

Mothers Misread: Conflicting Iconographies of the Plaza de Mayo



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Introduction

*"I am a mother. I have two sons and a daughter-in-law disappeared. I like to cook and I have no education beyond the sixth grade; I don't have any degrees."*¹
—Hebe de Bonafini, 1986

These were the opening words of Hebe de Bonafini, first president of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, as she spoke to two attendees of Argentina's First National Women's Meeting in 1986. To the contemporary reader, Bonafini's statement might read as a traditionalist, even conservative, ideal of femininity. In reality, however, Bonafini spearheaded one of Argentina's most influential nontraditional social movements, formed in the throes of a brutal dictatorship at the end of the twentieth century. That Bonafini introduces the Madres de Plaza de Mayo through her role as a mother and individual targets a central irony in the organization. Since its establishment in 1977, Argentina's Madres de Plaza de Mayo has been envisioned through and about individual mothers' experiences of loss, but enacted via collective political protest. This paper will examine the intersection of individualistic and collectivist imagery produced by and about the Madres' movement in the final three decades of the twentieth century.

The Madres de Plaza de Mayo emerged in response to Argentina's Dirty War, carried out under Argentina's last dictatorship lasting from approximately 1976 - 1983. The Dirty War, so-called for its tactics of brutal authoritarian repression, followed a cascade of dictatorial regimes from the 1930s through 1950s.² What ostensibly began as a crusade by Argentina's constitutional government in the name of national security became the entry point for a brutal military government,³ led by former army general Jorge Rafael Videla, in a

¹ Nancy Saporta Sternbach and Zelia Brizeno, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini: President of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo," *Feminist Teacher* 3, no. 1 (1987): 16.

² Donald Hodges, *Argentina's Dirty War: An Intellectual Biography* (University of Texas Press, 1991), ix.

³ *Ibid.*

1976 coup.⁴ The military regime relied on tactics of terror, targeting Peronists, Socialists, and members of the Third World Church⁵ (among other political “subversives”) long after any real threat of guerilla warfare had been leveled. Notorious in Argentine history is the disappearance of several thousand such subversives, known simply as *los desaparecidos*.⁶ The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, established under Argentina’s restored democracy in 1983, confirmed the disappearance of 8,960 people over the course of the Dirty War – a figure by no means considered exhaustive. The total number of people killed during the Dirty War is now estimated around 30,000.⁷ These *desaparecidos* were kidnapped from their homes, schools, work, and even off of the street, taken to one of 340 concentration camps for torture and assassination. In effort to conceal state violence, bodies of the victims were incinerated, buried in clandestine locations, or (most infamously) thrown into the sea.⁸ The majority of these “desaparecidos” were young adults between twenty and thirty years of age.⁹ Because the military junta targeted young activists, the vast majority of desaparecidos left behind living mothers; it is amongst these mothers that the Madres’ movement took shape.

Las Madres originally comprised fourteen mothers of these desaparecidos, who gathered at Buenos Aires’s famed Plaza de Mayo on April 30, 1977 with the intention of speaking to President Videla about their children’s whereabouts.¹⁰ When told by police that they could no longer loiter in Plaza de Mayo, the mothers began to march in circles about the square.¹¹ Within three weeks, the fourteen Madres had swelled to sixteen; by June 1977,

⁴ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994), 19.

⁵ Ibid., 176–7.

⁶ Donald Hodges, *Argentina’s Dirty War*, x.

⁷ Cynthia L. Bejarano, “Las Super Madres de Latino America: Transforming Motherhood by Challenging Violence in Mexico, Argentina, and El Salvador,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 1 (2002): 126.

⁸ Marjorie Agosin, *Circles of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo/Círculos de Locura: Madres de La Plaza de Mayo*, trans. Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman (White Pine Press, 1992), 1.

⁹ Marysa Navarro, “The Personal Is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo,” in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements, Updated and Expanded Edition*, ed. Susan Eva Eckstein (University of California Press, 2020), 200–201.

