Occupied Bodies and Political Space: Argentina's Abortion Enigma

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Argentina's Abortion Enigma

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Bibliography
Introduction

Why has Argentina, which has adopted progressive social legislation on other issues, not been able to liberalize its restrictive abortion laws, especially given the thousands of women who each year risk life and health obtaining clandestine abortions? Argentina has restrictive abortion laws that make abortion illegal in all cases except when the abortion is done to protect the health or life of the mother or when the pregnancy resulted from rape. Despite this, large numbers of women obtain illegal abortions, resulting in significant public health impacts including a disproportionately large number of maternal deaths. While many other Latin American countries have restrictive abortion laws, unlike many other countries, Argentina has adopted numerous socially progressive laws, passing same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, and a remarkably progressive transgender law. This makes it puzzling that restrictions on abortion have not been altered in any significant way.

Below I will give a brief overview of the subject of abortion in Argentina and then outline some of the posited reasons as to why abortion remains illegal. I will assess each one and discuss how these explanations -- the Catholic Church, State interests and interventions, lack of political will and split public opinion, as well as a supposed disconnect between private action and publicly professed views -- all seem to be incomplete, and can be enriched by further exploration. The main body of my thesis uses three non-traditional sources—Eva Peròn’s autobiography, La razón de mi vida (The Reason for My Life), The Little School, Alicia Partnoy’s semi-fictional short stories about a concentration camp she was held in during the Military Dictatorship (1976-1983), and the way in which the actions and writings of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo) established their real and symbolic “place” in Argentine public and political life --- to explore the means by which women have negotiated
access to public and political spaces. I do so because I believe that all three help explain how they both embody and have helped create some of the less visible obstructions to legalizing (or decriminalizing) abortion. I hope to be able to connect this exploration to the limitations and influences on women currently wielding political power, and, in particular, on current president Cristina Kirchner’s administration, which has pressed for the other progressive reforms I have mentioned, but is unwilling to publicly discuss, much less press for, significant abortion reform.
Chapter 1: Introducing the “Enigma”

Abortion in Argentina: An Overview

Argentina largely bans abortion, with limited exceptions. Argentine law permits abortions performed to save the life of the mother or to avoid serious danger to her health if the “risk can be avoided in no other way.”¹ The Argentine Penal Code defines abortion as a “crime against life” and a doctor who performs an abortion with the consent of the pregnant woman can receive one to four years in prison.² A woman who illegally obtains or “causes her own” abortion can also be imprisoned for up to four years.³ However, unlike the situation in some other Latin American countries (e.g. Chile), Argentine women who seek hospital care when they have post-(illegal)-abortion complications are not typically arrested.⁴

Until very recently, one of the only occasions that could result in a legal abortion was if a woman who was mentally ill or insane (mujer idiota o demente) was impregnated as a result of rape.⁵ Before a ruling by the Supreme Court in 2012, doctors seeking to avoid legal difficulties often required women who meet the criteria to obtain legal abortions to first get the permission of a judge. Judges could object to granting permission on moral grounds, even if the abortion was permitted under the provisions of the penal code.⁶ Recently, the Supreme Court of Argentina ruled that rape victims could obtain abortions without the consent of a judge, if they provided the doctor with an affidavit attesting to having been raped.⁷ However, despite this ruling -- which

² Ibid., Article 35.
³ Ibid., Article 88.
⁵ Ibid. While this is controverted by some, there was a clear lack of legal clarity in the language of the law regarding whether abortions that were to terminate pregnancies due to rape were punishable, not punishable, or legal under the law.
only marginally expands access to abortion for raped women and which some argued was already the case before the ruling—even women who are raped cannot count on having their rights enforced. Mauricio Macri, the mayor of Buenos Aires, tried to ‘veto’ the decision that “establish[ed] that women should be able to receive an abortion in public and private hospitals in the case of rape, with no more requirement than her consent” by attempting to stop the first legal abortion in Buenos Aires from taking place.⁸ Women living outside of the Buenos Aires province face even greater difficulty gaining access to safe and legal abortion.⁹

**Health Impacts**

While statistics vary greatly as to the exact number of women who obtain abortions annually in Argentina, it is clear that the continued illegality of abortion has real and tangible consequences.¹⁰ According to the newspaper *Página 12* “in Argentina the number of induced abortions per year is between 372,000 and 447,000. This statistic represents more than one abortion per two live births, according to statistics [reporting] hospital discharges [of patients] for abortion complications.”¹¹ It is possible that the statistics are exaggerated because they tend to come from groups seeking legal change, but even if the number were cut in half, it would still be shockingly high.

Other indices of reproductive health suggest that clandestine abortions pose a serious public health problem. Argentina has a relatively high maternal mortality rate compared with other indices of overall public health. Unsafe abortions are the main cause of maternal death --

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causing nearly a third (32%) of maternal deaths in the 1990s and 27.4% in 2002.\textsuperscript{12} This is far higher than the World Health Organization (WHO) worldwide average. WHO estimates that abortion is the cause of about 13% of worldwide maternal deaths.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook (CIA Factbook), Argentina’s infant mortality rate, in comparison to all other countries, is the 143rd lowest out of 224 countries, while its ranking for maternal mortality is much worse: 85\textsuperscript{th} highest of 224.\textsuperscript{14} This discrepancy in ranking is likely connected to Argentina’s illegal abortions and the problems with post-abortion care. The United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) chart below (Figure 1) illustrates that Argentina does well on indices of overall health, performing well above world and regional averages. Tellingly, maternal health lags far behind.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Gráfico 1.2 \textit{Brechas de la dimensión salud, 1980-2010} \newline Argentina en relación con países de la OCDE, América Latina y el mundo}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{12} Gogna et al., “Abortion in a Restrictive,” 132.

Among some Argentine health professionals, abortion is perceived as a health problem and has been viewed as such for some time. A 1998-1999 study found that 63.5% of obstetrician-gynecologists (OBGYNs) working in hospitals in Buenos Aires ranked abortion as a “very relevant health issue”, and another 12.8% thought it “fairly relevant.” Despite this, very little has been done to address the problem posed by the high numbers of clandestine abortions being performed annually.

Many groups – separately and in coalition -- have been fighting to increase access to reproductive resources aimed at preventing the need for abortion or improving post-abortion health care under existing law, and to legalize abortion. They have done so since well before the 2005 founding of the main organization currently supporting legal change: the “National Campaign for the Right to a Legal, Safe and Free Abortion” (the Campaign), a coalition of over

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300 groups that are in favor of the legalization of abortion, including “human rights groups, academics, scientists, health workers, unions and others.” The Campaign has fought fiercely to persuade politicians and the public to support legislation to decriminalize abortion, legislation that has been repeatedly rejected or blocked (even to be openly debated), until recently.

In mid-April 2014 during upcoming preliminary public discussions and debates surrounding the revision of the Penal Code the Campaign put forth an initiative to revise the articles in the Code that deal with abortion. The Campaign’s proposal to amend the Penal Code would “decriminalize and legalize abortion” during the first trimester for “any reason.” They have received the support for this proposal to be presented in the Senate for “the first time,” as an earlier attempt failed to get enough support to even be officially discussed and debated. The Legislators who support the proposal are from many different political parties, some kirchneristas and many who are not supportive of the Kirchner Administration.

Regarding the specific proposed revision to the (il)legal status of abortion, the person charged with being, among others things, “a liaison between the Executive and Legislative” branches, Jorge Capitanich, was careful to emphasize the distance between the Administration and this initiative. Capitanich, when asked about the subject of efforts to decriminalize and legalize abortion, stated that “the Government [Pink House] is not responsible for this initiative” and noted that the Administration does not “promote” it. However, the Campaign’s initiative presents an opportunity for this issue to be openly debated and will perhaps shed some light on

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18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
people’s current opinions. The legalization of abortion is unlikely to go much farther than an open debate at this time. However, the long-term effects of an open discussion of abortion policy will not be realized for some time.

The public health problems posed by lack of access to safe abortion are not exclusive to Argentina, and virtually all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean region (with the exception of Cuba and a few areas within these countries), severely restrict access to abortion except in very narrow circumstances. According to WHO, “The highest [regional] unsafe abortion rate is in the Latin American and the Caribbean region, according to a study about trends in unsafe abortions from 1998-2010.” So why focus on Argentina?

While the problems surrounding abortion illegality are not exclusive to Argentina, exploring its treatment in Argentina can serve as a way to understand some of the underlying tensions surrounding the issue elsewhere in Latin America. Although Argentina, and in particular the City of Buenos Aires, has had a greater level of European influence on culture, (due in significant measure to its historically large proportion of European immigrants) it is nonetheless similar in many ways to other Latin American countries. It may therefore be helpful to explore why what appears to be a move toward more socially open policies and away from Church influence in Argentina has not (yet) had much impact on abortion politics. The stark contrast between remarkable legislation, particularly on issues of LGBTQ rights, and remarkably little legislation and change on abortion, presents an opportunity to tease apart what some of the underlying issues surrounding abortion might be in Latin America overall, not just Argentina.

**Progress in Other Areas, yet Political Resistance to Abortion Reform**

It is intriguing that Argentina has recently widely expanded rights in areas that might be

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26 Ibid.
thought to fall within the spectrum of liberal social rights policies: same-sex marriage &
adoption; transgender rights, and, somewhat earlier, contraception. Like abortion, all these are
issues where liberalization has been strongly resisted by the Catholic Church. Given the current
administration’s willingness to pursue policy changes at odds with the wishes of Catholic Church,
one might expect them to do so with abortion as well. Both Cristina Kirchner and her late
husband, Néstor (who preceded her as President), campaigned on human rights platforms and
supported social change they viewed as consistent with human rights. 27  Given this, one might
expect more change to have occurred on with regard to an issue that is so closely tied, elsewhere,
to a ‘progressive’ agenda, and so pressing in terms of gender equity and public health. 28  Yet
Cristina Kirchner is not only unwilling to pursue liberalization of abortion law, but persists in
opposing abortion, at least publically. 29

It bears examining why, when so many women undergo clandestine abortions are harmed
physically as well as psychologically in the process, and those women have parents, friends, and
often spouses, children, siblings and other relatives who together constitute a significant
percentage of the voting population, abortion reform has not translated into a political issue with
the potential to gain votes. Theoretically, this could be a huge issue for candidates seeking
support; being pro-choice could be framed as a populist position. 30  Yet this has not yet happened.
Although, “after the return to democracy in Argentina, several bills to liberalize abortion were
presented in Congress […] none were discussed in commission or within political parties.” 31

As Alberto Maglietti, “Radical Party senator and author of one of the bills to decriminalize abortion,

28 I say ‘progressive’ because Argentine politics are not easily defined using terms such as ‘conservative,’ ‘liberal,’ ‘progressive,’ etc.
29 “En el final, Cristina habló sobre aborto, marihuanas, gays y cirugías” [In the End, Cristina Spoke about Abortion, Marijuana, Gays and
30 Despite etymological contradictions.
31 Mala Htun, Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies (Cambridge, UK:
Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152.
recalled: ‘No one has demonstrated interest in considering this bill. It is an impolitic issue for the political environment of our country. To speak publicly in favor of abortion is impolitic.’”

Nonetheless, Latin American countries have succeeded in enacting legislation on other ‘impolitic’ and controversial issues.

**Explanations of Argentina’s Reticence on Abortion**

**The Catholic Church’s Opposition - Political and Social Authority**

One frequently asserted explanation of Argentina’s restrictive abortion laws is the political and social power of the Catholic Church. Most Argentines are ‘nominally Catholic’ (92%), although fewer than 20% identify themselves as “practicing Catholics.”

While most Argentines openly identify as Catholic, the influence of the Catholic Church over the daily lives of Argentines is not as large as one might imagine. Its influence has diminished over time, in part because it has repeatedly clashed with popular political leaders: earlier with Juan Domingo Perón and, more recently, with the Kirchner administration(s). Moreover, the Church’s position on social rights has often lagged behind the apparent opinions of the general population. In 1987, when Argentina legalized divorce, over 70% of the population surveyed favored legalizing divorce. More recently, well over 50% of survey respondents favored legalization of same-sex
marriage (well above the percentage of those who identify as Peronists.)

The Church was and remains adamantly opposed to both reforms. Although Catholic teachings forbid or restrict contraceptive use, the legislature in 2003 established a “National Program of Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation” (Law 25.673) aimed at liberalizing access to, and establishing widespread education and publicity concerning, contraception. While part of the law’s aim was to eliminate the need for (still illegal) abortion, there continue to be very high rates of abortion.

Additionally, in another move opposed by the Church, the Administration recently passed a law that represents remarkable progress in the area of rights for trans persons. Trans persons, under Argentine law, can “alter their gender on official documents without first having to receive a psychiatric diagnosis or surgery,” going “well beyond [laws] passed in Britain... and Spain.” This radical expansion of trans rights stands in stark contrast to the most recent “adjustment” to abortion policy noted earlier which, by court ruling and not through legislative change, affirmed that rape victims could receive abortions without prior judicial authorization.

