchner distanced himself from his civil predecessors, Alfonsín and Menem, who had had a turbulent, and in the second case, openly hostile relationship with the relatives of the disappeared.² The next day, newspapers circulated an image that seemed to mark a radical departure from the past.³ In the photographer's framing of the scene, Bonafini looks on from the sidelines as Kirchner embraces Carlotto, her more conciliatory and diplomatic colleague. Wearing an emblematic scarf that has become iconic, and a poncho to create a more ethnic genealogy for her public persona, Bonafini stares at the camera with an air of discomfort. The newspaper article, "Reencuentro de Bonafini con Carlotto," read the photograph as a symbol of a possible reconciliation between these two female political leaders from La Plata, who became human rights activists after their children were kidnapped, tortured and killed by the military regime (1976-1983). When asked about the event, Bonafini responded with the bluntness for which she is both admired and despised: "No hubo ningún reencuentro. El presidente nos pidió que fuéramos y fuimos, nada más. Pero entre nosotras no hay diálogo" [There was no reconciliation. The president invited us to go and we went, that was all. There is no dialogue between us].⁴

² When Raúl Alfonsín was elected president, human rights groups hoped that he would be strong enough to punish the military government for its crimes against humanity. These aspirations proved wrong when he signed two amnesty laws forgiving members of the military for their crimes. President Menem went even further with these laws when he forgave even high-ranking military officers who had not been included in the previous amnesty laws.

³ See *Clarín*, May 26, 2006. The photograph can be found at <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2006/05/26/elpais/p-01001.htm>

⁴ All translations are my own unless specified otherwise. The interview with Bonafini titled "Nunca voy a perdonar a Carlotto" was conducted by Pablo Dorman. It can be found at: <http://www.lapoliticaonline.com.ar/index.php?seccion=103&pagetype=list> (December 5, 2006).



Kirchner embraces Carlotta (Photo by *Clarín*)

While doing research for this project in Buenos Aires, I paid a visit to what Pierre Nora would call a *lieu de mémoire*, the Plaza de Mayo, where the mothers of the victims of the military regime have been staging political demonstrations since 1977, every Thursday from 3:30-4:00.⁵ A series of scarves are engraved on the pavement to mark a territory that has become unofficially theirs. The “pañuelos” are one of the many visual traces that the mothers have left in a city that, thirty years after the military coup, is still trying to come to terms with a traumatic past that left 30,000 people missing. Originally, the scarf was a gauze diaper that identified the mothers in a massive religious procession to the church of Luján.⁶ A synecdoche of the domestic side of their public identity, the scarf seemed to neutralize class differences in a movement that included women from the whole spectrum of society.

⁵ Pierre Nora discusses the concept of *lieux de mémoire* or sites of remembrance in “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 19.

⁶ Hebe de Bonafini explains how the diaper turned into a kerchief in a conversation with Gorini. She says: “Era poco práctico usar esos pañales que se rompían enseguida y que no se podían doblar con facilidad para meter en la cartera. Al pañuelo en cambio lo podías lavar, planchar, meter en un bolsillo del tapado o en cualquier lado y volverlo a usar cuantas veces querías” (Bonafini quoted in Gorini 119). [“It was not very practical to wear those diapers that broke almost immediately and that could not be folded to put in your purse. On the other hand, the kerchief was washable. You could carry it in your pocket, and you could reuse it as many times as you wanted.”]

The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo have a foundational role in the history of political activism in Argentina on account of their theatrical visibility. While most other organizations operated in extreme secret during the years of the military dictatorship the Mothers gathered in the most centrally located place in the city to stage marches and demonstrations on behalf of the disappeared. They carried giant images of their missing daughters and sons around the plaza, they published lists of the disappeared in the main newspapers, and they covered the city with photos and silhouettes of the missing.⁷ At a time when people were afraid to voice their opinions in public for fear of retaliation, the Mothers were the only ones who dared to display their public opposition to the repressive military juntas. In the context of the weekly demonstrations, the Mothers created a collective identity that went from “I” to “we.” At the plaza, says Fanny Brener de Bendersky, “*we* could share *our* hopes, *our* doubts, *our* fears...these are dramatic moments in *our* lives, very sad, but when *we* are together, *we* feel strong, *we* really feel strong...”(Mellibovsky 75, my emphasis). What united the Mothers in the beginning was the magnitude of their pain.