¹⁰ Bejarano, “Las Super Madres,” 132; Navarro, “The Personal Is Political,” 203.

¹¹ Marysa Navarro, “The Personal Is Political,” 204.

over one hundred mothers had joined the cause.¹² It was not until 1979 that the Madres established a formal organization, but by 1982, the organization had a membership of 2,500 mothers.¹³ Despite kidnappings and arrests within their ranks, the Madres remained active.¹⁴ They march every Thursday at 3:30 PM before Argentina's governmental residence the *Casa Rosada* in Plaza de Mayo to this day.¹⁵ Their demonstrations demand a specifically articulated goal: recognition and records of the thousands lost under Argentina's brutal dictatorship.

Beside the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, a partner organization emerged in the form of the Abuelas. The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, also established in 1979, comprised women whose grandchildren disappeared under the dictatorship. Many missing grandchildren were themselves the children of desaparecidos – either abducted with their parents or born in concentration camps across the country.¹⁶ Yet another sector of children were left orphaned when their parents were kidnapped; among these children, many were taken to the police and illegally adopted by wealthy members of the junta, therefore becoming a new semblance of the desaparecido.¹⁷ Twelve grandmothers followed in the footsteps of the Madres, meeting originally as the “Abuelas Argentinas con Nietitos Desaparecidos” (“Argentine Grandmothers with Disappeared Grandchildren”) and eventually becoming the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. They partnered with the Madres, collecting photos of kidnapped women and their children and presenting writs of habeas corpus before Argentine judges.¹⁸ Like the Madres, the Abuelas continue their work in Plaza de Mayo today.

As organizations composed solely of women, the Madres and Abuelas must be read within the context of women's roles in twentieth-century Argentina. Considering the patriarchal society in which these women lived, the act of marching in public was itself a

¹² Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 70.

¹³ Navarro, “The Personal Is Political,” 203.

¹⁴ Ibid. 205–06.

¹⁵ Bejarano, “Las Super Madres,” 132.

¹⁶ Navarro, “The Personal Is Political,” 203.

¹⁷ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 179; Rita Arditti, *Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza De Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina* (University of California Press, 1999), 62.

¹⁸ Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 55–56.

radical form of protest. The fourteen Madres who gathered in Plaza de Mayo in 1977 were largely housewives. Those few mothers who worked held the limited jobs available to Argentine women in the mid-twentieth century; they were primary-school teachers or social and retail employees.¹⁹ During the 1930s and 1940s, only men attended higher education in Argentina, meaning that the women who were mothers by the time of the Dirty War remained largely uneducated and unemployed.²⁰ Women's limited opportunities are a recurring theme within the Madres' autobiographical accounts. Hebe de Bonafini declares that, prior to the establishment of the Madres, "women were the consequence of their husbands: washing and ironing."²¹ Another mother writes, in a similarly despairing tone, that Argentina's "daughters had no possibilities other than graduating as teachers."²²

Significantly, "motherhood" in particular operated as a tool of misogynistic repression in Argentina during the dictatorship. Historian Cynthia Bejarano situates the state of women's rights in Argentina in the twentieth century within a larger history of Latin American familial expectation. She argues that "Latinas are expected to enact their citizenship in their roles as wives and as mothers raising respectable citizens of the state."²³ In Argentina, women's subordinate role in the family was reinforced just before the dictatorship under the administration of President Isabel Perón. Amongst other decisions which set back women's autonomy, Perón vetoed a policy which would have given women and men equal legal rights over their children.²⁴ The junta in Argentina relied on traditional household gender roles for legitimacy, often metaphorizing the nation as "una gran familia" ("a big family") with the military serving as "father."²⁵ In this model, the mother was an apolitical, domestic figure nonetheless essential in sustaining the metaphorical father and

¹⁹ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²¹ Nancy Saporta Sternbach and Zelia Brizeno, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini: President of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo," *Feminist Teacher* 3, no. 1 (1987): 17

²² Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death*, trans. Maria Proser and Matthew Proser (Curbstone Press, 1997), 15.