Given the number of socially progressive policies of the current Administration (and the opinions of the population on many social issues) the power of the Catholic Church cannot, by itself, explain why there has been so little movement on abortion. One has to look to other explanations to try to understand Argentina’s abortion policies. “The waning [influence] of Catholicism in Latin America” is important in understanding the advancement of social rights in

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40 Illusions of Care: Lack of Accountability for Reproductive Rights in Argentina (n.p.: Human Rights Watch, 2010).


Argentina, but it remains to be explained why this waning has not (yet) led to a parallel advancement on an issue which so deeply impacts women’s and public health and well-being.\(^{43}\) As I argue below, the powerful symbolism of the self-sacrificing “Mother” – the Virgin Mary – is one influential part of Catholic “doctrine” which may not have waned as much. Rather, its resonance has been used to forge women’s access to and power within the public sphere and public spaces, used as a nationalist and secular symbol.\(^{44}\) This powerful and symbolic role for mothers and the utilization of Marian symbols and rhetoric by women to carve out access to political space is certainly apparent, especially by those I discuss in this paper: Eva Perón (Evita), who gained unprecedented access to political power and space, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Mothers), who risked violence in order to find their children and protest against the Military Dictatorship.\(^{45}\) The Mothers and Evita engaged in activities that were “Marian on the one hand and challenged the gender order on the other.”\(^{46}\) The power of a Marian model of female activity is not so much a reflection of the power of the Catholic Church, but rather points to the power that motherhood and the symbol of Mary has gained as a political and secular tool to inspire a certain type of nationalism, linked to Catholicism yet independent of it.\(^{47}\)

**The Explanation that Abortion is not, for Argentines, a Pressing Issue**

The de-criminalization or legalization of abortion is not often *openly addressed* as a pressing issue, however, from a public health perspective it seems rather urgent. Indeed, “in 2008, according to Argentina’s national health ministry, over 20 percent of deaths recorded due to obstetric emergencies were caused by unsafe abortions.”\(^{48}\) This is despite the fact Argentina’s

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\(^{44}\) Linda B. Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 208.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 250.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 247.

\(^{47}\) Again, it is possible that the influence of the Catholic Church in Argentina will grow in the coming years due to Pope Francis.

\(^{48}\) *Illusions of Care: Luck*...
“public health spending is high: around 10% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), well above the Latin American country average, and is closer to the [spending] of European countries.” 49 One might expect that the maternal health crisis posed by high numbers of clandestine abortion is so at odds with Argentina’s overall health performance that it would generate concern and serious debate.

Indeed, advocates of the legalization of abortion argue that the appalling situations that result from its criminalization amount to human rights abuses. Women seeking hospital when they suffer complications from illegal abortions have been subjected to cruel treatment.50 “Some women have been subjected to painful procedures, such as curettage [tissue removal by scooping as well as scraping], without the aid of anesthesia.”51 Others have been “questioned by doctors in a manner more like that of police officers investigating a crime than physicians whose jobs it was to treat those suffering health problems.”52 Yet public discussion of abortion has only opened up slightly, and only recently.

Recently proposed amendments to the Penal Code that would legalize first trimester abortion arguably represent a slight liberalization of public sentiment.53 Although limited decriminalization (or legalization) enjoys limited support from individuals across the political spectrum, no major party, other than the socialist party New Encounter (Nuevo Encuentro), and a few small and far left parties, has any type of internal consensus on abortion policy.54

The Kirchner Administration, which has been outspoken about its support of human

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52 Gogna et al., “Abortion in a Restrictive,” 129.
54 Ibid.
rights, has been unable or unwilling to address the pervasive practice of clandestine abortions as a human rights issue, and the issue’s purported unimportance to Argentines hardly seems an adequate explanation, given the number of women who obtain clandestine abortions every year, often at great personal risk.

The “Double Discourse” or “Silent Revolution” Explanation

A recent explanation put forward by a former undergraduate at the University of Chicago, Emily Heaton, posits that there is a “double discourse” in Argentina—in which private behavior conflicts with public expression of belief—and that this explains why abortion remains illegal.\(^{55}\) She rests her argument on the idea that because large numbers of Argentine women are obtaining illegal abortions, the relative silence and morally charged political discourse is out of sync with the “true views” of the Argentine population. She suggests that “a ‘silent revolution’ exists in Argentina;” because “despite a majority of citizens who support the legalization of abortion, debates on the matter are largely absent from the political arena.”\(^{56}\) From this “emerges Argentina’s ‘double discourse,’” defined as the “public espousal of restrictive abortion policy....despite citizens’ own beliefs and life-threatening behaviors that disregard the illegality of abortion.”\(^{57}\)

Even accepting that there seems to be a conflict between the secret behaviors of Argentine women and their public professed beliefs, undergoing an abortion does not necessarily signify that one supports decriminalization, and it is difficult to know what Argentine “public opinion” on abortion really is. While Heaton cites a statistic that purports to show that most people favor abortion reform, the study she cites was reported only in a newspaper (Página 12)  

\(^{56}\) Ibid.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid.
which seems to have conducted a telephone survey (2012), and is corroborated by no other source that I was able to find. Another newspaper article from La Nación in 2011 suggests a very different story. 30% of those surveyed thought that abortion should be allowed in any case during the first trimester, 17% thought it depended on the circumstances and 53% said they were against abortion in general. However, most opinion polls are outdated, limited in scope, and difficult to substantiate. Heaton’s claim that it is an ‘incontrovertible’ truth that the majority of the public favors legalization of abortion is therefore suspect. Even if there is there is a “disconnect between the modernization of morality and the reflection of this evolution in the Argentine political sphere,” this does not mean that there has been a significant shift of moral beliefs among the public on the issue of abortion.

Heaton “argue[s] that the dominant discourse surrounding abortion has shifted from a morally charged absolutist framework to a technical one, and that this shift carries with it the potential to bridge the divide between public discussion and private practice, and to bring abortion policy further into the Argentine political spotlight.” While this may be true, it should be added that belief about women’s bodily self-determination is complex, and cannot be captured by a simple “pro and con” model. The most recent Human Rights Watch report on the subject points to substantial “obstacles women and girls face in getting...reproductive health care services” despite the fact that sexual health and education are not only legally required, but a top political priority. Even within the narrow circumstances under which abortion in Argentina is legally permitted, women have had a lot of trouble securing legal abortions. This suggests that Argentine “public opinion” is far more complex than a single simple survey can capture, and that

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59 Jastreblansky, “Las cifras del aborto.”
60 Ibid.
61 Heaton, "Reframing Abortion in Argentina.”
62 Ibid.
63 Illusions of Care, Luck...
expanding access to abortion is likely to be difficult, even if abortion were legalized. The ‘disconnect’ is not simply between private behavior and public position, but also within individual human beings who may struggle with deeply held conflicting feelings on the subject.64

The Link between Motherhood, Family Values & Patriotism

Another explanation that many point to—linked to, but distinct from, my own exploration—is the historical relationship that the Argentine state has had with maternity. During the period extending from the end of the nineteenth century through about the 1940s, Argentina developed a “nation[al] historical narrative” which emphasized the importance of motherhood and procreation, and hence the State’s role and interest in regulating the family.65 Due in part (but by no means entirely) to national concerns such as the need to populate the nation and certain southern territories, the Argentine government sought to link motherhood with patriotism, thereby to encourage and protect maternity. Women became centrally “subjects and objects of public policies” and were “brought... into the light of public debate. Their merits as mothers and wives were added to their legal rights under the law.66 The meaning of womanhood gained an important dimension when mixed with affairs of the state.”67

A “redefinition [of] motherhood as a social function” allowed women to “‘modernize their role to suit a new political scenario without changing some aspects of its traditional core,” often using the mantle of maternity to gain access to substantial space for women in the public sphere (either as parts of civil society groups or as having importance to politics in general through their roles as mothers).68 The pre-existing historical discourse surrounding women and

64 Heaton, “Reframing Abortion in Argentina,” The University of Chicago Undergraduate Law Review.
66 Lavrin Asunción, Women, Feminism & Social Change in Argentina, Chile, & Uruguay (n.p.: Univeristy of Nebraska Press, 1995), 4.
67 Ibid., 4-5.
68 Ibid., 5.
their relationship with the “patria” (although femininely gendered, it means, literally, ‘fatherland’) was incorporated and expanded:

“Motherhood was [a] powerful ingredient in building a special ideology of gender. Southern Cone feminists embraced it wholeheartedly as the highest signifier of womanhood. Women’s rights as individuals were important, but they never lost sight of the fact that most women became mothers and that motherhood caused some of the most serious problems they faced. The toil and sacrifice of working mothers were only one side of the coin. Motherhood demanded respect as a practical service to the nation. Personal issues gained relevance and meaning when elevated to the plane of national interests. Thus came the introduction of mothering—motherhood guided by education, a conscious effort to go beyond it natural functions of maternity to project women’s importance in the task of raising future generations.”

Argentine women gained power during this period primarily through a discourse of difference -- valorizing women’s special role as mothers as the source of respect and rights -- rather than a discourse of equality which might have emphasized that women possessed the same capacity, intellect and rights as the men who, simply by virtue of their sex, claimed superior status.

Additionally, there was a push in the 1930s to “construct a homogenous and national identity around Catholicism,” partially evidenced by using the Virgin Mary (through the use of Virgin of Luján, a Marian apparition during the early colonial period) as means to achieve this identity.

This particular focus on motherhood, by the State and by individual women, impacted how abortion is or is not, today, able to be addressed politically. The expansion of access to political space by women has been historically predicated on the affirmation of women’s ‘natural’ roles as procreators, mothers, and caretakers (of home, of polity). “Women used the appeal of culturally safe images to carve a niche in politics… [one that] reinforced the stereotype of women’s biological image that confined them to specific areas in public life.”

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69 Ibid., 7.
70 Ibid., 7.
71 Hall, Mary, Mother and Warrior, 176+208-9.
72 Ibid., 13.
73 Ibid.
This phenomena tends to make it difficult for women to assume important roles in the public sphere while simultaneously seeking to make abortion more accessible, because the “right to participate in civic life and politics” had been negotiated through a discourse of maternity and motherhood which placed care of others above concern for self.\textsuperscript{74} Indeed, while it usefully served to expand the areas in which female participation was acceptable, its presentation of women’s symbolic role as eclipsing their individual bodily existence so powerfully penetrated Argentina’s cultural, literary and national consciousness that, I suggest, it has had a profound effect on abortion politics.

Argentina has a fairly long history of politically active women exercising a substantial amount of power and today Argentina has quotas requiring the presence of a minimum of 30% women in each party’s group of candidates, thereby guaranteeing women access whether or not they wear (or give the nod to) the mantle of motherhood.\textsuperscript{75} Argentina currently has one of the highest levels of women’s placement worldwide in political posts. The Global Gender Gap Report of 2013, an annual report on gender equality in different countries from the World Economic Forum, ranks Argentina as the country with the 34\textsuperscript{th} lowest amount of overall gender inequality, 24\textsuperscript{th} highest level of female “Political Empowerment.”\textsuperscript{76} Additionally, Argentina is ranked as having the 15\textsuperscript{th} highest number of women in Parliament.\textsuperscript{77} Argentina does not have, relative to other countries, a lack of females holding power or having a voice in politics. However, despite this—and despite the large constituency of women who have undergone clandestine abortions (and the partners, friends and families many of whom have shared their

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{76} Hausmann and Tyson, \textit{The Global Gender Gap Report}, 115.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
anxiety and pain)—there has been relatively little official and public debate about abortion policy.

There is no doubt that the historical linkage between motherhood, family, and *Patria* is of central importance. However, in order to address and alter this linkage, it is essential to tease apart the ways in which it has expressed itself and been solidified during the period of Evita’s rise and the horrors of the 1976-83 Dictatorship. Unraveling the interwoven strands constraining women’s acceptable occupation of political and public space—revealing the way their public roles have been negotiated and elaborated—is essential to beginning to weave a new abortion politics.  

The language through which “battles for land and national identity have been staged on, over, and through the female body—literally and metaphorically”—is an important piece of abortion puzzle.  

I therefore focus the second half of my paper on the way in which the performance of motherhood and maternity has been employed to expand women’s access to political spaces, and how that performance has, in turn, created limitations on the way individual women are able to express themselves (and “perform”) within those spaces. In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore these issues by focusing on the words of Eva Perón, of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and of Alicia Partnoy, who was “disappeared” during the Military Dictatorship of 1976-1983, but was among the very few to “reappear.”

In order to understand the terrain of the abortion issue, which is quite literally an issue of the right to *not be* a mother, I focus particularly on moments at which the individual bodies of actual women are “occupied” and eclipsed by the metaphorical body of the “body politic”, so that women’s physical nurturing functions have been applied metaphorically to the State—women

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78 I will, in future chapters, pay particular attention the figures and words of the Mother de Plaza de Mayo in order to explore how some of these negotiations of power and space take place and what limitations they might also reinforce and their consequences.