In recent years we have become accustomed to thinking of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo as a fairly monolithic movement that dared to make visible through their performative marches a traumatic reality that nobody wanted to see. With the exception of Temma Kaplan’s *Taking Back the Streets*, most studies about the Mothers pay minimal attention, or mention only in passing, their internal disagreements.⁸ The figure of the circle that the Mothers

⁷ I am referring here to an event organized by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in September of 2003 called *el siluetazo* in which thousands of empty silhouettes were printed on the facades of buildings to commemorate the disappeared.

⁸ See in particular Kaplan’s chapter, “Memory Through Mobilization,” in which she hints at anti-Semitism as one of the possible causes for the split between the two main factions of Mothers. She says that most of the Founding Line mothers were Jewish or married to Jewish men (145).

follow in their marches around the pyramid has had an impact on the way feminist scholars conceptualize the movement: a tightly knitted “feminotopic” circular space in which women walk with their arms linked to create an island of solidarity in a world that has become an inferno.⁹ Less attention, however, has been paid to the confrontations that rock the apparent harmony of that circle and to the ideological differences that ended up fracturing the association in 1986. Reading the Mothers’ political intervention against the equally theatrical discourses of the left and the right has proven productive, as Diana Taylor has shown in *Disappearing Acts*.¹⁰ But what happens when we read the movement against itself? In other words, what were the issues that estranged female activists belonging to the association and what does that debate tell us about the frailty and/or strength of gender bonds? At the same time, why did a female organization that was defiant and unified in its early stages become factionalized with the fall of the military regime? I would like to explore here, how the mothers situate themselves with regards to mourning, gender identity and the construction of national memory. At the same time, I would like to point out that their disagreements

⁹The figure of the circle appears in the title of Marjorie Agosín’s *Circle of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. It is also featured in Matilde Mellibovsky’s *Circle of Love Over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, originally titled *Círculos de amor sobre la muerte: Testimonios de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard’s comprehensive *Revolutionizing Motherhood* focuses on the utopian aspects of the movement in her introduction when she says that: “Against the military values of hierarchy, obedience, and the unchecked use of physical force, the Mothers practiced pacifism, cooperation, and mutual love. They developed a political organization and style which contradicted that of a culture whose politics historically had been passed upon ideological fragmentation and military intervention” (1).

¹⁰Diana Taylor has drawn attention to the theatrical nature of the political marches of the mothers and to the ideological complexity of a movement that both mirrors and subverts dominant ideologies of femininity. She reads the performance of gender staged by this group as a response to other spectacles of national identity such as avant-garde theater, soccer and above all the show of terror staged by the military regime. On a visual level she contrasts the circular and somewhat unruly walk of the mothers with the rigid parades of military men.

about the construction of post-dictatorial memory coincided with the emergence of competing models of female political activism.

In *La rebelión de las madres*, Ulises Gorini states that the early stages of the association were marked by a period of collectivization that depended, paradoxically, on the refusal on the part of the mothers to think of themselves in political terms (158). In the testimonial literature of the movement, the Mothers say that it was “natural” and not political for a mother to leave the home in search of her missing son or daughter. In a dichotomy that opposes domesticity and politics, the category of the natural becomes a euphemism for hegemonic femininity. If dominant ideologies of gender assert that women are closer to nature than to culture, the Mothers both reproduce and subvert those discourses by saying that it is their biological duty to abandon the domestic sphere in search of their disappeared child. At the same time, the Mothers justify the transgression of their assigned domestic role by saying that their movement is all about justice, not politics. The rhetorical differentiation between justice and politics functions in the early stages as a recruitment device in a society for which the decency of women is dependent on their degree of isolation from the public sphere. Thus, when Juanita de Pargament recalls the foundation of the movement she explains that in the beginning, the decision to stay away from traditional or masculine politics was a way to protect the safety, reputation and “femininity” of the members of the group. She reiterates that the mothers stayed away from political groups because “we did not want to jeopardize the movement that we had founded and we wanted to protect it. We did it so that we could say ‘we are not mothers who have ties with political groups. We are only searching for our children’” (Gorini 159, my translation).