²³ Bejarano, "Las Super Madres," 143.

²⁴ Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 79.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

children of the nation. Motherhood was, therefore, inculcated into the nationalist project of Videla's government.²⁶ The female body also became a site of political control under the dictatorship, in that sexual assault was a common form of torture for female protestors.²⁷

Scholars have assigned meaning to the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo within broader social and political movements. Cynthia Bejarano identifies the Madres as the catalyst for a wave of "motherist activism," which demands rights for Latin American children, most recently in Mexico and El Salvador.²⁸ Marysa Navarro argues convincingly that the Madres and Abuelas transformed motherhood into a political category, citing members' disengagement with social and political protest prior to 1977 in contrast with their profound global impact.²⁹ Bouvard claims that the Madres' marches in front of the Casa Rosada were "but the first step in what would become a long act of defiance against the terrorist state established by the junta."³⁰ All three scholars share a tendency to read the Madres as part of a larger political project – whether that project be feminist, democratizing, or other. Significantly, however, the Madres and Abuelas themselves are quite resistant to such affiliations. The Madres' slogan "Bring Them Back Alive," adopted in 1984, stands a testament to their focus on retrieving information about the desaparecidos above all else.³¹ Their movement remains focused on this one goal, and even in collaborations with organizations like the National Movement of Housewives or the Socialist Feminist Center de Justo, they wield publicity only to promote their individual search for Argentina's missing children.³² Embedded in this isolationist approach to social change lies a central irony of the Madres' movement: while isolationist in their political goals, the Madres function through a structure of protest rooted in solidarity. Their weekly marches around Plaza de Mayo have nothing if not power in numbers. This paper will examine the visual and rhetorical

²⁶ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 19.

²⁷ Bejarano, "Las Super Madres," 137.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁹ Navarro, "The Personal Is Political," 197.

³⁰ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

³² *Ibid.*, 191.

iconography of the Madres' movement as a central site of this irony. An examination of written and visual materials produced by the Madres themselves reveals the mother's individualistic approach to social change, whereas comparable materials produced about the Madres from outside their ranks embraces a collectivist attitude. Comparative analysis reveals that the Madres de Plaza de Mayo envisioned an isolationist movement based upon individual struggle, while their work has been interpreted in popular culture and scholarship as a solidarity movement rooted in collective experience.

From Within: Individualistic Rhetoric and Isolationist Project

The language of the movement partially evinces the individualistic mode of social change envisioned by the Madres, which relies often on individual narratives as a catalyst for social change. Hebe de Bonafini's poignant "*I am a mother. I have two sons and a daughter-in-law disappeared. I like to cook and I have no education beyond the sixth grade; I don't have any degrees*" (italics mine) is in keeping with the individualistic rhetoric of many Madres' accounts.³³ Emblematic of this approach is a collection of Madres' testimonies, compiled by member Matilde Mellibovsky in 1997 under the title *Circle of Love Over Death*. The book comprises twenty-one mothers' stories, each written from the first-person point of view. The testimonies are grouped by subject ("The Children," "The Search and the Wait," "The Mothers Go to the Plaza"), yet they appear as individual narratives. The women orient themselves as individuals constructing and experiencing history. Gardella de Ackerman, mother of the disappeared Leticia Mabel Ackerman, for example, reflects, "When I think about Leticia, everything I remember is good, positive; but of course I am partial."³⁴ Notably, in Gardella's history, the story of Leticia is mediated through her mother's own memory. The mother as an individual (the *I*) becomes the subject experiencing the grief of the Dirty War and therefore prompting social change. María Ardela Gard de Antokoletz, mother of the

³³ Sternbach and Brizeno, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 16.

³⁴ Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death*, trans. Maria Proser and Matthew Proser (Curbstone Press, 1997), 8.

disappeared Daniel Victor Antokoletz, provides a particularly striking example of this first-person narrative, locating as the beginning of her testimony her own childhood. She writes, “I was born in San Nicolás de los Arroyos in the bosom of a family deeply rooted in the city. I grew up surrounded by love and devotion; I was protected and educated.”³⁵ In María’s testimony, the self again becomes an essential focus of the Madres and the starting point for their efforts. This individualistic rhetoric in both interviews and testimonies aligns with the isolationist intent of the Madres – one witnessed in the creative production of the movement.