80 The word “perform” is used here to emphasize the fact that public actions are typically performances aimed at achieving goals by adopting roles, rather than simply spontaneous interactions.
nurture and rear the nation. Body politic is used here as a symbolic representation of a collective of citizens through reference to the human body, as an almost living being. The individual identity and biological corporeality of mothers get subsumed and submerged in the symbolic functions of maternity, as being the ground from which the nation—and the body politic—‘springs.’ Women’s physical bodies become entangled with their role as ‘vessels’ which are occupied by the body politic, drawing on Marian versions of motherhood (self-sacrificing, existing below and for God or the State), in order to gain legitimacy while at the same time renegotiating traditional gender roles as largely passive and submissive. Argentine women continue to draw on the symbolic function of maternity in order to carve out political space and legitimacy. However, in the context of abortion politics as well as access to reproductive resources, their symbolic motherhood becomes a trap, because woman as mother and springboard of the nation is so heavily valorized that advocating for the right to control and even eliminate physical motherhood appears antithetical to this “sacred role” of women.

To illustrate these themes, I focus below on the real and symbolic influence of Eva Perón on the Argentine understanding of women’s reality and role—and on women’s public and political participation, through examination of her (semi-fictional) autobiography. I then address the impact of the Military Dictatorship on the formation of a collective and often maternal identity surrounding the “disappearances” and the deliberate choice of the Madres to couch their entry into and onto the public and political space as mothers individually, and symbolically. Using writings of Alicia Partnoy I explore as well the ways in which the resistance and survival of the “disappeared” employed and necessarily depended in part on the symbolism of motherhood, self-sacrifice, and abnegation of individual, bodily existence.

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81 Taylor, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender, 16.
82 Eva Perón, La razón de mi vida y otros escritos (The Reason for my Life and Other Writings), 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Planeta, 1997), 250.
I suggest that the strategies or ‘script’ that Evita followed and incorporated into her speeches and autobiography, as well as the work done on understanding the disappeared and the efforts to fight the Military’s labeling of them as ‘subversive’, reveal that the performance of the “role” of motherhood and of a collative solidarity became almost a straitjacket (or corset) which limited women’s ability to claim the right to control their own bodies and ‘destinies’.
Chapter 2: Argentina’s ‘Symbolic Mother:’ Evita

Introduction and Background

Eva Perón, or ‘Evita,’ was one of the most important political figures of the 20th century in Argentina. In her autobiography, *The Reason for my Life* (*La razón de mi vida*), she describes her entrance into the public sphere and her political activity. In it, she adopts a script based on national ideas about women’s roles in propagating the *Patria* – that women are the creators of the next generation who promote and protect the authentic and proper national being. While Evita drew on the accepted norms, roles and ideas of femininity and maternity, she also defied them by becoming a political force, engaging in diverse activities many of which represented trespasses onto spaces—both physical and, more importantly, metaphorical—that were often closed to women at the time. Eva Perón crafted her own persona as ‘Evita.’ She wrote her own script as to why and how she was entering into spaces that, she proclaims, were it not for the love of Perón, Peronism, and her country, she would have had no interest in entering.

Evita was born Eva Duarte on May 7th 1919 to Juana Ibarguren (who never married but used her paramour’s last name, Duarte) and died on July 26th, 1952, at the age of 33. There are few known facts about her childhood and little documentation of her life during that period. Indeed, she rarely spoke about her early life in her autobiography or speeches. Before meeting her future husband, Juan Perón, Eva worked as an actress, and was “not interested in politics.” The Peróns both later referred to their meeting as a transformative moment, one in which they knew that they were to join together to form a movement for justice in Argentina. However, the truth is that for “the first year and a half of their life together [they] lived not as collaborators,

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84 Ibid., 32-3.
85 Ibid., 30.
but as Colonel and mistress.\textsuperscript{86} Indeed, much of what is said about the origin of their relationship, by both of them as well as political supporters, as well as about the beginning of Eva’s political career, appears to be largely fictionalized.

After meeting Perón at a benefit for victims of an earthquake in northern Argentina in early 1944 and marrying him in 1945, the Eva who “had appeared in twenty plays, five movies and at least twenty-six soap operas” was “swallowed up in her other life, her political life with Perón.”\textsuperscript{87} Eva Duarte, faded, or rather, was consciously, if inconspicuously erased, and replaced by “Evita”, a woman who purportedly disliked the spotlight, and lived only to help her husband. Of her political beginnings Evita writes,

\begin{quote}
Me asomé a la calle y empecé a decir más o menos esto: ‘Aquí estoy. Soy la mujer del Presidente. Quiero servir a mi pueblo para algo.

[I showed up in the streets and began to say, more or less, that “Here I am. I am the wife of the President. I want to serve my people.”]\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

Her presence in the ‘streets,’ in the literal sense of being present at certain rallies and ceremonies and in the symbolic sense of gaining public power, existed solely, she suggests, by virtue of being wife of the President. Yet her status as the wife of the wife of the President cannot fully explain her extraordinary public presence, as previous first-ladies had not entered the public sphere nor wielded so much power.\textsuperscript{89} Evita claims that her public visibility was entirely derivative of Perón’s, whereas in fact she was already known to many as a radio and stage actress, and her beauty and cultivated speaking ability – personal traits – surely played an important role in her popularity.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 32, 48
\textsuperscript{88} Perón, \textit{La razón de mi vida}, 123, (The translations are my own unless otherwise noted.)
\textsuperscript{89} Fraser and Navarro, \textit{Evita: The Real Life}, 85.
\textsuperscript{90} Perón, \textit{La razón de mi vida}, 72.
Evita was painted as always having been dedicated to politics and social change, but only now able to express that commitment through absolute and unwavering dedication to Juan Perón and his leadership. Evita played the role the self-effacing and self-sacrificing wife and mother – likening herself to the masses of women to whom she appealed and served as role model. Although unlike most of those women, she had no children, she portrayed herself as just like them by adopting the stance of symbolic mother of the country and all its children.91 She fondly states that:

Cuando un pibe me nombra “Evita” me siento madre de todos los pibes y de todos los débiles y humildes de mi tierra.

[When a kid calls me ‘Evita’ I feel like the mother of all children, of all the weak and poor people of my land.]92

Evita followed a script in which her occupation of political, public, and traditionally masculine territory, was based solely on her role as the representational mother of the people. She was there only to advocate on behalf of “her” people (or “children”), fully and solely occupied by her mission to serve them and carry out their “wishes, just as other mothers are occupied by fulfilling the wishes of their children and families.”93

This symbolic ‘Evita’ was able to trespass and negotiate access to political space precisely because she displaced her physical presence, as Eva, the individual wife of the elected leader, onto Evita, the symbolic embodiment of the will of the people she purportedly loved and served. The seductive actress Eva -- who was an illegitimate child, who had been Perón’s mistress for some time before marrying him, and who had displayed no interest in politics nor particular concern for the poor -- was “occupied” and replaced by Evita, universal mother of the

91 Sadly and perhaps ironically, the physical Eva never birthed a child, and perhaps could not have done so because she died of cervical cancer at the age of 33. She claimed fulfillment in her role as mother to “her” people, even while her physical body was filled with growing tumors.
92 Perón, La razón de mi vida, 75.
93 Fraser and Navarro, Evita: The Real Life, 95.
people.\textsuperscript{94} Evita was at once “any woman,” who might by chance end up placed above and in front of everyone else, and “every woman” who would similarly act as mother to her “family” were she situated as Evita was in relation to the people as a whole. Evita served, and continues to serve, as the stand-in for all mothers, but especially the mothers of the poor and downtrodden -- the collective of \textit{descamisados} (literally, the shirtless). She represents all of the actual and potential mothers, responsible for the care of their actual, or in her case metaphoric, children. Evita served as a metaphor herself—a vessel into which many could pour their hopes, dreams, and sorrows—to the point where her own body was transformed into the symbolic body of “the people”, their collective being—in other words, of the polity itself. Her rhetoric and actions had strong “Marian resonances,” referring to Juan Perón as “all-powerful, a human stand-in for God the Father, with herself as intercessor,” between him and the people of Argentina.\textsuperscript{95}

\textbf{Evita’s ‘Power Play’}

It is essential, whenever examining the words of Evita in her autobiography, to keep in mind that she was an actress, playing a part, and her intention was to gain power for Perón (and hence herself).\textsuperscript{96} Both Eva and her husband understood that there were masses of poor and working people who had been excluded politically and they consciously targeted these masses in order to gain political power. They gave their followers both concrete improvements (improvements literally visible today in housing, parks, television antennas atop protected indigenous housing and the like), and the promise of “voice” – of real representation.

The role Eva adopted in this partnership was one as self-abnegating woman and servant of the people, a role which became larger than life, has, while for some it is empowering and help it can also be a stumbling block for later women who wished to claim interests of their own.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Hall, \textit{Mary, Mother and Warrior}, 208+221.
\textsuperscript{96} Whether because she believed that Perón gaining power was the only means to help the \textit{descamisados} or because of a more selfish motive, is contested and does not affect this analysis.
and rights for themselves as individuals. The power of her symbolic denial of the reality of her physical body in favor of representing the metaphorical body politic today contributes to the difficulty women’s groups have when attempting to claim the right to individual, physical self-determination in part by claiming the right to safely end a pregnancy.

In the prologue to her autobiography Evita describes her role as a ‘humble woman,’ whose dedication and entrance into politics are for reasons that have little to do with her as a person. She states:

[... ] yo no era ni soy nada más que una humilde mujer... un gorrión en una inmensa bandada de gorriones... Y él era y es el cóndor gigante que vuela alto y seguro entre las cumbres y cerca de Dios. Si no fuese por él que descendió hasta mí y me enseñó a volar de otra manera, yo no hubiese [...] podido contemplar jamás la maravillosa y magnífica inmensidad de mi pueblo [...] Por eso ni mi vida ni mi corazón me pertenece y nada de todo lo que soy o tengo es mío. Todo lo que soy, todo lo que tengo, todo lo que pienso y todo lo que siento es de Perón.

[ [...] I have never been more than a humble woman... a single sparrow an enormous flock of sparrows [...] And [Perón] was and is the grand condor that flies high and secure among the summits and close to God. If he had not descended to reach me and teach me to fly another way, I would have never [...] have been able to gaze upon the marvelous and magnificent grandeur of my people. That’s why neither my heart nor my life belongs to me; nothing of what I am or have is mine.]

Evita’s rhetoric, in addition to gaining her hundreds of thousands of devoted followers, also sheds light on how she probably truly saw herself in relation to the Peronist movement: as flying beneath Perón, as a ‘humble’ or ‘poor woman’ (humilde mujer), closer to the earth (the people) than he. Whether she truly saw herself, obviously beautiful and a previously successful actress, as “a mere sparrow”, able to reach greater heights only by chance, we might doubt. But that she found a winning political formula by adopting this stance is clear. Her intentional vocabulary of humility, her references to her “magnificent...people”, her pueblo and of her dedication to them was an enormously successful script, but one which has repercussion for women today. Evita’s

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97 Perón, La razón de mi vida, 13-4.
98 Ibid., 13.
“self-abnegating, loving rhetoric is clearly Marian,” where she is the vessel through which God, or in her case, Perón can be delivered to the people, the means through which the “Condor” is able to save the people, the descamisados, of Argentina.99

To reconcile the Evita ‘flying’ with the president and the ‘humble woman’ Evita insists that everything that seems to be hers, such as the political opinions contained in her autobiography, is not derived from anything innately hers or distinct about her, but rather from Perón because he showed her the way to serve the people. She is able to position herself with the humble people of the earth by attributing entirely to others – Peron, and by extension, “her” people – the very public roles she actually played – giving speeches, crafting and “selling” social programs, and touring the country on behalf of the Peronist movement. Any special trespass onto inappropriate spaces for women is justified by the fact that her body is symbolically occupied with the will of the people and the will of Perón.

After Perón was elected in 1946, Evita was more politically active than any woman before her in Argentine history. Even while he was campaigning, although Evita “made no campaign speeches”, she “stood by Perón’s side[... as] no candidate’s wife” had ever done before.100 She worked with the with the General Confederation of Labor (CGT Confederación General del Trabajo de la República Argentina) in the early years of the presidency, often acting as a liaison between organized labor and the president.101 She was able to exercise “this sort of freedom […] because as a woman and…as his wife, his ‘shadow’ as she would call herself,” she could “continue Perón’s work unobstructed [and] in his own style […]” in a “way that could not threaten Perón”, moving between labor and Perón, only as the “low flying sparrow.”102 Her mobility and access to the public sphere stemmed not – according to her writing -- from her

99 Hall, Mary, Mother and Warrior, 228.
100 Fraser and Navarro, Evita: The Real Life, 73.
101 Perón, La razón de mi vida, 84 and Fraser and Navarro, Evita: The Real Life, 73.
102 Perón, La razón de mi vida, 13.
strength or intelligence as an independent woman; to the extent that she possessed these qualities they were derivative of her occupation with furthering the popular project of Peronism. Her physical presence, as a woman in perhaps ‘inappropriately’ high places is displaced onto a symbolic one that justifies her “public” role: as the sparrow that flies between the huge flock of her people and the ‘Condor/President’ who, in turn, flies high (close to God) to lead them towards the ‘New Argentina.’