The mothers’ reluctance to assume the political identity of the group parallels their refusal to see themselves as feminists in a country that equates feminism with the cause of man haters and

radical viragos.¹¹ However, the disappearance of the movement's leader, Azucena Villaflor de Vincenti, in 1977 in the company of two other mothers who were kidnapped, tortured and killed by the military regime was a painful reminder that from the perspective of the government the activities of the Mothers were extremely political.¹² Coincidentally, the Mothers that were taken from the church of Santa Cruz on December 10, 1977 -Esther Ballestrino de Careaga and María Eugenia Ponce de Bianco- were active in "Vanguardia Comunista", a political movement that was infiltrated by naval officer Adolfo Astiz, who pretended to be the brother of a disappeared person.¹³ According to some of the Mothers, the brutal kidnapping that was devised to intimidate the group had the opposite effect. In *Circle of Love over Death*, Matilde Mellibovsky talks about the mothers' sisterly bonds that refuse to be broken even when confronted with death. She says, "There is a tacit rule among us: the best tribute *to a sister* and friend from the Plaza when she is no longer around is to prime up our spirits so that the circle does not stop-by marching, protesting, or by communicating, as I am trying to do now" (x, my emphasis).

In the testimonies written by the Mothers, one of the recurring statements that almost becomes a cliché is the idea that the

¹¹ Bonafini explains her unwillingness to think of her activism as feminist in an interview with Alejandro Diago. Although she does not say it explicitly she favors class, and to a certain extent ethnicity, in her way of conceptualizing identity (Diago 227).

¹² Azucena Villaflor's body was found by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team in July 2005. Her body showed fractures that allowed them to conclude that she was killed in the "flights of death" recalled by naval officer Adolfo Scilingo. Villaflor's body was cremated and her ashes were buried at the Plaza de Mayo on December 8, 2005. For more information on Villaflor see Arrosagaray.

¹³ The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and "Vanguardia Comunista" had their clandestine meetings at the Church of Santa Cruz. The relationship between the two groups, however, was complicated from the start. According to Bonafini, the majority of the mothers resented the more openly "political" use of discourse by the communist group (Gorini 158-159). Ballestrino de Careaga and Ponce de Bianco disappeared from the Church of Santa Cruz on December 8, 1977, in the company of the French missionary nun Alice Domon. Two days later, another French nun, Léonie Duquet, was taken with Azucena Villaflor to a concentration camp (ESMA) where they were tortured and killed that same year.

disappearance of their sons and daughters “gave birth” to them. Hebe de Bonafini is categorical about this when she claims in *Historias de vida* that “nuestros hijos nos parieron.” The birth metaphor presupposes a fractured identity for the female subject in which the domestic and the political selves are somewhat at odds with each other, and in which the residual “housewife” persona must be left behind in order to embrace a political way of life. The phrase also signals the Mothers’ subordination to the revolutionary vision of their sons and daughters who lead, posthumously, the Mothers in the fight. And yet, the autobiographical self that Bonafini constructs for the reader never abandons the domestic foundation of a sentimental self that is always present at the level of the residual. The nineteenth-century ideology of the domestic Angel of the House, in which mothers are supposed to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of their family, is still prevalent at the end of the twentieth century. However, the Mothers find, within the hybridity of an ideology that does not distinguish between morality and politics, a way to subvert it without completely questioning all its premises. By accepting the idea that the supreme duty of a woman is to be a mother, they question another premise of the angelic ideal, which is their exclusion from the realm of politics.¹⁴

On the day I attended the march, the Mothers, now in their eighties and nineties, walked slowly counterclockwise around the pyramid, some of them on wheel chairs, others in small groups of two or three. One major group led by Hebe de Bonafini carried a giant banner reading “Distribución de la riqueza ya” [For an equal distribution of wealth now]. A less numerous group called Madres Línea Fundadora [Founding Line Mothers] marched closely behind, holding a few small pictures of their sons and daughters who

¹⁴ In the film *Botín de Guerra* (2005), Chicha Chorobik de Mariani explains that many of their clandestine meetings were carried out in *confiterías* or tea houses where grandmothers traditionally meet to have afternoon tea. On these occasions they used a cryptic domestic language to hide their political activities.

disappeared thirty years ago. At the end of the march, I approached Hebe de Bonafini and asked her about the divided configuration of the march. She explained to me that the few mothers who left the movement took the money that Alfonsín's government gave the relatives of the disappeared to compensate them for their loss. She also explained that some mothers chose to accept Alfonsín's desire to turn the "mothers of the missing" into "the mothers of the dead" by collaborating with him on the exhumations, the posthumous memorials and the CONADEP report.¹⁵ In the end, she said, referring to her own group of mothers, "we have done much better, we have a radio, a café and even a university. And what do they have?" She stopped herself short when she remembered that a bus was waiting for the Mothers to take them to the Mercosur Córdoba Summit, where she would share the stage with Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez the next day. When I asked her about *Botín de Guerra* (2005), a documentary about the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo that won several prizes at international film festivals, she made a face. She refrained from giving me a negative report but instead recommended another documentary. "To tell you the truth," she added at the end, as if sensing that all my questions were pointing in the direction of fractured sisterhood, "it is all a question of class." But why did those class differences that remained latent during the military dictatorship rise to the surface with the arrival of democracy?