The isolation of the movement manifested partly as gender separatism – that is, the exclusion of men in both the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. The organizations retained their gender separatist approach for reasons personal and political. Hebe de Bonafini addresses men’s exclusion explicitly in her 1986 interview, recalling that “there were a lot of times when the fathers wanted to have a say in what we were doing, but even then we maintained our distance.”³⁶ She contends, “we’re stronger than men,” citing the fact that “in those early years, more fathers than mothers died from the desperation” of their children’s disappearances.³⁷ Although murky in its historical credibility – how exactly Bonafini determines that a parent “died from the desperation” remains unclear – this quote reflects an ethos of gender separatism in the movement. The Madres relied on rhetoric of their own strength relative to their husbands, in part as emotional fodder for their protest. Pragmatically, the exclusion of men also functioned to protect the Madres from political retaliation. Scholars such as Navarro have explained that “The junta did not recognize the political nature of the Madres’ actions”³⁸ because “mothers were not perceived as political subjects” and their “actions were therefore politically invisible.”³⁹ She reflects that the government’s inability to perceive a women-only organization as a political threat “was

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

³⁶ Sternbach and Brizenó, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 19.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Navarro, “The Personal Is Political,” 204.

³⁹ Ibid., 209.

crucial for the evolution of the movement because it gave the women the necessary time to strengthen their resolve, contact other mothers, establish an informal organization, and engage in other activities.”⁴⁰ Gender separatism therefore operated as a political tactic as well as an interpersonal preference. Isolation from men can be identified as one facet of the Madres’ broader isolationist approach to social change.

Isolation from men appears, throughout the iconography of the Madres’ work, in a focus on the female body. Interviews and testimonies provided by the Madres share an interest in the maternal body as a site of political mobilization. Several mothers refer to pregnancy, either metaphorically or literally, thereby positioning their struggle within the female body. Lola Weinschelbaum de Rubino, one of the twenty-one Madres given voice in Mellibovsky’s book, exemplifies this focus on pregnancy. She begins the story of her disappeared daughter Raquel del Carmen as “an unexpected pregnancy,” thus centering her bodily experience of motherhood.⁴¹ In the same way, Poeme Gardella de Akerman describes her daughter Leticia as having been “breast-fed on the craving for justice.”⁴² Again, in this testimony, the mother’s body – the breast-feeding body – becomes a living participant in the story of the disappeared child. Hebe de Bonafini’s interview galvanizes similar language of pregnancy to interpret and express the experience of the Madres. Bonafini at one point claims that her children “gave birth to” her⁴³ and makes the poignant comment, “For me, when a mother’s children have been taken from her, she remains pregnant forever.”⁴⁴ This language highlighted the mothers’ bodily experience of rearing and losing the desaparecidos. In doing so, the rhetoric inherently isolated men from the Madres’ project. In an overturning of histories of reproductive rights abuses, the female body became the site of political focus and inspiration – an inspiration that fathers could not access.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 205.

⁴¹ Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death*, 11.

⁴² Ibid., 9.

⁴³ Sternbach and Brizeno, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

Pregnant women also inhabit a central place in the visual iconography produced by the Madres. Figure 1 (shown below), depicting the front page of the tenth bulletin published by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, visually captures the individual female body as a locus of power. Figures 2 through 5 (also below) all depict pregnant silhouettes plastered on walls in Buenos Aires during the early 1980s. The pregnant women can be identified as associated with the Madres' movement by virtue either of written reference to desaparecidos in the images or the shape of the pañuelo – the handkerchief worn by the Madres as they march-around their heads.⁴⁵ Figure 3, for example, identifies the pregnant silhouette as “María José Rapela de Mangone, desaparecida julio 1977” (“disappeared July 1977”).⁴⁶ Figure 5, in addition to marking its subject with the pañuelo, labels the desaparecida as “Gabriela Gariquiborde de Repeur” who was six months pregnant (“embarazada de 6 meses”) and disappeared on September 30, 1976.⁴⁷ That the pregnant women in all four of these posters stand alone (figures 2 and 3 show posters positioned beside one another, but the silhouettes remain in individual frames) reinforces the association between the female pregnant body and isolation in the Madres' movement; the female body was an icon which divided the Madres' work from Argentine men.