Often dismissing her role as simply being one among thousands, Evita justifies her very public presence by making it clear that she is not there by virtue of her position as a woman and wife of the President, but because she belongs to and acts on behalf of her public. In her autobiography, Evita cleverly undercuts any suggestion that she acts from personal ambition by “confessing” to a “grand personal ambition” to “figure someday in the history” of her country, but only as “a tiny footnote” to Peron’s “marvelous chapter” -- only as the “woman at Peron’s side” who “dedicated herself to taking the wishes of the people” to him.

Confieso que tengo una ambición, una sola y gran ambición personal: Quisiera que el nombre de Evita figúrase alguna vez en la historia de mi Patria. Quisiera que de ella se diga, aunque no fuese más que una pequeña nota, al pie del capítulo maravilloso que la historia ciertamente dedicará a Perón algo que fuese más o menos esto: Hubo, al lado de Perón, una mujer que se dedicó a llevarle al Presidente las esperanzas del pueblo, que luego Perón convertía en realidades.... De aquella mujer solo sabemos que el pueblo la llamaba, cariñosamente, Evita.

[I confess that I have an ambition, a sole and grand personal ambition: I would like it if the name of Evita were to figure, some day, in the history of my Country. I would like it if it were said about her, even if it were no more than a tiny footnote to the marvelous chapter of history that will certainly be dedicated to Perón--more or less the following: There was at Perón’s side, a woman who dedicated herself to taking the wishes of the people to the President that he then transformed into reality. All we know of this woman is that the people called her, affectionately, Evita.]
Evita imagines her entrance into the immortal sphere of written history as a small and insignificant, and as desiring only the abstract affection of the people, rather than any physical or bodily love.  

The significance and body of Evita, in history and politics, is beside the point, in her mind. The female body is less important than the purpose it is occupied with, the well-being of the nation as a whole.

For Evita, women’s proper places within the nation were as literal (birthing) and figurative mothers whose labor was to secure the future of the nation as a whole, in significant part by servings as supports and inspirations for men, whose acts of bravery and heroism and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the *Patria* were necessary to protect and build the nation.

> La misión sagrada que tiene la mujer, no sólo consiste en dar hijos a la Patria sino hombres a la humanidad. Hombres en el sentido cabal y caballerosco de la hombría, que es la cuna del sacrificio cotidiano para soportar las contrariedades de la vida y base del valor que inspira los actos sublimes del heroísmo cuando la Patria los reclama...

> [The sacred mission of women consists not only of giving children to the Nation but also men to humanity. Men, in the proper and chivalrous sense of the word, which is the cradle of daily sacrifice that enables us to face trials and tribulations of life and the foundation of the courage that inspires sublime acts of heroism when the Country calls for them.]

Although women’s “sacred mission” stemmed from the biological capacity of women to give birth, it was less about the individual children that women give birth to and more about giving birth to and supporting the collective group that will go forward and fight for Argentina. This description of women’s natural roles drew upon the religiously acceptable (and perhaps divine)

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105 Of course, her autobiography should be taken with a grain of salt: she embodies her claim to want to be remembered only as the humble messenger in an autobiography which contains numerous — although only a few of the myriad — photographs of her engaged in a wide variety of very public activities. There is an entire museum in Buenos Aires is devoted largely to housing her many outfits in Palermo called the *Museo Evita*.


107 Perón, *La razón de mi vida*, 250.

108 Additionally, it should be noted that referring to the ‘sacred mission’ of women and the ‘daily sacrifice’ draws on religious language and ideas. While the ‘sacred mission of women’ is one that fits very well with the role of the Virgín Mary, providing humanity with Jesus Christ and God, to save all of humanity and the “daily sacrifice” appears in Dan. 12. 11,12, Evita states clearly that what she does is not for God but rather for Perón and her country.
roles of women, but in a secular way.\textsuperscript{109} She utilized “Marian symbols, rhetoric, gestures and evocative acts and performances” to gain support and legitimacy in the eyes of Argentines, claiming to act as she does for Perón and the country, not for God.\textsuperscript{110}

Evita did not invent this script – she used a well-worn, established strategy. Before Evita’s time, particularly between the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, Argentina’s feminists – like those in several countries during this and other periods—used the symbolism of motherhood to establish a place for women in national discussions, as well as to demand respect.\textsuperscript{111} The deployment of this gendered ideology as a means to access power by emphasizing the centrality of women’s roles as mothers and wives, was thus neither unique to Evita nor to Argentina.\textsuperscript{112}

Evita also is linked with the legal and political entrance of women into politics by means of the vote. After women gained the right to vote in 1947 (under Perón), Evita founded the Female Peronist Party, which gained 500,000 members by 1952 and boasted over 3,000 different headquarters throughout the country.\textsuperscript{113} Despite being at the head of the Peronist Women’s Movement, Evita “had never been especially interested in the question of women’s suffrage, and she similarly displayed little concern with more theoretical questions of women’s rights.”\textsuperscript{114} For Evita,

De nada nos valdría un movimiento femenino organizado en un mundo sin justicia social. Sería como un gran movimiento obrero en un mundo sin trabajo. ¡No serviría para nada!

[An organized women’s movement would not be worth anything in a world without social justice. It would be like a grand worker’s movement in a world without labor. It would be useless!]\textsuperscript{115}

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\textsuperscript{109} Hall, Mary, \textit{Mother and Warrior}, 207.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 207-8.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 208.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. As mentioned earlier, the Virgin of Luján was utilized in order to promote the State and national identity.
\textsuperscript{114} Perón, \textit{La razón de mi vida}, 202.
\end{flushright}
Indeed, Evita “devoted very few of her speeches to questions that exclusively concerned women,” and often “dismiss[ed] feminists contemptuously as women who did not know how to be women.” Despite this, her work to organize women to be politically and socially active influenced how women formally entered onto the political stage, setting up the justifications for that entrance and presence. Her script for female activism has continued to influence women seeking entry to or influence within political and public spaces formerly or partially closed to them. They are able, when fighting on many issues, to paint themselves as seeking the greater good, or helping others, but this remains difficult to do when the primary issues involve and largely affects only the body and self-determination of women themselves.

Evita emphatically did not believe that the ideal place of women was in the streets or in a factory. She lamented that women, forced to leave the home and look for work, sometimes came to prefer the “street to the home” (calle a la casa), and became like men. That their economic circumstances sometimes “convinced [women] that the worst deal for them is to make a home,” was something Evita saw as a fundamental problem for women. For Evita, women were “born to tend the hearth,” but were unable to do because they needed to earn money. The way to reconcile the necessity to find work outside the home with the fact that women are ‘born’ to be in and create the home, was to devote oneself to Perón and justicialismo. Evita states clearly in her autobiography that:

Reconozco, ante todo, que empecé trabajando en el movimiento femenino porque así lo exigía la causa de Perón.

[I recognize that, primarily, I began working in the women’s movement because Perón’s cause required it to be so.]
She sees a place for women in politics, in order to promote the well-being of the country as well as to fight for a future where, perhaps, something like a basic income would be paid to women at marriage so that they could stay at home, tending to the family.\textsuperscript{122} For Evita:

\begin{quote}
En política los hombres buscan su propio triunfo. Las mujeres, si hiciesen eso, dejarían de ser mujeres.
\end{quote}

[In politics men look for personal triumph. If women were to do this, they would cease being women.\textsuperscript{123}]

Thus, politics can benefit from the participation of women, who are, because they are “born” to create the home, “born” to be concerned with the needs of more than just the individual, able to fight for Patria, because it represents the family. If the female (body) were to enter into politics and not be occupied by something beyond herself, she would not be worthwhile as a woman, as a human, and could not be a proper (female) citizen. For her, women can only renegotiate the boundaries of their roles and the spaces they occupy if they themselves are occupied by their “sacred mission,” which is secular and linked intimately with the promotion of Peronism.\textsuperscript{124}

This particular vision of women in politics, entering only on behalf of political causes that reach beyond their individual concerns as women, expands women’s access to power in some circumstances and restricts it in others. Women cannot enter political spaces and wield political power for matters that concern solely women; they assume public roles for the good of others or for the greater good. And while reproductive rights -- and the right to abortion in particular – are not important only to women, they are often framed and thought of narrowly as “women’s” concerns. It is difficult to align a claimed right to abortion with larger claims -- support for others, for Patria or for ‘the people’ -- when only half the people appear, superficially.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
directly involved. Since it is “merely” their individual physical bodies at issue, few women dare to openly embrace the right to be what is seen by many as “anti-mothers” or, within Evita’s framework, non-women.

In the context of Argentina’s abortion politics, Evita’s self-proclaimed role as an otherwise insignificant wife who existed only as “mother” of her people, available to carry their wishes to Peron, has likely influenced future activists like the Madres, to cloak themselves in the mantle of motherhood. Their model differs in some ways from Evita’s “macro” version of the role of the traditional wife and mother; the Madres challenge the strong, military junta father-figure, rather than serving as intermediaries between head of state and his children. Nonetheless, as I will discuss below, the Madres, too adopt the stance of symbolic motherhood, also drawing on Marian “symbol[ism] to support their political position.”¹²⁵

Whether or not Evita’s use of the trope of wife and mother demonstrated a genuine belief in and reverence for the (traditional and/or sacred) mission of women or was merely a strategic choice to employ deeply inculcated cultural attitudes about the proper role of women (or some mixture of the two) in the service of Peronism is not central to this project. Whatever her motive, Evita’s “behaviors had strong Marian resonances that evoked highly positive responses in the Argentine masses and contributed significantly to her political power and personal charisma.”¹²⁶

Her script -- one in which the biological individual woman was replaced by the symbolic woman who represented the womb of the nation; occupied by, serving, and protecting that – shaped the subsequent entry of women into public sphere. It did so in ways that both opened political space for women and restricted how, when, and in what ways they could enter political space, both literally, as with the Plaza de Mayo, and symbolically, as in gaining the role of President. Just as

¹²⁵ Hall, Mary, Mother and Warrior, 22.
¹²⁶ Ibid., 208
the real flesh and blood Eva is overshadowed by symbolic mother-of-the-country-Evita, so her powerful and symbolic role as mother casts a long shadow over future women’s movements, and women’s effort to gain abortion rights.

This long shadow is discernable to a degree in the career path of the current President Cristina Kirchner. Her husband, Néstor Kirchner, was elected in 2003, and, at least initially, “a similar pattern” to that of Juan Perón and Evita “emerged.” Cristina was first lady, but like Evita, she had more political power than is typical for a first lady. While for the most part she “drove her husband’s legislative agenda through Congress and helped him lobby the courts to prosecute atrocities of the 1976-83 dictatorship”, yet “she also became active in causes of her own, especially in defending women’s rights.” Moreover, unlike Evita, Cristina has had a long history in politics. She was a senator in the province of Santa Cruz and, later, in the province of Buenos Aires. She has been outspoken in her support of human rights which, for her, include same-sex rights and as a candidate, she “staked her political reputation on passing the gay-marriage legislation.” Despite this, Cristina has maintained her public opposition to abortion. Although she has not engaged in explicitly anti-abortion activity, and admits that she does not think that “those who advocate for the decriminalization of abortion are for abortion”, whenever asked, she maintains that she is against legalizing abortion.

In part, the Kirchners’ stance on abortion may be linked to their desire to capture the energy and enthusiasm Peronists, at least, had felt towards the team of Evita and Juan. Their

128 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
status as a political duo, almost equal to the Perons -- if not in power, at least in popularity -- has to be seen in light of the “mythology of Peronism as a political force,” represented by husband-wife teams fighting for social change.134

Cristina maintains that she does not “want to inherit anything from Eva,” or her husband, and insists that she has gotten where she is entirely due to her own “achievements […] and defects.”135 However, it is impossible to see connections and interactions between the two. Paying tribute to Evita, on the 59th anniversary of Evita’s death, Cristina Kirchner asked that Evita “be a symbol of unity in order to overcome old antinomies,” drawing upon her memory in order to evoke a sense of national unity and solidarity.136 At one event, Cristina “inaugurated a mural of Eva Perón”, one of two which occupied the north and south sides of the Ministry of Health, a large and centrally situated building in Buenos Aires.137

![Figure 3: President Kirchner Celebrates Evita and Inaugurates a Mural](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1392634-cristina-kirchner-inaugura-un-retrato-gigante-de-eva-peron)

135 Profile: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.”
137 Ibid.
The mural (shown above at the inaugurating event) is made out of steel anchored across the side of the pictured building. The other side of the building features an Evita mural as well. The above image is of “Evita to the Poor,” in which, facing “her people,” the ‘children’ of the nation, she appears warm and motherly, smiling toward the workers in the south of the city. On the other side, (Figure 4, see below), facing the North, where the rich of the city -- those who oppressed the humildes -- live, she is combative, mouth open with a microphone in front of her, fighting for the poor.