Contrasting the strained nature of the movement today with its more amalgamated beginnings becomes an archeological task that takes us back to April 30, 1977, when a group of fourteen mothers gathered at the plaza for the first time. The balance between solidarity and fragmentation was kept in place during the formative years of the association because unity was the mothers' only weapon

¹⁵ The CONADEP report titled *Nunca Más* [*Never Again*] was produced by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, chaired by Ernesto Sábató. It contained 50,000 pages of testimony given by witnesses of the repression.

against a ferocious enemy. Erroneously, the mothers thought that perhaps what they could not achieve in isolation (recovering their sons and daughters), they could accomplish together. Scenes of sisterly solidarity were frequent at the plaza, particularly when the police came to take some mothers to jail. In the words of Bonafini:

They wanted to take one mother, but all of a sudden they had to take sixty, and if they did not have enough police cars we asked them for more. We completely puzzled them. And then, people thought we were crazy. [...] They didn't understand. It was a way in which we could express solidarity towards one another. It is not that we wanted to go to jail, but we just made a fuss and we did not leave our *compañeras* alone. It was solidarity and it was a fight. (Gorini 104, my translation).

In the context of the Dirty War women could not afford to endanger the cohesiveness of the group by dwelling on their differences. At the same time, since the magnitude of the trauma defied the boundaries of language, the rhetoric of emotional affect was used as a bonding device. In the sentimental vignettes that punctuate *Historias de vida* by Hebe de Bonafini, shared suffering crosses multiple barriers. According to her testimony, the founding moment of her identity as a political activist happens when she takes a bus trip from La Plata to Buenos Aires in the company of another mother/grandmother whose pregnant daughter had shared the same tragic fate as Bonafini's two disappeared sons. Although Bonafini did not know the name of the woman who was inviting her to go to the plaza, she felt very close to her emotionally and after a few minutes she "started to feel a tremendous solidarity towards her pain. As the bus kept going [she] felt a bond of sisterhood towards that woman" (Bonafini 109). The sentimental topos of domestic virtue in distress allows the Mothers to politicize the ideology of domesticity and to question the anti-sentimental nature of the military government. At the same time, as Taylor has demonstrated, there is something problematic about the hyperbolic celebration of motherhood to which the movement subscribes, since the image of the *mater*

dolorosa functions both as a political strategy to stretch the limits of the domestic sphere and as a trap (183).

It is difficult to read the mothers' testimonial narratives without getting involved emotionally because they are written to make us feel compassion for the victims and rage for the moral monstrosity of the killers. Rousseau's assertion that the sentimental scenario *par excellence* is a monster devouring a child under the tearful gaze of a man behind bars, becomes a fruitful allegory to reflect on the ways in which the mothers merge the semantic fields of the sentimental and the political ("Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men"). In both scenarios the monstrous is associated with the violation of a sacred bond: the relationship between mother and child. In *El Corazón de la escritura*, a collection of poems, testimonies and tableaux, written by the mothers, the speaker's heart becomes a metonymical figure for a wounded identity that refuses to heal itself. In *Circle of Love Over Death* Mellinovsky uses the sentimental figure of a "throbbing heart" as a metaphor for the *Plaza* (xv), a site of memory where the mothers can perform an array of conflicted emotions that go from sadness to rage.

During the years of the dictatorship, the Mothers operated within the parameters of a rhetoric of feelings that was devised as a response to the lexicon of terror manipulated by the state. The successful use of this rhetoric was construed as excessive by a military government that gave the Mothers the derogatory title, "sentimental terrorists." However, as Susan Kaiser demonstrates, the vision of the Mothers as mentally unstable is still current in Argentina today, especially among the members of what she calls the post-memory generations, following the terminology used by Marianne Hirsch. Argentinean youth who were not directly affected by the dictatorship's violence view the Mothers' activism as a painful remainder of a past that has come to agitate the "peaceful" waters of

the present. Commenting on the role of “memory keepers” that the Mothers assign to themselves in this debate, an anonymous speaker that Kaiser identifies as a “grey zoner” comments on what she perceives to be the futility of their cause. In a passage that alludes to the “flights of death,” from which Azucena Villaflor and most of the disappeared were thrown alive to the river thousands of feet below, she comments:

I think these ladies must be very hurt by what happened. It's logical; it's not easy to lose a child. But the current government isn't responsible for what happened twenty years ago and can't do anything. Even with investigations. If your daughter was thrown into the ocean, she's already eaten by creatures. Nothing can be done now. They can't empty the ocean to look for your daughter. It's over. I mean, it's not over. The suffering will continue for as long as you live. But the current government can't do anything, except bring to trial those involved. (Anonymous interviewee quoted in Kaiser 186.)