⁴⁵ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 181.

⁴⁶ Daniel García, “Dos siluetas de una pareja de desaparecidos permanecen pegadas en las inmediaciones de Plaza de Mayo,” *Colección Gráfica Política: Archivo de Artistas Juan Carlos Romero 1930-2017*, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1983
[https://archivosenuso.org/search/node/embarazada#viewer=/viewer/590&js=.](https://archivosenuso.org/search/node/embarazada#viewer=/viewer/590&js=)

⁴⁷ Edward Shaw, “Primer Siluetazo, silueta de una mujer embarazada sobre muro urbano,” *Colección Gráfica Política: Archivo de Artistas Juan Carlos Romero 1930-2017*, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1983,
[https://archivosenuso.org/search/node/embarazada#viewer=/viewer/650&js=.](https://archivosenuso.org/search/node/embarazada#viewer=/viewer/650&js=)

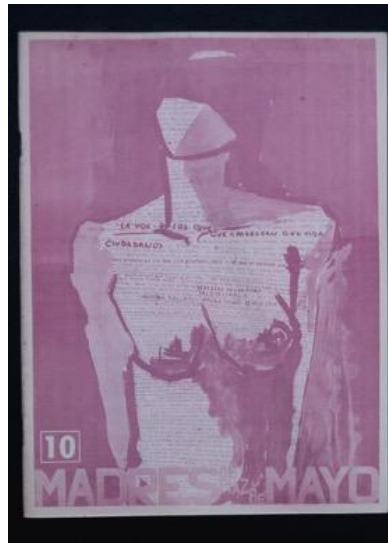


Figure 1. *Portada del décimo Boletín de Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 1982*



Figure 2. *“Embarazada,” afiche en una calle de Buenos Aires, undated*



Figure 3. *Dos siluetas de una pareja de desaparecidos permanecen pegadas en las inmediaciones de Plaza de Mayo, 1983*



Figure 4. *Primer Siluetazo, silueta de mujer embarazada pidiendo Aparición con vida, 1983*



Figure 5. *Primer Siluetazo, silueta de una mujer embarazada sobre muro urbano, 1983*

The Madres' dislocation from Catholic iconography provides another instance of their isolationist approach to social change. Although many Madres were Catholic, the movement found little solace in the Catholic church.⁴⁸ Bishops and priests alike condemned the Madres for lacking faith in god, declaring that the answer to their struggle lay in prayer rather than mobilization.⁴⁹ The Madres were particularly resistant to Catholic gender constructs like Marianismo – a movement based in comparison of Catholic women to the self-sacrificing figure of the Virgin Mary. Historian Marguerite Guzman explains the Madres' rejection of this association with the Virgin Mary, writing:

In popular culture she is portrayed as a grieving woman, draped in a black mantilla and praying for the souls of her sinful menfolk to whom she is nonetheless submissive. The Mothers do not need feminist theory to understand how the traditional female role reinforces a repressive system. They have refused to mourn or weep for their children because they have concluded that such behavior helps the

⁴⁸ Navarro, "The Personal Is Political," 204.