![Figure 4: Eva and Evita](http://ciudadevitavive.wordpress.com/2011/07/26/homenaje-a-evita/)

As pictured, during the inauguration Cristina stood directly below Evita’s figure, facing, like Evita, the pueblo. Evita, 59 years after her death, appears larger than life above the body of the current President, who invokes her memory to encourage people to continue the Evita’s fight. These murals perfectly capture how Evita was able to become more influential than any woman previously had in Argentina. Her aggressive demeanor, anger and passion – which stand in opposition to the traditional and proper place of women – are justified and portrayed as permissible because offset (on the other side of the building) by her warmth and love for her people. It would be awfully difficult for Cristina, who has made it very clear that “Eva Perón is a

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139 “Cristina Kirchner inauguró un mural,” Taringa!.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 The neighborhood of Buenos Aires wealthier citizens is known as Recoleta, and also boasts the city-like cemetery where Evita is buried.
historical and cultural icon for all Argentines” to stand beneath Evita’s larger-than-life figure of maternal love which Kirchner’s own administration has placed looming over the Ministry of Health, and support the right of women to avoid motherhood. It would surely render her vulnerable to being perceived as permitting if not encouraging women to shirk a noble duty, to be, in essence, unpatriotic.

Using language similar to that of Evita, Cristina Kirchner in March 2014, justified cutting subsidies to water and gas services to homes and businesses instituted as necessary measures to help Argentina out of its economic crisis.¹⁴³ Using an all too familiar script, Kirchner asserted that the cuts were intended to rearrange and redistribute subsidies rather than cut them, and that her government’s planned surveillance of reactions to them stemmed not from a desire to “control or monitor anyone” but rather from a desire to “care for this child”¹⁴⁴ To clarify what she meant by “this child” (“este hijo”), she indicated that she “feels like the mother of the country, the mother of all Argentines and [thus] feels responsible for what happens to 40 million Argentines.”¹⁴⁵

The use of care/concern/motherhood symbolism can serve effectively, as I shall further demonstrate in the next section, as a shield or protection for women who are politically active, vocal, and at times, necessarily combative. However, this “cover” also creates boundaries to women’s access to and effective exercise of power, because it severely limits women’s ability seek and assert power for purpose aimed at creating a more just and more fulfilling lives for

¹⁴⁴ Cristina Kirchner quoted in: el Fantoche, la ‘madre de los argentinos’ y otras frases polémicas por cadena nacional” [Cristina Kirchner, the Braggart, the “Mother of Argentines” and Other Controversial Statements on National Broadcasting], La Nación (Buenos Aires, Argentina), March 28, 2014, Politics, accessed April 24, 2014, http://Cristina Kirchner, el Fantoche, la “madre de los argentinos” y otras frases polémicas por cadena nacional.”
¹⁴⁵ Ibid.
themselves, trapping them in symbolism of selflessness and self-sacrifice, of care and concern for others at their own expense.

Eva Perón was able to negotiate access to political space and power, relying on traditional notions of femininity and female roles in order to carve out access to spaces heretofore largely in accessible to women. Eva was able to access this space by transforming herself into “Evita”, the symbolic mother of the nation as well as the vessel into which the people, who also had little access to political space, could put their wishes and their hopes. This draws on the powerful figure of the Virgin Mary and her role, and depiction, as the vessel through which Jesus came to the world. The physical body of Eva was obscured by and placed beneath the national and symbolic body that she stood in for. She acquired a public presence because the cause of Peronism, and of the people, her symbolic children, and not her personal ambition or will, required it.

Evita’s importance in Argentine politics as the feminine embodiment of Peronism cannot be overestimated. “Although Peronism is complicated and has meant many different things at many different times, it has continued to be seen through the lives and personalities of its two principal protagonists, Perón and Evita.”146 Evita was and remains the most important female political figure in Argentine history and mythology. She gained an unprecedented amount of political power in the brief span between 1946 and her death. Her role as symbolic mother of Argentina’s poor continues long after her death. Her grave is to this day one of the most visited spots in Buenos Aires. And the legacy she has left Argentine women is powerful, and bittersweet. Yet she is not the only the only important female figure to have used the imagery of motherhood to achieve important victories which impact how women enter political spaces today.

Chapter 3: How Desaparecidos ‘Reappear?:’ Collective and Occupied Bodies

Legacy of the Military Dictatorship

During the Military Dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983), the Military and paramilitary groups targeted and “disappeared” people who were politically active or connected to those who were politically active, going after family and friends of wanted individuals. At the same time, there was also a discursive violence against the disappeared, characterizing them and those opposed to the dictatorship as ‘subversives’ who were undermining the effort to foster national unification and establish order.

During this period of disappearances “the struggle to represent the absent bodies became central to the battle of images between the military and the Madres [as well as human rights activists] during the Dirty War.” Both “the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Argentine military, in their confrontations during the Dirty War in the 1970s and 1980s, […] used Marian symbols to support their political positions.”

The Mothers, resisting the characterization of their children – most of them youthful protesters against the dictatorship – as subversives, demonstrated in the Plaza de Mayo, one of the most historically important political sites in all of Argentina. They marched in circles around the Plaza, wearing photos of their children, insisting that the military reveal where the children were, and demanding their return.

A more in-depth examination of the iconic Madres of the Plaza de Mayo (many of whom still march today) will appear after the analysis of a book by Alicia Partnoy, The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival. However, it is worth noting here that their presence in the Plaza de Mayo, a highly symbolic public space where many leaders made important political

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147 I will not label this time period and these disappearances as a “Dirty War.” Many in Argentina object to this terminology, partially because it legitimizes the violence against the disappeared by stating that although the tactics may have been ‘dirty,’ there was a legitimate war happening. While there were left-wing groups who used violent means to try to bring about a revolution, the numbers of persons killed by Guerrillas was a few hundred in comparisons to over 30,000. Additionally, the Dictatorship targeted persons who were not politically active, union leaders, students, family members and friends of active persons.
148 Taylor, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender, 140.
149 Ibid.
150 Hall, Mary, Mother and Warrior, 248.
speeches, was predicated on their effort, as mothers, to find their children. The Madres often carry large placards plastered with photos of their children, thereby reasserting a tangible connection to the physical children that were taken from them and making visible those whom the military attempted to disappear. The Madres did so both to assert their children’s reality and in the hope someone might recognize them and know something about their whereabouts.

It is now clear – more than thirty years after the end of the dictatorship -- that the vast majority of the children will never reappear. Out of over 30,000 disappeared individuals, only about 1,500 reappeared alive. However, as many of the families of the disappeared and the few who reappeared emphasized at the time (and some continue to emphasize), “there is no over” to the ordeal. Diana Taylor, professor of Performance Studies and author of *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’* describes the way in which the act of torture expands beyond both the moment of torture and the individual who was tortured:

Torture destroys both horizontally, across these interconnected bodies, and vertically, through the generations. It attacks three generations simultaneously: the target generation; their parents, who wonder if they are further endangering their children’s lives by doing too much or too little to bring about their release, and their children, most of whom would never see their parents again and who would be taught that, in any case, their parents had been ‘subversives,’ undeserving of life.

The torture itself is experienced by an individual physical body; however, the effects of this torture and denial of existence expand to include not just the individuals but all those around them.

Individuals tend to come together as a collective based on their experience of shared

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152 Ibid., 172. The assertion of the ‘never over’-ness of this period of systematic elimination of opposition should be looked at through the recent judicial trials in which some who were guilty of these crimes were, after over 30 years, sentenced to prison for the crimes that were committed. As Alicia Partnoy and Raquel Partnoy stated in their visit to Bard College on March 9th and 10th, 2014, the impact of justice being done, even so much later, is powerful and should not be overlooked. However, this is beyond the scope of this project and it is perhaps too soon to understand how the trials will influence people’s opinions about this time and how they will consider themselves in relation to the disappeared.

tragedy. Concurrently, members of the military involved in perpetrating the tragedies (or not halting them) develop a collective identity and “story” in relation to these disappearances. While the military engaged in “acts of torture and disappearance as acts of sociopolitical decomposition,” they were also engaged simultaneously attempting a “re-composition governed by collective fantasies prioritizing certain kinds of bodies congruent with the nation’s self-image.”

The ‘re-composition’ of the ‘correct’ nation was predicated on the decomposition of families, networks of activists, groups of friends, as well as individual people. Although many concerned with justice for the disappeared groups are looking for the physical bodies and physical proof of the atrocities committed, taking back the disappeared was and is, frequently, not a material project. It is beyond the scope of this project to examine the human rights reports documenting the military crimes committed during the period. However, the way in which a collective consciousness and connection based on shared loss and suffering, and in which attempts to make visible those who were disappeared, interacts with the current living bodies, especially those of mothers, has much to do with the current ambivalence on abortion.

The way in which disappeared bodies reemerged, representationally recomposed by loved ones, “as icons, either as ‘subversives’ [...] or as the ‘disappeared’ [...]” sheds light on how women entering the public sphere and political spaces today are limited and often less able to claim rights for themselves. Women like the Madres, who form an identity as a “collective of survivors,” as well as an identity for their lost ones as “a collective of disappeared persons” can draw visibility to the humanity of the victims, reasserting that the disappeared were once flesh and blood children. Yet these collectives also obscure the biological bodies of the victims, drawing attention to who they were alive and away from their brutalized bodies that are now

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154 Ibid., 150.
155 Ibid., 140.
156 Ibid., 148.
157 Ibid.
deposited in unknown locations. Taylor describes how “conflicting images that reintroduced the missing into the public sphere as pure representation,” can make visible certain aspects of those people, their humanness in life, but it also can obscure some of the very violence that these images intend to denounce.\textsuperscript{158} There is an interaction between making visible those who are no longer alive, by turning them into symbolic bodies, and the physical, current bodies that enter political spaces with the intention of making visible that which the Military attempted to hide. Having claimed the political stage by invoking their collective children, as generation of people fighting for a better Argentina, the Madres have utilized this discourse of maternity that can obscure how matters of bodily needs and rights, and especially the right to “disappear” potential replacement children for those who were so brutally taken, to materialize and gain support. 

In the section which follows, I explore the way in which a “resistance strategy that has kept various issues and figures ‘alive’ in Argentina—from the seemingly immortal Evita to the victims of the Dirty War”—by declining to accept corporeal loss and creating instead an ongoing living presence, limits women’s ability to claim abortion rights.\textsuperscript{159} I address the way this displacement of the individual physical body onto a collective and symbolic ‘body politic’--symbolic representation of a collective of citizens through reference to the human body--obstructs political discussions – such as those concerning women’s right to bodily autonomy and abortion -- that concern and claim rights related to the physical and individual body.

**Writing the Collective Body Politic**

Alicia Partnoy’s collection of stories -- *The Little School (La Escuelita)* -- illustrates the effect of this metaphorical “re-composition” of the disappeared into type of ‘body politic’ which, by submerging the corporeal, and grasping collective maternity as a means of displacing physical

\textsuperscript{158} Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender*, 160.

\textsuperscript{159} This is not to criticize the Madres and any other groups in the least. It is only to say that there are consequences to representing or not representing either the physical bodies or the symbolic bodies of the victims.
pain, makes it difficult, for women, especially, to invoke rights so closely connected to individual, physical, bodily choices – especially ones that involve potential life.

Alicia Partnoy was herself ‘disappeared’ in 1977. Military personnel took her from her home in Bahía Blanca, in front of her 18 month-old daughter, Ruth (who was fortunately found by neighbors and protected until Alicia’s parents could take her). Partnoy was taken to a concentration camp “ironically named Little School (La Escuelita).” Prisoners were routinely taken there and tortured for information. She was kept handcuffed and blindfolded for three and a half months, and kept in prison for nearly three years. Eventually, in 1979, Alicia was released, on condition that she leave Argentina. She sought and was granted asylum in the United States.

Almost immediately, Partnoy “started to work on behalf of the remaining prisoners and the disappeared ones.” After the Dictatorship crumbled in 1983, she returned and testified in front of the “Argentine Commission for the Investigation of Disappearances[,] CONADEP.” Additionally, she has written semi-autographical stories in an attempt to remember and pay tribute to the voices of companions that were killed. Partnoy’s book, The Little School, is comprised of “literary representations” that serve “a different function and address[] a different audience than the accusations and descriptions [...] brought forth in front of human rights groups” do. In The Little School, Partnoy records not simply the facts concerning the camps and the torture, but the strategy used by the prisoners to manage the pain and terror, and to engage in forms of resistance to it. She documents her own effort to distance herself from her corporeal
self, blocking the physical awareness of torture, while simultaneously seeking to remove distance between herself and fellow prisoners, physically and emotionally, by focusing on shared senses of humanity and on the formation of solidarity between them. 169

Partnoy focuses on “recomposing the disappeared, rather than documenting their destruction.” 170 Recomposing the disappeared -- reminding the readers of the humanity the military tried to rob them of -- is an important component of Partnoy’s vignettes, however it also problematizes her notion of herself, as an individual. This is particularly evident in the vignette, “A Conversation Under the Rain,” where she refers to herself in the third person. 171 (For the sake of clarity, I use ‘Partnoy’ to refer to the author, Alicia Partnoy, and ‘Alicia’ to refer to the character of Alicia Partnoy within the vignettes.)