Here, the speaker ridicules in very graphic terms the mothers' insistence on recovering the disappeared alive even after the government had timidly told them that they were all dead. In other instances, witnesses accused the Mothers of politicizing suffering to gain visibility in the media, as if the disappearance of their sons and daughters had not been political in the first place. Just as there are Nazi groups today who still deny the existence of a Holocaust in Germany there are ultra-conservative groups in Argentina who still claim that the category of “the disappeared” was a fabrication of the mothers whose children are somewhere in Europe leading the life of the rich. In the same way, on a website posted by supporters of the Military Dictatorship, titled “Por la memoria completa,” certain groups question the identity of Carlotto as a grandmother by denying that her daughter, Laura, had a baby in prison.¹⁶

¹⁶ The article about Carlotto, titled “La verdad sobre Carlotto,” [The Truth about Carlotto] can be found at:
<http://www.ladecadadel70.com.ar/JuiciodelosMenores/boletin27.html>

The organization originally called *Abuelas argentinas con nietitos desaparecidos* was formed in 1977 when thirteen mothers who were also grandmothers decided to search for their missing grandchildren in a more efficient and organized manner. Most of the five hundred infants who disappeared during the Dirty War were taken or killed with their parents by the para-military forces. However, some of these children were born in concentration camps, and taken for adoption by the same military men who killed their parents, as the Nazis had done with Polish children after World War II. The horrific black and white photograph that appears in the cover of *Botín de Guerra* by Julio Nosiglia features a half-bombed baby stroller covered in ashes as an artifact of memory to which the brutality of the past has attached. Belonging to Clara Anahí Mariani, the granddaughter of the first president of the organization *Abuelas*, Chicha de Mariani, the dilapidated stroller reminds us of the military government's lack of respect for family bonds and for the sacred figure of the child. According to Pilar Cambeiro, a female witness for the concentration camps who is quoted at length by Beatriz Sarlo in *Tiempo pasado*, pregnant women were kept alive at the concentration camps until they gave birth, and then they were sedated so that they could be thrown to the river while their torturers and assassins kept their babies. When the military trials took place in 1985, some officers alleged that they had tried to save the babies by giving them away for adoption because they did not believe in abortion (Kaiser 109). As Estela de Carlotto explains in the filmic version of *Botín de Guerra*, cute blond children were considered the most treasured possession of the disappeared, empty vessels that had to be placed in a Christian family to erase the memory of their subversive upbringing.

The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo were at one point members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Rumor has it that they had a difficult relationship with Bonafini from the start and that

when the grandmothers made posters with pictures of their grandchildren to celebrate Children's Day, Bonafini told them to go find another plaza. In 1986, when twelve mothers led by Renee Epelbaum and María Adela Antokoletz separated from the original movement, the grandmothers chose to remain close to this new group called *Madres Línea Fundadora* by distancing themselves from Bonafini. According to Matilde Mellibovsky, the differences between the two groups that had been muted by the urgent task of remaining united against the horrors of dictatorship became insurmountable with the arrival of democracy. Although both groups agreed that the constitutional government had betrayed the cause of the disappeared by sanctioning the Law of Due Obedience, the *Madres Línea Fundadora* still wanted to collaborate with the democratic government. At the same time, the question of mourning the disappeared became a contentious issue among the two factions when a group of forensic anthropologists led by Clyde Snow and supported by *abuelas* began to unearth the collective graves that had been marked N.N. by the military government.¹⁷ Up to that point the signifier "disappeared" was used to refer to a person who was neither dead nor alive, a political use of language that was explicitly devised to paralyze the political activities of the relatives. When the mothers went to General Harguindeguy to demand an explanation for the disappearance of their family members, he dismissed them as crazy because their children might have left the country or in the case of women, were working as prostitutes somewhere (Gorini 92). The task of the forensic experts was to scientifically examine the remains of the dead to gather evidence against the military for a trial that was called the Argentine Nuremberg. While Bonafini's group adamantly opposed the exhumations because they wanted to keep alive the