⁴⁹ Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 61.

government dominate them by absorbing the energy that should be used for political struggle. The Mothers do not wish to be seen as grieving women – they are fighters.⁵⁰

Guzman contextualizes the Madres' rejection of Catholic iconography via a rejection of the gender roles imposed upon Argentine women by the Catholic church and the ideology of Marianismo. The Madres' repudiation of passive grieving, as an extension of their religious disaffiliation, is symbolized in the form of the white handkerchief worn about their heads. These kerchiefs, known by their Spanish name *pañuelos*, are meant to evoke the swaddling shawls of a baby. The white of the pañuelo provides a contrast from the "black mantilla" of the mourning Virgin Mary. Rather than grief, the pañuelo symbolizes strength, hope, and solidarity amongst the mothers. The shawls are often tied together into long ropes to protect young protestors from the violence of Argentine police.⁵¹ The white of the shawls and their use as mechanisms of empowerment in the face of grief provide an iconographic break from the Catholic church, further isolating the Madres' movement.

More surprising than the Madres' rejection of male participation and Catholicism was their pointed dislocation from feminist movements. Hebe de Bonafini articulates clearly in her 1986 interview, "We're not feminists."⁵² Admittedly, Bonafini's understanding of the term "feminist" must itself be defined before her position can be understood by contemporary readers. She reads feminism as a "vindication of the clitoris," reducing Argentine feminism to a frivolous request for sexual liberation.⁵³ The conditions that Bonafini advocates – equality with men and development of a "consciousness as women," do indeed resonate with contemporary feminist rhetoric.⁵⁴ Regardless of this semantic complication, however, Bonafini's words reflect a disinclination amongst the Madres to align politically with the cause of women's rights. Despite their collaboration with the National Movement of Housewives and their guest appearances on women's radio and television

⁵⁰ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 184.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵² Sternbach and Brizeno, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

programs, the Madres have remained vocally wary of feminist movements which privilege the professional classes or attempt to extricate women from maternal identities. Guzman explains their disinterest in feminism for its own sake through a lens of intersectional struggle. She argues that “their male and female children’s political activism” – and the disappearance of those children – “is a more potent factor in their motivation than the feminists’ task of transforming views on gender.”⁵⁵ That is, for the Madres, the dismantling of patriarchal structures itself is not an ultimate goal; rather, patriarchy must be dismantled as it intersectionally produces an obstacle to the primary goal of the Madres: the recognition and return of the desaparecidos.

As a final instance of their isolationist rhetoric, the Madres and Abuelas remain staunchly isolated from Argentine political actors. Bonafini stated clearly in 1986 that the Madres’ movement had “no intention of allying with a political party.”⁵⁶ In the “Declaration of Principles and Affidavit of the Grandmothers of the Plaza De Mayo,” released in 1982, the Abuelas project the same politically unaffiliated stance. They declare themselves “[un]motivated by any political objective,” confirming, “No one has called us together, no one directs us or uses us.” They explain, rather, “We are against violence and against any type of terrorism, private or state.”⁵⁷ The Abuelas act, like the Madres, to promote their particular project and theirs in isolation. From the focus on individual Madres’ narratives to the politically unaffiliated stance of the movements, the Madres and Abuelas maintain an individualistic approach to social change in their rhetoric and iconography.

From Without: The Madres as a Collective

While individualistic iconography produced by the Madres imbues the movement with an isolationist bent, rhetoric produced about the Madres from external sources tends to frame the Madres as part of broader political structures. This collectivist understanding of

⁵⁵ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 191.

⁵⁶ Sternbach and Brizeno, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 19.

⁵⁷ Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 61.