Partnoy originally wrote the vast majority of the vignettes from the point of view of other desaparecidas. 172 She, as Taylor points out, “wanted a collective voice […] wanted [her book] to be about a whole generation.” 173 Partnoy’s stories are, as Taylor notes, “a literary disavowal of death, [a] bid for [a symbolic] ‘aparición con vida.’” 174 Partnoy attempts to recompose her generation through the creation of a collective voice for those who could no longer speak. Through her stories, she establishes a collective of persecuted persons; a collective whose identity becomes as invulnerable and impermeable in contrast to the all too vulnerable physical bodies of the individuals who make up the collective are tortured and destroyed. 175

This ‘divide’ between the prisoners’ individual physical bodies and their invocation as a collective ‘body politic’ –actually involved divides that operated on different levels: a “split

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169 Ibid., 159-159.
170 Ibid., 161.
171 Ibid
173 Partnoy quoted in Personal interview with Taylor in Taylor, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender, 166.
174 Ibid. “Aparición con vida” was the slogan adopted by the Madres de the Plaza de Mayo.
175 Taylor, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender, 166.
between the individual [physical] (Partnoy),” and the “group”-- the segment of the metaphorical body politic that she is writing or reviving through her stories (whose being the Military could not destroy); and a dislocation of what is experienced in the realm of the “physical,” (torture, starvation, and the like) onto the collective (or body politic), as both coping mechanism and survival strategy. Alicia can endure and distance herself from physical pain because this metaphorical body politic protects her and acts as an emotional and even physical shield; her membership in a collective dedicated to justice at all costs, is what endures, even as nearly all of the individual physical entities perish.

The activism of many of the disappeared (like that of Evita) was based on a commitment to fighting for a better future for the country -- for the people as a whole -- not just for themselves. Evita, when she died, reemerged (was continuously ‘recomposed’ over the past 60 years) as a symbol for national social justice, and her memory, even today, is evoked to continue that struggle. Similarly, the desaparecidos’ bodies reemerged in the realm of social activism as a collective whose symbolic body nods to a particular type of patriotism and dedication to justice. At the same time that their singular bodies disappeared (or, in a few cases, reappeared permanently scarred), the collective body remained immortal and invulnerable, permanently enshrined in collective consciousness and in the Madres ever-present photographic and artistic representations, as well as in Partnoy’s writing.

Partnoy also displaces a conception of the family as comprised of individuals with connections to a particular family with that of a symbolic collective family, based on solidarity and shared values (and suffering) rather than blood or legal relation. Partnoy describes the way in which disappeared women devised survival strategies by separating themselves as individual

176 Ibid., 155.
177 Although those who were disappeared had diverse backgrounds, viewpoints, and were engaged in a range of different activities,--indeed, many were targeted for their union membership or were targeted for merely knowing someone who was a ‘subversive’--in understanding what happened and why, many describe the activities that people were engaged in had to do with a commitment to effecting political change.
mothers with biological children from an imagined collective, symbolic maternity that kept the biological at bay. This displacement at points became corporeal: according to Partnoy, none of the non-pregnant women menstruated, “as if [their] bodies were protecting themselves,” presumably from pregnancy resulting in rape from the guards. In lieu of biological maternity, the women became symbolic mothers to the youths in the camps with them.

Partnoy’s stated intent in writing *The Little School* is to “pay tribute to a generation of Argentines lost in an attempt to bring social change and justice.” She connects the story of what happened at the ‘escuelita’ to a larger story of the disappeared in Argentina as well as to “victims of repression” across Latin America persecuted for their efforts to effectuate political change. Partnoy recomposes, through her writing, not only herself, fragmented psychologically and physically, but also a generation (actually, multiple generations) of activists. The vignettes are “tales of disappearance and survival.” *The Little School* portrays not only Partnoy’s actual (and rare) survival but also, in the absence of the literal survival of her compatriots, their endurance as a group. The solidarity that Partnoy writes about, belonging to this group of activists and dissidents, is based on a formation of a collective in which the collective is necessarily distanced from the physical individuals who were ‘disappeared’ are abstracted. This strategy of resistance and survival is related to how individual biological needs that might involve abortion can be difficult to make visible, especially when the current Administration has been so dedicated to pursuing justice for those whose rights were violated during the Military Dictatorship.

As Partnoy tell us, many of the disappeared were young university students, and some knew or knew of one another from past activism. Because in the camp they could not speak

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178 Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales*, 70.
179 Ibid., 18.
180 Ibid., Front page, title.
181 Ibid., 11-2.
openly and were punished for any communication at all, this solidarity of shared commitment had to be transmitted and communicated through fleeting moments of physical connection. In the vignette “Latrine,” Partnoy describes how, when her cot was briefly moved close to those of two other prisoners blindfolded like the others, she

“held Vasca’s hand, a handshake of complicity and on [her] other side [she] felt Hugo’s firm hand. [Their] palms conveyed a message: “Courage. For today and for the rest of the days [they’d] have to endure [t]here.”182

Attention to the physical, however, entailed attention to pain and torture, so most of her attention is paid to transcendence of it. She largely does not describe the details of her own torture or that of others. Even when the physical is invoked, it is often in the context of a group experiencing a shared experience of physical awareness which is experience and endured collectively.

One of these rare moments occurs in “Latrine,” in which Partnoy describes the constipation prisoners suffered, due to “months of immobility, inadequate food, and the lack of even a minute of privacy to empty [their] bowels.”183 The ‘solution’ offered for constipation is to “pretend that” one of the Guard’s faces, “is inside the latrine [so that] shitting becomes a pleasure,” an imagined defiance of the common enemy.184 What allows the group to overcome the pain of constant constipation is connecting the individual, suffering physically, to the collective, comprised of those imprisoned for pursuing justice and seeking change.

Later the same story, Alicia meets a fellow prisoner, a stranger, returning from the latrine. A guard orders her to “slap his face because he’s got bad manners.”185 Instead of “hurt[ing] a pal,” Alicia “caresses his face,” knowing that her actions would likely result in physical punishment for her. Yet, instead of hurting this unknown fellow torture victim, she prefers to take on his pain, receiving twelve slaps herself for disobeying the guard. Yet these “almost [don’t] hurt,” because

182 Ibid., 31.
183 Ibid., 29.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid., 32.
she associates the stranger with her friend, Hugo, who had endured, “more than [she] had,” and the stranger thereby becomes a “pal,” to Alicia, so that her physical body somehow is protected - - numbed – because she acts for someone who is part of her symbolic collective.\(^{186}\) This type of “solidarity” both transcends the individual (one need not know the person on whose behalf one acts) and allows transcendence of her physical pain.

Another Vignette, “Benja’s First Night” describes Alicia’s experience when another young man is brought to the concentration camp. Alicia remembers him as, “the youngest of the group” and recalls their previous shared political activity.\(^{187}\) She remembers that “the two of [them] once wrote together on a wall: ‘Down with the military killers. We shall overcome.’”\(^{188}\) This makes her want “protect him -- Just a kid!”\(^{189}\) Despite her own hunger and malnourishment, she manages to “pass [her own] bread and cheese to Benja” whose “ribs [are] sticking out.” She cannot exercise a maternal role towards her absent daughter, Ruth, so attempts to do so in relation to Benja. Like any ‘good’ mother (metaphoric rather than actual), she addresses his suffering and hunger before her own, embracing the Marian ideals of self-sacrifice for the good of the child or children of the group.\(^{190}\) Alicia tells us that for her, “what really matters is that [the guard] stop beating Benja.”\(^{191}\) She wishes that she could take the pain for him, that the “coward [was] beating her instead.”\(^{192}\) To protect her symbolic “child,” she devises a plan, “to arm wrestle the guard” and distract him from torturing Benja.\(^{193}\) Despite being starved, tortured, and exhausted, Alicia is able to summon unlikely (even impossible) strength for Benja’s sake.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{187}\) Ibid., 45.
\(^{188}\) Ibid., 45.
\(^{189}\) Ibid., 46.
\(^{190}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{191}\) Ibid.
\(^{192}\) Ibid., 46.
\(^{193}\) Ibid.
and wins her first contest. She continues to wrestle even though her “arm is rather sore,” convincing herself that it doesn’t bother her, although eventually, after several rounds with the guard, she “can’t feel [her] arm.” Fighting for another who is part of the collective resistance acts, for Alicia, as a shield against the pain, and the pain that would have been inflicted on Benja.

Adopting her maternal role, protecting “her” child and, by extension, all children suffering injustice at the hands of the junta, Alicia is able to engage in bravery and action on behalf of a symbolic “child of the group”. This strategy is to some extent a gendered one -- particularly associated our expectation that all women, whether actual mothers or not, should act as (self-sacrificing) mothers would. Women are able to engage is superhuman acts of bravery to protect children – their own, certainly, but also all children. This sacrifice enables women to lay claim to a public role – but in a form that makes it nearly impossible claim, in that role, a right to “sacrifice” potential child’s life for one’s own personal -- hence selfish -- reasons.

In “A Conversation Under the Rain,” Partnoy writes about a conversation she had with another young prisoner, María Elena. Partnoy writes about the experiences of Alicia – herself -- in third person, splitting the “I”, the individual who experiences bodily pain and is vulnerable from the “she” of the story, who is strong and part of collective/body politic, shielded by this separation from her “I/individual” self. While waiting to be tortured, Alicia “summon[s] all her defenses, blocking out any speculation about her fate. She [does] not indulge in self-pity. The hatred she [feels] for them shield[s] her.” The experience of torture, coping with torture, it seems, requires her to dissociate from her own body and from fully acknowledging what is happening. However, what enables Alicia—as well as other prisoners—to do this is their shared convictions, ideologies, and, it turns out, ordinary conversations. As she is getting ready to be

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194 Ibid., 47.
195 Ibid., 48.
196 Ibid., 71.
197 Ibid.
tortured, Alicia feels “as if the guards [don’t exist]” and is able to “erase [them] from her mind by thinking of pleasant things [...like] her conversation with María Elena.”\(^{198}\) Alicia knows that talking to fellow prisoners can easily result in punishment. Despite this, Alicia holds the conviction that their “conversation had been worth it, despite the beatings that could come, despite humiliation” because their “warm conversation” allowed her to focus on something other than her physical sensations.\(^{199}\) Their shared passion for justice, equality, love of others and hatred of the guards, allows her endure and “neither [cry] nor plead[,] for mercy [...] not even tremble,” while being tortured.\(^{200}\) The symbolic body politic of which she is a part and for which she sacrifices acts as a shield to the physical body, even as that body suffers brutality and starvation. Partnoy weighed only 95 pounds when she ‘reappeared.’\(^{201}\)

In the vignette, “The Denim Jacket,” Alicia receives her friend Vasca’s jacket, after Vasca has been taken away to be killed, which serves as a (relatively ineffective) physical shield when she, herself, is later beaten. Yet its power is enhanced because it acts as a symbolic shield: the “magic of the jacket” makes Alicia feel as if she were in her “mother’s arms when she was a little girl” and, for the first time since disappeared, Alicia feels “safe.”\(^{202}\) Alicia feels somehow imbued with “Vasca’s courage” and, as she is hit with a rubber stick, feels as if “the blows almost [don’t] hurt.”\(^{203}\) She summons heroic courage to call her torturers “fascists” despite the risk of more abuse, because she feels she can displace her pain onto a sense of human connection to and solidarity with the disappeared as a whole—her ‘body politic.’\(^{204}\) As the individual body is hurt, the symbolic and collective body (politic)—united by shared moral certainty in fighting for values larger and of greater importance than any individual body—is strengthened.

\(^{198}\) Ibid., 72.
\(^{199}\) Ibid.
\(^{200}\) Ibid., 73.
\(^{201}\) Ibid., 15.
\(^{202}\) Ibid., 109.
\(^{203}\) Ibid., 112.
\(^{204}\) Ibid.a
Tragically, the bodies of the disappeared were treated by the military as a stand-in for what it perceived was wrong with society, and as the sites for an attempted “birthing process for the new national being.” Fighting the military’s plan (and discourse) entailed the reemergence of the disappeared, if not physically, then as a symbolic, collective rebirth, by and through which they and their families became part of a larger movement for social justice. Like Evita, the desaparecidos symbolically overcame physical death to occupy a critical space in Argentine political memory and politics. They re-emerge(d) as representative of a particular dedication to political and social change and justice -- to demand a right to be “present”, literally and figuratively, in the national arena. Thus, in many ways, as permanent as their physical disappearance was, their “reappearance” has become, in this sense, also permanent.