¹⁷ The letters N.N. or N. stand for the Latin *nescio*, "not known," from the verb *nescire* meaning to ignore. For more information about this term see Cohen Salama.

memory of the disappeared as a political category, the Mothers *Línea Fundadora* desperately sought to recover the remains of their loved ones in order to complete the task of mourning. The latter group maintained a more open-ended position with regard to this issue, proclaiming that “the decision to recover the remains of disappeared family members in those cases in which they are scientifically identified is very personal” (Mellibovsky 179). Thus, while one group of mothers chose to remain in a state of “incomplete mourning” that bordered on collective melancholia (I am referring here to Freud’s famous taxonomy) the Mothers *Línea Fundadora* wanted to gain closure by burying their family members’ remains in a dignified manner.

Another contentious issue among the Mothers was the willingness of some members of the association to accept economic remuneration from a government eager to appease the relatives of the missing. Taking money from a president who was not willing to go all the way in prosecuting the military was, for Bonafini, a form of prostitution because what they wanted was the names of the assassins (Diago 158). The demand for accountability was a reaction against the CONADEP report ordered by Alfonsín in which the names of the military men who had committed crimes against humanity were carefully deleted. If the government was trying to pacify society by declaring officially that the disappeared were all dead, the Mothers kept fighting to keep their memory alive through the circulation of silhouettes, masks, photographs, and banners. To accept the death of a whole generation without knowing the way in which they died was for Bonafini a way of killing them again. As a response to the government’s efforts to domesticate the past, the phrase “aparición con vida” [we want them alive] was embroidered on the kerchiefs and the slogan “Con vida los llevaron con vida los queremos” [They took them alive, we want them alive] prevailed at the plaza. When the forensic teams unearthed the hundreds of

collective graves that were hidden in the cemeteries of Buenos Aires, the Mothers led by Bonafini circled several graves in order to prevent the scientific teams from doing the exhumations.

Cemeteries, according to Philippe Ariès, are mourning sites that separate the dead from the living. In post-dictatorial Argentina, cemeteries become a political stage on which the fate of the past is debated among the living. For the organization *Abuelas* led by Carlotto the task of the forensic teams was indispensable in proving that some of their dead daughters had given birth in the secret concentration camps. In 1984, supported by *Abuelas* and their legal advisors, Clay Snow unearthed, in the cemetery of San Isidro, the remains of Roberto and Beatriz Lanouscou, a *montonero* couple who, according to military records, had been killed in an armed confrontation in the company of their three children. When the bodies of four-year-old Barbara and six-year-old Roberto Lanouscou were recovered it was proven that they were killed at close range with an *Itaka* shotgun. However, in the baby coffin that belonged to six-month-old Matilde, the forensic team found bones that upon close inspection proved to be those of a man's foot. They also recovered baby clothes and a pacifier that had no traces of a decomposing body or bones. The substitution of bones proved that perhaps baby Matilde had not been killed, as the military had claimed, but was given instead to an unknown military family for adoption, a fact that was later confirmed by incidental evidence at a trial. The children's grandmother thus joined *Abuelas* in an effort to find her disappeared granddaughter, although to this day Matilde Lanouscou has never been found.

In the way she presents herself to the media, Estela Barnes de Carlotto, the president of *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, seems to follow a model of political activism that does not deviate significantly from the normative concept of middle-class femininity. Unlike Bonafini who comes from a working class background and has no education

beyond elementary school, Carlotto was a teacher and a school principal before she became a political activist. The class opposition between the two is underscored by Bonafini in *Historias de vida*, when she mentions her proletarian origins in a shantytown of the great Buenos Aires as the daughter of a factory worker. Kika Pastor, as Bonafini called herself before becoming a political activist, later married a car mechanic. On the other hand, Estela de Carlotto, María Adela Antokoletz and Matilde Mellibovsky come from more privileged and educated backgrounds that range from the lower to the upper middle classes. As Bonafini explains with a certain level of resentment, some of these Mothers had maids, were able to travel and spoke foreign languages.¹⁸