the Madres is evidenced partially in verbal and visual language, which posits members as a group rather than independently grieving women. Where Matilde Mellibovsky's *Circle of Love Over Death* relied on isolated testimonies, Marjorie Agosín, Chilean author and professor of Latin American literature at Wellesley College, explored the Madres together in her 1992 poetry collection *Circles of Madness*. She describes the mothers most often in the plural. She details "The kerchiefs that *they* tie" (emphasis added) in one poem.⁵⁸ In another, she writes, "*They* patiently name them, as if dealing with legends. / But *they* are *their* children and no one attends the ceremonies."⁵⁹ With this pluralistic language, Agosín reveals her own reading of the Madres as one collective rather than individual. She sees the mothers as a group of protestors, rather than women who grieve independently for individual children. In perhaps the most intriguing linguistic move, Agosín even situates herself within the Madres' point of view. She writes often in the first-person plural. "Here are our albums," she declares: "We are the mothers of the / disappeared. / We collect / their faces in these photographs / and we often talk with them / and we ask ourselves / *Who will caress / Graciela's hair? / What have they done with Andres' / little body?*"⁶⁰ Agosín's decision to position herself within the Madres' collective struggle is particularly interesting, as it reflects an impulse on the part of onlookers to identify themselves within the Madres' movement. So doing, they expand the meaning of the social struggle beyond the particular context of the desaparecidos and Argentina's Dirty War. In a sense, this is the same impulse that prompts historians like Bejarano, Navarro, and Bouvard to locate the Madres within larger feminist and democratizing social movements throughout history.

The collective perspective projected from outside the movement upon the Madres is likewise manifest in visual iconography – murals, posters, and photographs created by outside actors tend to depict the Madres in groups rather than individually. Figure 6 shows

⁵⁸ Agosín, *Circles of Madness*, 33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

one such mural, envisioning the Madres as a crowd of marching pañuelo-clad heads.⁶¹

Figures 7 and 8 provide two photographs of the Madres marching as a collective front. Both photos depict the Madres from the exterior of the crowd, producing a gaze that looks upon the protesters – and the movement more broadly – from the outside in. In contrast to the individual pregnant women featured in so many murals from the Madres, figures 6 through 8 feature a collection of Madres, matching the pluralistic rhetoric of Agosín's poetry.



Figure 6. *Mural de apoyo a las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, undated*



Figure 7. *Última marcha de Madres de Plaza de Mayo bajo la dictadura, 1983*

⁶¹ Roberto Amigo, "Mural de apoyo a las Madres de Plaza de Mayo," *Colección Grafica Politica: Archivo de Artistas Juan Carlos Romero 1930–2017*, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, undated, <https://archivosenuso.org/search/node/madres?page=1#viewer=/viewer/482&js=>.



Figure 8. *Circles of Madness* frontispiece, undated, published 1992

This collectivist understanding of the Madres promulgated from outside the movement became a means to political solidarity with other causes. One particularly interesting poster, published for the *Día Internacional de la Mujer* in 1984, exemplifies the common practice of situating the Madres as a collective in solidarity with larger political struggles. The poster, depicted in figure 9, is titled *Madres de la Plaza, los artistas las abrazan* (in English, “Mothers of the plaza, artists embrace them”). This title identifies the poster as a document of not only the Madres themselves, but Argentine artists’ reactions to their movement. The poster contains three sketches of the mothers holding photos of their children, drawn by modern Argentine artist Carlos Alonso. An extensive caption accompanies the sketches, calling viewers to march at the Plaza de Mayo in celebration of International Women’s Day on March 8th.⁶² The caption

⁶² “Madres de la Plaza, los artistas las abrazan,” *Colección Gráfica Política: Archivo de Artistas Juan Carlos Romero 1930–2017*, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1984, <https://archivosenuso.org/search/node/madres#viewer=/viewer/1824&js=>.



Figure 9. *Madres de la Plaza, los artistas las abrazan*, 1984

embodies the collectivist language emblematic of external representations of the Madres. Like Marjorie Agosín's *Circles of Madness*, the poster's text employs the second-person plural. With declarations such as, "*Sentimos que el arte es un camino para la más profunda identificación con la vida*" ("*We feel that art is a path for the most profound identification with life*") and "*vemos en la mujer la esperanza activa de la paz y de la nueva vida*" ("*We see in women active hope for peace and new life*"), the poster sets its authors and readers within a larger collective that looks upon and implicates the Madres (italics mine).⁶³ That the Madres are discussed not only in the plural, but in the first-person plural echoes the collectivist positioning in Agosín's poetry.

⁶³ "Madres de la Plaza, los artistas las abrazan."