Indeed, many who were active during this time, “often university students, took Evita as their standard-bearer and tapped into the energy of her memory in favor, they proclaimed, of social justice,” and they searched for the body of Evita in an attempt to connect themselves tangibly to this fight for social justice. The body of Evita, even after death, thus continues to serves as a vessel, carrying the potential life of for a ‘New Argentina’, just as the bodies of the disappeared are invoked in demands for justice and a better Argentina.

**Collective Maternity, Pregnancy and Children**

Partnoy writes the vignette, “Graciela: Around the Table,” from the point of view of a pregnant prisoner, further emphasizes the submersion of the individual corporeal self as a survival technique. Pregnant prisoners were afforded a certain amount of mobility to exercise in order to protect their offspring, which were prized by the military because of the demand among powerful Argentine families for infants to adopt. Yet Graciela uses her ‘freedom’ to circle round

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206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
208 Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 244.
and round the same table—the circles as a metaphor for mothers in captivity as well as a means of distancing herself from her pregnancy and the child who will be taken from her.

During one of these walks, Graciela hears María Elena, one of the younger prisoners, “[a]sking for water”, and rather than focus on her own pregnancy, imagines ways to help María Elena, the group’s ‘collective child’. Partnoy is not only documenting that, despite contrary claims, pregnant women were disappeared, but is also demonstrating the way in which Graciela distances herself from her current pregnancy and the guilt she feels about her living (and left behind) daughter, Adrianita, by focusing on María Elena. Yet, when Graciela is circling, the “guilt feelings” begin, “one more chain...” Partnoy here seems to express and mirror own feelings about her daughter, Ruth, as well, displacing her sense of maternal responsibility onto “little” and “strong” María Elena. María Elena herself is not only the baby of the group, but is herself pregnant. Thus Graciela’s (and Partnoy’s) maternal care is displaced from their own children onto not one, but two, children who are at once “real” in the story, imaginary (it is only a story), and symbolic (they represent for the protagonists all children, as well as the purpose of their struggle—a just world for future children).

Graciela, who is physically pregnant, often describes the pain that she endures while pregnant as either amplified by her knowledge that her child “was being hurt,” bringing a “terrible fear of miscarriage.” Graciela thinks, at times, “it would have been better if [she] had lost him.” The pain of her body, her physical pain, is felt in connection with a sort of maternal pain of knowing that she cannot protect her child. Graciela does not often allow herself to think

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208 Partnoy, The Little School: Tales, 70.
209 Ibid., 55.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid., 54.
212 Ibid.
about her young daughter Adrianita outside of prison.\textsuperscript{213} She simply cannot endure her suffering and distance herself enough from it when she is thinking about the individual child that she was forced to leave. The day before the vignette takes place, “thinking of [Adrianita]... [Graciela] cried all day long,” wondering where her child was, wishing that she could be sure “her parents were taking care of her [daughter]!”\textsuperscript{214} The thought of her daughter makes her emotionally raw and vulnerable, something that she cannot afford to in jail.

In “A Puzzle” Partnoy describes (as Alicia) being unable to remember what her daughter looks like. Something about the pain of recalling her daughter physically – of imagining her whole face – is, for Alicia, impossible. She, like Graciela, “tries not to remember too much, to avoid crying.”\textsuperscript{215} Alicia can remember many fragments of her life with her daughter: she can remember her daughter Ruth’s “big eyes[...]almost non-existent nose, the shape of her mouth[...] the texture of her hair, [...] the warmth of her skin, [...] the things [they] did together.”\textsuperscript{216} However, when Alicia tries to assemble her daughter in whole, put all of the physical pieces together that make her face, “something goes wrong.”\textsuperscript{217} Alicia thinks to herself that “maybe it’s better this way. If [she] could look at a picture of her face, [she] would surely cry... and if [she cries, she] crumbles.”\textsuperscript{218}

Although Partnoy describes Graciela’s pain when thinking of her daughter (and by extension, Partnoy’s own), most descriptions are of the reaction to the pain – such as Graciela’s need to move quickly from one thing to another or focus on the details of the table or count laps to cope -- and the actual pain of separation and uncertainty is largely represented by ellipses, because it cannot be expressed with words or would cause too much pain to write. For both

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 55.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 78-79.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 77.
\item \textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 79.
\end{itemize}
Alicia and Graciela, self-preservation requires remaining at a psychological distance from the daughters they were forced to leave. Taylor notes that Partnoy largely “distance[s] herself [and her fellow prisoners] from the biological facticity of the torture and death taking place around her” in order to achieve that ‘wholeness’ and connection that all need, to survive.”

Although Alicia cannot compose the face of her daughter Ruth, Vasca, a friend also in La Escuela, “of course” remembers Ruth’s face. In fact, the memory or knowledge of Ruth gives her friend Vasca courage when she is facing the prospect of death. On the last night that Alicia saw Vasca, she said to Alicia “If I don’t see her again give your daughter a kiss for me. Make her a happy child, strong but sensitive, and teach her to give to others.” Similarly, when Raul, Graciela’s husband, is being tortured, he states that he is “okay” and tells her to “be strong” and “take heart” “for Adrianita... for the baby.” For Alicia and Graciela, the memory of their own individual children is incapacitating, necessitating a certain distance from the concepts of these individual children. Others tell these women to draw strength from their children, as the symbolic and literal future. These others are able to draw on a certainty that what is currently suffered can be endured for the sake of the child, who might grow up in a better world. As the biological family is destroyed, symbolic and collective families are created to perpetuate and re-embody them. Thus in The Little School, mothers distance themselves from the biological awareness of themselves as mothers and from the memory of the children they gave birth to, but at the same time they are drawn closer to the collective and symbolic Child.

The “psychological wholeness” that Taylor points to is not merely psychological, but political as well. Symbolic preservation of the collective disappeared simultaneously creates a

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219 Taylor, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender, 159.
220 Partnoy, The Little School: Tales, 77.
221 Ibid., 107.
222 Ibid., 55.
223 Taylor, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender, 159.
collective of survivors based on shared experiences, suffering, loss, and even sometimes, the joyful recovery of lost children, to promote action and awareness. Both collectives aim to overcome some of the holes – physical and psychological -- left by the disappearance of so many. This process of ‘recomposition’ necessarily involves a shift from any specific individual in favor of an emphasis on shared (collective) political values.

Partnoy’s tales embody a gendered story about how women, claiming yet simultaneously eschewing their status as actual and potential mothers, survive. The women of the Escuelita are engaged, in part, in collective performance of maternity, and this symbolic connection between progressive struggle, resistance, and maternity, like the Evita imagery, influences and restricts today’s effort to gain the legal right to abortion. As the disappearances increased, the focus on each individual mother’s link to her biological children was replaced by an emphasis on the role of symbolic and almost ‘universal’ mother to the children of the entire group. This emphasis, I claim, significantly impacts today’s attempts to assert a right to individual control of the biological functions of maternity, and must be factored into the strategies used in the effort to gain legalized abortion.\(^\text{224}\)

**Becoming ‘Madres’**

The “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” (the ‘Mothers’ or the *Madres*) began to form soon after the 1976 coup, once it became clear that many of their children were being disappeared by the Military Junta.\(^\text{225}\) For the most part, the Mothers were middle-aged women who had spent most of their adult lives in the home -- cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their children.\(^\text{226}\) Most had not, themselves, been politically active. Rather, they were women who occupied

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\(^{224}\) In my conclusion, I suggest some ways in which this might be done.


\(^{226}\) Ibid., 2.
spaces traditionally associated with women and mothers, engaging in traditionally feminine activities.

The sudden and massive assault on that existence -- when their children, many of them college age and younger, were abruptly kidnapped by military and paramilitary forces without notice beforehand or information afterward – prompted them act. Often unable to discover what had happened to their children, who were talking to them one day and gone the next, or hearing from witnesses only that their children had been “taken”, they began to leave the safety and familiarity of their homes to assemble and demonstrate in the Plaza de Mayo – carrying placards with or wearing pinned to their clothing photographs of their missing children -- demanding the return of their children.227 As the disappearances were carried out with anonymity, often in the middle of the night, in order to deny or hide responsibility, the Mothers demanded accountability by assembling in the heart of Buenos Aires, in front of the Casa Rosada [Pink House] – Buenos Aires’ most public building, from whose balcony countless leaders, including Evita, had given important addresses to the nation. They demanded to know the whereabouts of their children, as well as to be given information about the perpetrators. Robbed of their biological children, and therefore unable to perform their specific maternal function (at least toward those absent children, though many had others), the Mothers “banded together […] redefining their sense of self, analyzing their own situation as part of a broader pattern of repression, and discovering their own inviolable dignity and worth.”228 When only a few of the missing children reappeared, and as the connection between the Mothers in similar situations strengthened, the focus on individual

227 Ibid.
228 Ibid., 79.
disappeared children began to shift. Many realized that fighting for one child, or only one’s own child would be less useful than continuing to “fight for all the children.”

The Mothers stepped out of their traditional roles as women and mothers, “homebound” and ostensibly “submissive,” or at least not politically active, taking to the streets to call attention to the disappearances and demand their children’s return. "While Mothers maintain[ed] the traditional concept of maternity, they … infused it with new content. They believe[d] that they must not only be politically active but also willing to go to the barricades and risk their lives in order to achieve a just community." This contradiction – basing a very public role on their private status as mothers, homemakers and caretakers -- did not go unnoticed.

As part of an attempt by the Military to discredit the Mothers, an army captain criticized. “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo pervert the role of the mother,” “I can’t imagine the Virgin Mary shouting, protesting, spreading hatred when her son, our God, was snatched from her arms.” By adopting such a public role, “The Mothers […] subverted the concept of motherhood as merely biological […] and stepped out of their roles as passive and private persons. In so doing they […] challenged the conservative Catholic heritage that provided support for the political system.”

"[T]he symbolism of the Virgin is … invoked to remember children, as with the white scarves of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina,” precisely as a way to justify trespasses onto political spaces and into political and public roles. The mantle of maternity is used in order to negotiate access to political and public spaces. The Mothers utilize on Marian symbolism and rhetoric to justify stepping outside of traditionally acceptable roles. This strategy,

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229 Ibid., 180.
230 Ibid., 8.
231 Ibid., 189.
232 Ibid., 184.
233 Ibid., 189.
however, can end up being a trap or cage when women access public space to claim rights for themselves as women, and not as mothers, caretakers of next generation of patriots (or good Catholics).

The vast majority of the 30,000 “children” would never reappear, and it would take years to discover the fates of many. The fate of many others remains unknown. As a result, the initially narrow goals (information and return) with which the Madres began expanded to include efforts to bring those who were responsible to justice, and to make visible the lost children not merely to find them, but also to combat the military’s attempt “to annihilate the memory” of their existence and their struggle for justice by denying their disappearances, whereabouts, and ultimately their deaths.234

After the Junta fell in 1983, the Madres continued and to this day continue to demonstrate, both to remind people of what happened to their children in order to make sure it does not happen again. Deeply pained by the permanent physical absence of their children, they do so, in addition, to keep alive the goals and dreams for which those children died.235 Another and often related organization, “the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo formed at the time the Mothers formalized their society” limited its focus to discovering the whereabouts of individual “disappeared” persons. “Though they collaborated with the Mothers, their goals were to find their grandchildren who either had been born in captivity or who were disappeared along with their parents, and this would remain their primary objective.”236

Some Mothers’ bid for the reappearance of live children, even knowing it to be impossible, led to considerable disagreement among the Mothers, in addition to different viewpoints on strategies, ultimately lead to a split over how best to continue as an organization.