One thing worth mentioning is that the differences that are so crucial for Bonafini are not, in the case of Carlotto and Bonafini, so evident for the rest of society. In fact, I would like to suggest that once women enter the promiscuous terrain of masculine politics they lose the respectability attached to their class status by a process of sexualization or masculinization. From this perspective, the conservative right has difficulties with all of these women who, in spite of their many differences, are relentless in their search for justice. If Bonafini is frequently labeled *loca* or *histérica* by her political enemies. Carlotto's feminine suits and "psychoanalyzed" discourse have proven harder to discredit. By not doing away

¹⁸ In one of her multiple interviews, Bonafini underlines the class bond between herself and Azucena Villaflor who was also from a proletarian background. In one interview, Bonafini tries to establish a closeness with Villaflor that is based more on class than on gender solidarity. She says: "Me acuerdo de la primera reunión fuera de la plaza, nos juntamos en un bar y vino una Madre de clase social alta, toda vestida de violeta; llovía, tenía paraguas violeta, piloto violeta, como si fuese una modelo, y dijo (imitando el acento de Barrio Norte): ¿Vos cómo te llamás? Y Azucena le dijo: Azucena. Entonces la otra mujer le respondió (sigue el acento): Ay, ¡el mismo nombre de mi cocinera! Y Azucena desde ese momento no la quiso mirar más. Ahí empezamos a hablar de nuestras raíces, de nuestra gente, de su barrio, de mi barrio, y creo que además de la lucha, en el tiempo que compartí con ella nos hicimos compañeras por estas cosas." The following interview conducted by Enrique Arrosagaray for *Página 12* can be found at www.elortiba.org/azucena.html

completely with the stereotype of the respectable middle-class *señora*, she successfully negotiates a political identity that is apparently apolitical, in a community that is still extremely suspicious of women's political activism. From the perspective of their ultra-conservative enemies, Carlotto is more dangerous than Bonafini because she does not make a spectacle of her anger. Her more "feminine" persona seems to be less threatening for the Argentinean elites who do not want their women to act "masculine."

Another point of contention between Bonafini and Carlotto is the degree to which they have allowed themselves to embrace other political causes. Here, Bonafini's motto "El otro soy yo" [I am the other] comes to mind as a reminder of her desire to act as a mediator between different marginal groups (*piqueteros*, street children, seamstresses, indigenous groups) who lack the most basic rights of Argentinean citizenship. Carlotto's fight, on the other hand, has remained more focused on the cause of disappeared children. While the Grandmothers and Mothers *Línea Fundadora* remained loyal to the original mandate—which was to stay away from masculine politics—Bonafini and the mothers from her camp chose to embrace the revolutionary cause of their deceased daughters and sons. In October of 2006, Bonafini demonstrated on behalf of the members of an ethnic community from Chaco who were being evicted from their land so that the government could sell it to corporations. While the indigenous groups were conducting a hunger strike against the regional government in Chaco, Bonafini traveled back and forth to Buenos Aires to negotiate with Kirchner's government on behalf of the disenfranchised ethnic group.

The cause of disappeared children, called the "desaparecidos con vida," has become a cultural obsession of post-dictatorial Argentina. When Menem's government further pardoned the military for their crimes with a law that freed all military men, a move furiously opposed by human rights groups, the issue of robbing

children of their right to an identity allowed the supreme court to reverse the amnesty laws. The figure of the Grandmother, up to that point less visible than that of the Mother of the Plaza, became a sudden icon. Books and documentaries about *abuelas* appeared in quick succession (*Botín de Guerra*, *Nietos (Identidad y memoria)*, *Cautiva*) and the issue of memory and identity became a topic of discussion at all official events commemorating the thirty years since the military coup. On the other hand, a popular soap opera titled “Montecristo” that argentinizes the Alexandre Dumas novel, dramatizes the problems that *Abuelas* face in searching for their grandchildren in societies prone to collective amnesia. In one of the most-watched episodes, punctuated by commercials showing faces of the disappeared children that the mothers are still searching for, two sisters, played by Paola Krum and Viviana Saccone, face the difficult task of recognizing that they share a traumatic past as daughters of the disappeared.