The pluralizing language of the poster assumes an explicitly political valence through the association between the Madres and International Women's Day. In contrast to Hebe de Bonafini's pointed "We're not feminist," the pairing of the Madres with International Women's Day implicates their movement within a global feminist struggle.⁶⁴ The poster indeed demands that *the woman* is "la más marginada entre los marginados, la más despreciada en la hora del desprecio" ("the most marginal amongst the marginalized, the most despised in the hour of contempt").⁶⁵ This absolutizing language not only links the Madres' search for desaparecidos to the feminist political project; it declares the feminist project to be the ultimate political motive – women being the "most marginal" and "most despised" of peoples – towards which the Madres work. The poster ultimately calls upon Argentines to march not for the desaparecidos, but for all women everywhere. While the Madres envisioned their demands as an intersectional struggle for individual desaparecidos, in which gender formed one obstacle, the poster repositions gender as the center point of the movement.⁶⁶ The poster thus exemplifies the tendency of rhetoric and iconography produced outside the Madres to discuss the movement as a collective political struggle, functioning in solidarity with broader political movements, but obfuscating the Madres' original intentions.

Conclusion

Comparison of the iconography promulgated by the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo with the iconography constructed about them from without their movements demonstrates a discrepancy in the intentions and perceptions of their project. Where the language and visuals produced *by* these movements represented the women as individuals and their project as an isolationist cause, artistic production from outsiders envisioned a collective of mothers in solidarity with various liberatory projects. The story of the Madres

⁶⁴ Sternbach and Brizeno, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 20.

⁶⁵ "Madres de la Plaza, los artistas las abrazan."

⁶⁶ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 191.

and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo in dialogue with the world around them is therefore a story of misalignment. Outside actors have co-opted the imagery of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo as symbols of feminism and democracy, often without centering the Madres' ultimate goal of political redress for Argentina's desaparecidos. They have rendered the Madres a symbol of feminism and democracy, even when the Madres themselves attempted to elide those generalizing identifiers.

The explanation for this political misalignment lies, I would argue, in the figure of the mother – a figure so universal and yet so diverse in meaning that various political actors naturally reinterpreted the Madres through their own perceptions of motherhood. To explain this interpretation, I look to one final form of art inspired by the Madres: the song *Siempre Viva*, written by Argentine singer Teresa Parodi and dedicated to Hebe de Bonafini. Released in 2023, Parodi's song does not belong to the archive of late twentieth-century Madres-inspired art on which my research relies.⁶⁷ It does, however, provide a framework for understanding the iconographic and rhetorical disconnect that has existed in depictions of Madres since our period of historical focus and persists in historical memory. Throughout her 2023 ballad, Parodi describes Hebe de Bonafini as “Madre eterna del pueblo” or “Eternal mother of the community.”⁶⁸ In the chorus, Parodi sings, “Madre eterna del pueblo / no te olvido te abrazo / no te pierdo te encuentro / no te lloro te canto” (“Eternal mother of the community / I do not forget you, I embrace you / I do not lose you, I find you / I do not cry for you, I sing to you”).⁶⁹ With these lyrics, Parodi claims Hebe de Bonafini as a universal mother – one of the *pueblo* with whom the singer can speak directly. Her words reflect the essential historical rewriting of the Madres charted in rhetorical and iconographic representations. Try as they might to promote an individual and isolated movement advocating only for the return of desaparecidos, the Madres became symbols of solidarity

⁶⁷ “Siempre Viva,” by Teresa Parodi, track 6 on *Retrato de Familia*, Sony Music Entertainment Argentina, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzvMCUvdkUw>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

movements by virtue of the audiences who perceived them and the artists – both literary and visual – who spread their ideals.

The failure of the Madres to isolate their movement in artistic and historiographic renderings hints at a broader historical truth. The movement has ultimately been defined not by the Madres or Abuelas themselves, but by the historical actors perceiving their work. The Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo has taken on a life of its own in popular and historical memory – one that transcends beyond its members' own intentions. It therefore serves as a testament to a social movement defined not only by those who promulgated it, but also by those who received its rhetoric.

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