In the early years of the constitutional government, some memory communities regarded the grandmothers with distrust, because they were taking children away from the military families who were raising them in a Christian way to be good citizens. *La historia oficial* (1985), an Oscar-winning film that also featured an *abuela* in a leading role, had left the most polemical topic of post-dictatorial Argentina unresolved by closing with the image of a child rocking on a chair while listening to a canonic song about memory and forgetfulness titled *En el país del no me acuerdo*, by María Elena Walsh. At the end of the film, the question of whether the child who was adopted by a couple with ties to the military regime would stay with her adoptive parents or go with her biological grandmother, remained deliberately up in the air. In the case of “Montecristo,” the huge effect that it had on public opinion was harder to foresee. It resulted in an increased number of calls to the *Abuelas* organization from viewers in their late twenties who had doubts about their

identity and wanted to submit themselves to DNA testing. In a recent homage to *Abuelas*, at which Carlotto presided, she appeared at the Plaza de Mayo surrounded by 85 recovered children of *desaparecidos*, who chanted “Gracias Abuelas” among balloons, clowns, puppets and performances by “*Miranda!*” and Marcela Bublick.¹⁹ The politico-sentimental nature of the event was underlined by the fact that *Abuelas* and H.I.J.O.S. hired the child actors from Hugo Midón’s company to perform at the ceremony.²⁰ The event was organized to celebrate the “día de la identidad” a holiday declared in honor of *Abuelas* as homage to their cause.

Mothers and *Abuelas* participate in a debate about memory construction that recognizes the need to transfer the knowledge of a traumatic past to future generations. These debates have focused on the representation of the disappeared. At the level of the referent, we know that eighty percent of the missing were between the ages of 18 and 35. We also know that their bodies were tortured, pulverized, chained, raped, and thrown to the sea from planes. Although the group was diverse and included militants, bystanders and people who simply had bad luck, the military lumped them together under the label of “subversives.” The label erased the previous identity of the person, who became dehumanized at all levels. The photos of the disappeared “subversives” aim to remember the person as a whole body, young, beautiful and unaware of the horrific fate that awaits him or her. For Taylor, the photos that the mothers exhibit “are powerful evocations of their loved ones that, arguably, inadvertently hide the very violence they aim to reveal” (142). For Silva Catela, they

¹⁹ This event took place at the Plaza de Mayo on October 24, 2006.

²⁰ The designation H.I.J.O.S. stands for “Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio” [Children of the Disappeared for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence]. The organization, founded in 1995, inherited the mothers’ crusade against forgetfulness and impunity. However, their emphasis is on seeking justice in the name of their disappeared parents through their equally performatic marches named “escraches.”

have a “vivifying” component, by seeking to keep alive the memory of the dead (155).

And here it is worth pointing out that, even though Bonafini and Carlotto seem to polarize themselves by representing two very different models of female political activism, they also have a lot in common. Although Bonafini was critical of the *abuelas*' sentimental strategies on behalf of the child, her recent speeches against war and globalization at the Córdoba Summit in the company of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez were also dominated by the postmortem presence of her disappeared sons. An echo of domesticity appeared in her political speech when she said evoking their memory: “Cuando mis hijos me decían, mami, mirá Cuba, yo no entendía nada [...] Hijos queridos se cumplieron sus sueños [...] América se está uniendo”. [When my children used to say to me, Mom, look at Cuba, I was completely ignorant of what was going on.[...] Dear children your dreams have come true. [...] America is becoming united.]²¹ In a complicated process of ventriloquism Bonafini represents herself as inhabited by the political project of her sons. When she says that one day one of her children will cross the plaza to enter the pink house, not to be next to the president but to be president, she is not referring to a woman like herself but to a member of a later generation, perhaps even Kirchner, who will inherit her cause.

Ideologically speaking the group *Abuelas* is closer to *Madres Línea Fundadora* than to the more radical mothers in Bonafini's camp. Thus, it is not an accident that, in the context of a revival in the making, *Clarín* chose to highlight the image of Carlotto hugging Kirchner and not the other way around. After all, as the newspaper article indicated, both Carlotto and Bonafini offered Kirchner a “pañuelo” with the names of their respective organizations engraved. From a pragmatic point of view in a society that has not always

²¹ For a transcription of Bonafini's speech on July 22, 2006 see <http://www.aporrea.org/dameverbo.php?docid=81145>

welcomed female political activism, the more sentimental and practical task of *abuelas* seems more palatable. On the one hand, the desexualized figure of an *abuela* as a living memory archive is less charged than that of the mother. The cause of children in distress who can still be saved is less threatening than that of revolutionary sons and daughters who were killed for their radical political ideas. However, in spite of their class and ideological differences, *madres* and *abuelas* are united in a culture of remembrance that depends on the circulation of visual artifacts. As memory custodians of the nation their function is to combat the political amnesia favored by the right. Although mothers and grandmothers have different political strategies for the transmission of memory to future generations, they are still in the circle together, questioning our desires to establish a teleological chronology between dictatorship and post-dictatorship, the present and the past.

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