234 Ibid., 12. Not all of the disappeared called themselves Peronists. However, to the Junta, subtle or radical distinctions between persons who were anti-capitalist, Peronists, and family of those involved did not exist.
235 Ibid., 153.
236 Ibid., 94.
and the appropriate level of opposition to the post-junta government.\textsuperscript{237} In 1986, the Mothers formally split in two: the “Línea Fundadora (Founding Line)” and the “Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, hereafter “the Association”).\textsuperscript{238}

The Mothers of the Founding Line disagreed with the Association’s refusal to work within the Alfonsín government (which had given some members of the military pardons), its increasingly oppositional stances, and its refusal to accept the offers to stage memorials, exhumations to find and honor their children.\textsuperscript{239} The Association “made a deliberate decision to keep the wounds open, in order to help them maintain their purpose and momentum,” refusing to take part in Alfonsín’s goal to “heal the wounds of the nation.”\textsuperscript{240} This refusal to accept the “normal” formal rituals of death (and the exhumations that might have made them possible by identifying remains), did not, for the most part, express a belief that somehow the children, 30 years later, would return to their families alive.\textsuperscript{241} Rather, the Mothers deliberately opted to give “a new meaning to death […] to die for a cause has a different meaning, because it’s a death that kills the body, but it doesn’t kill the feelings, the idea.”\textsuperscript{242} Attempts to identify the bodies, commemorate individuals with plaques or memorials, and move on, were and continue to be rejected by the Association. The Association’s refusal represents both an unwillingness to “recognize” the murdered without an unequivocal admission by the government of the Military’s guilt and that of the individual guilty parties, and simultaneously a refusal to accept anything less than the completion of the fight for justice for which their children died.\textsuperscript{243}

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\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 162-163.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{242} De Bonafini quoted in Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard, Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2004), 162.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 153.
\end{footnotesize}
Hebe de Bonafini, the leader of the Association at the time of the split, who remains active within the group today, “refused to attend the ceremonies for [the installation] of plaques with names of the disappeared in every classroom,” because it was not in line with her mission to make sure that what her son and “daughter-in-law fought for does not die with them.”\(^{244}\) The Mothers in the Association believe that “the physical annihilation of their offspring does not mean the death of their dreams […] and ] they believe their children live on inside them.”\(^{245}\) The Mothers are occupied not by the physical children that have been annihilated, but by the desire to make sure that their children’s existence, symbolically, lives on. Indeed, de Bonafini says that the disappearance of her son “has left [her] permanently pregnant,” stating that “if they are no longer, [she has] to be them, to shout for them[…]\(^{246}\) Her purpose in continuing to march, and that of many Mothers who do so, is to transform the political structure because “they would not achieve justice […] while the very forces that were responsible for their children’s disappearances were in place.” The forces they invoke are not only the persons that, to this day, largely enjoy impunity for their crimes (with a few narrow exceptions, and only recently), but also the “social and economic inequities” that their children challenged.\(^{247}\)

Many of the Mothers (from both organizations) still occupy the Plaza de Mayo on Thursdays, continuing to demonstrate and make demands, as well as to travel internationally and participate in national and international human rights conferences as a part of this continued fight.\(^{248}\) Their authority in these roles stems directly from their symbolic roles as “permanently

\(^{243}\) Ibid., 182.
\(^{244}\) Ibid., 181.
\(^{245}\) Ibid.
pregnant” mothers of the disappeared, standing in for – indeed, serving as vessels carrying – the dreams and wishes of their absent children.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 190.}

In the 1970s, when the Junta was in power, the Madres faced a “terrifying scenario in which [they] felt compelled to insert themselves, [which] was organized and maintained around a highly coercive definition of the feminine and motherhood” held by the military.\footnote{Taylor, \textit{Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender}, 184.} The Mothers employed the roles and symbolism attached to maternity by Catholicism and Peronism (especially through Evita, childless ‘mother of the nation’) in order to access spaces that were politically and culturally significant (the Plaza de Mayo, in front of Military buildings and Churches) and heretofore largely forbidden to them, and to anti-junta activists. The Mothers “performed” their maternity in order to access these forbidden spaces, seeking to bring about change and gain answers from the government. They predicated their trespass onto public and political spaces on their maternal roles (indeed, often exaggerated “performances” of those roles), visibly and verbally expressing a desire to find their children, willing to face violence and, as some did, even death on behalf of those missing children.\footnote{Guzmán Bouvard, \textit{Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers}, 177.} They did not limit their trespass to local and national spaces. “From their intrusion into a political arena that proscribed any form of opposition, they […] moved on to join the arena of international diplomacy,” attending international conferences and using their authority as Madres to gain audience and support.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 89.}

Some feminists today “criticize the Mothers on [the grounds…] that they perpetuate the concept of the self-sacrificing woman”.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 189.} Yet their strategy was, at the time, effective, and their strategy to present themselves “simply” as mothers who were seeking return of stolen children, gave them the moral authority to claim political space (both physical and symbolic) and gain the

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\item \textit{Ibid.}, 190.
\item Taylor, \textit{Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender}, 184.
\item Guzmán Bouvard, \textit{Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers}, 177.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 89.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 189.
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support and sympathy of the international community in a way that simply demonstrating as citizens who happened to be women would not have done. The Mothers entered the streets as middle-aged housewives, unthreatening and in line with their maternal duties to ensure the well-being of their children. They adopted “baby shawls as their insignia[...] not only [to] identify themselves, but [also to] represent a reality in stark contrast” to attempts of the Military to discredit them by claiming that they had raised ‘subversives,’ who were less than human and enemies of the nation. The Mothers were able to claim the Plaza de Mayo and other spaces covered by their pañuelo (shawls), precisely because they did so in their roles as mothers expressing concern for their “babies”, the very embodiment of non-threatening innocents.254 Like Evita, their utilization of the acceptable roles of women as mothers, both literal ones in their case, and symbolic ones as in Evita’s, represented a powerful strategy to gain power and support by relying on the historic, religious and cultural significance attached to women as mothers.

Additionally, the mutual support became in important part of how the Mothers coped with their losses.

“The vase of the Mothers’ lives had been smashed by the disappearances of their children, and they were reclaiming the shards to form a new and more resistant shape out of the broken pieces of the universe that had once housed them—the church, the inviolable home, the husband as a protector, and their own safety as middle-aged women in a society that revered women even while it marginalized them. Whether they gathered on stone benches in front of a church or circled the Plaza, the Mothers were experiencing a growing solidarity and a new path in their maternal roles.”255

These maternal roles evolved to be based more on a symbolic and collective notion of maternity than on an individual and biological one. The Mothers coped with the absences of their physical children by collectively pressing for achievement of the vision of justice for which their children died, “legitimating values such as peace, justice, brotherhood, and a democratic system that

254 Ibid., 144.
255 Ibid., 80.
respects human rights.”256 Despite its initial anchoring in the return of their specific children, the Madres’ effort has broadened and continued to gain momentum well beyond the end of the Dictatorship.257

The Association maintained its oppositional stance until “the polic[ies] of Kirchner with respect to the violations of Human Rights” from the early 1970s-1983, were adopted.258 In 2006, the Association held the last of their annual marches of Resistance.259 Hebe de Bonafini, as the head of the Association, indicated that the reason for ending the marches was that “the enemy is no longer in the Pink House as it was during the Dictatorship,” and that it was now time to stop “resisting the government” and to “join them.”260 The Administration of the Kirchners, expressing outspoken support of human rights, and “backing efforts to prosecute military and police officials” who committed human rights abuses during the dictatorship, deserved support in this effort, not opposition. Indeed, the Administration had direct links with the Association.261 Cristina officially “authorized” the Association’s “Popular University of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” (Universidad Popular de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo) and it expanded to offer degrees in “Social Work,” “Law,” and “History”.262

Today, groups of Mothers still demonstrate on Thursdays in the Plaza de Mayo, perhaps to remind tourists about the horrors of the Dictatorship (their presence is described in tourism books and they continue to attract visitors to the Plaza), and perhaps to remind the government that they intend to continue to make visible and salient their children’s struggle for justice. Yet

256 Ibid., 95.
257 Ibid.
258 "La Asociación de Madres comienza su última Marcha de la Resistencia” [The Association of Mothers Begins its Last March of Resistance], Página 12 (Buenos Aires, Argentina), January 26, 2006, National, accessed April 24, 2014, http://La Asociación de Madres comienza su última Marcha de la Resistencia.html
260 Ibid.
261 http://www.hrw.org/legacy/english/docs/2004/01/21/argent6979.htm
the model of female activism the Mothers embodied is also still very much alive, and their emphasis on the symbolic function of maternity, motherhood and self-sacrifice as the basis for political activity and visibility remains strong. This, in turn, contributes to a cultural and political milieu that impedes women’s ability to openly and publicly advocate for their rights as women to autonomy, and to control their bodies and “eliminate” maternity through abortion. It may be that the pull of motherhood and maternity is so strong that it will initially take a movement of people who are not as vulnerable to being accused of shirking their responsibilities as citizens, perhaps of fathers and children seeking the right to protect their wives and children from botched abortions and their own right to limit family size to bring this issue to the fore in a way that enables public embrace of it. Of course, feminist activists will (and should) continue to claim bodily self-determination, but that claim has not yet been enough even to win over otherwise likely allies like Cristina Kirchner. Alternative strategies need to be looked at in order to make visible the consequences of Argentina’s restrictions on abortion, to have those bodies occupy political space, literally and symbolically.
Conclusion

All of the explanations for what I have called Argentina’s “abortion enigma” outlined in Chapter 1—the Catholic Church’s influence and opposition, the notion that it is not a high priority issue for Argentines, the historic linkage between motherhood, family values, and patriotism, and the idea that there is a disconnect or “double discourse” in which public professed belief contrasts with private action—are parts of the puzzle. I have argued in this paper that these explanations taken together cannot fully explain why abortion remains illegal when so much other socially progressive legislation on such issues as gay and transgender rights has been adopted, and why even the ‘socially progressive’ Kirchner administration is largely unwilling even to speak about the issue, much less to support this reproductive right.

Despite fierce opposition, the Catholic Church was not influential enough to stop the passage of same-sex marriage in 2010. The explanation that abortion, for Argentines, a not pressing issue, points to a symptom rather than the cause of the fact that the significant numbers of botched underground abortions with their very public health consequences remain invisible, for the most part in the political arena. The ‘double discourse’ or ‘silent revolution,’ explanation likely claims too much. Apart from the fact that the evidence that a majority of Argentines ‘privately’ support abortion rights is weak, even if the “disconnect” between public statements and private beliefs exists, it fails to explain why this ‘disconnect’ exists, and how it is maintained. This is a gap I have tried to help fill.

Perhaps most important to my project is the theory emphasizing the strong historical and cultural linkage between motherhood, family values, and patriotism. Yet, it, too, requires, further elaboration and analysis to demonstrate the ways in which those concepts operate. I have
tried to show that the “performance of maternity” by which women claimed access to public and political space, together with the way in which the physical bodily presence of women in politics became displaced onto the symbolic “body of the nation”, has made it extremely difficult to even discuss, much less to claim a right to, women’s individual, biologic right to self-determination, and the right of families to control reproduction.

To illustrate these themes, I have analyzed sources from two time periods in which women utilized and drew upon the performance of motherhood to claim and create a public presence and take on non-traditional roles: the autobiography of Eva Perón The Reason for My Life (La razón de mi vida); the stories of Alicia Partnoy in The Little School (La escuelita) about her period of “disappearance”; and the “writings” and performances of the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo. I hope I have shown that women gained additional access to political space -- literal and metaphorical -- through the “redefin[ition of] motherhood as a social function,” and the “performance of maternity” on a national and collective level, and that this resulted both in enhancing women’s political and social visibility as symbolic mothers and in obscuring the individual physical bodily existence of women.263 Hopefully, I have at least partially persuaded my readers that this has directly impacted – has both shaped and restricted – today’s debates about and efforts to gain abortion rights. Given the nature of this project, I limited to scope of my analysis to the biography of Eva Peròn, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the writing of Alicia Partnoy, and a few other sources. What remains for a further project is to link my themes even more directly to contemporary utterances and actions (literary, artistic and political) on all sides of the abortion issue, as well as to explore some earlier and different sources.

263 263 Lavrin Asunción, Women, Feminism & Social Change in Argentina, Chile, & Uruguay (n.p.: Univeristy of Nebraska Press, 1995), 4-5.
For instance, to fully understand the script that Evita was using, it would be useful to explore much earlier periods, and expand the number of sources. Examining the founding myths of Argentina and the notions of maternity contained within them would be helpful. Additionally, looking at changing notions of maternity and femininity at the end of the 19th to early 20th century in the Buenos Aires area (with its large number of European immigrants) would be helpful, focusing specifically on changing and evolving notions of motherhood and changing female roles (in factories, for instance). Seeing how roles of women outside of their traditional roles during Argentine independence and other transitional periods would also be helpful, to better understand the way in which at those times, too, women occupied ‘non-traditionally feminine’ spaces. It would also be helpful to go even further back to the 16th century Spanish colonization of present-day Argentina and examine whether and how the Spanish brought with them Christian notions of maternal sacrifice, and, to the extent that evidence can be found, how those beliefs might interacted with different beliefs systems of the various pre-Colombian populations.

I have focused on the way in which aspects of women’s claims to public space, and resistance to oppression – in part by emphasizing their roles as women, and mothers not merely to individual children but to the Nation—have made the claim to abortion rights difficult to press. But these efforts may also contain the seeds of—and help guide the effort to develop—new strategies. The author of the ‘double-discourse’ explanation, Heaton, is probably right that it makes sense to shift the framework surrounding abortion away from its morality or immorality, and focus instead on the public health problem created by complications from “back alley” abortions. Shifting the discussion toward a more fact-oriented approach that emphasizes the large numbers clandestine abortions, injuries, and deaths may allow a gradual move toward
liberalization. But in taking up the symbol of the Madres by wearing shawls (albeit green ones, rather than ‘virginal’ white) to emphasize the link between the Madres continuing struggle for justice and that of women seeking the “human right” to reproductive self-determination, the National Campaign for the Right to a Legal, Safe and Free Abortion adopts and emphasizes the aspect of the Madres’ performance that represents women exercising autonomy – in this case not only on the national, but also the international stage. The Campaign explicitly frames abortion bans as violation of human rights.  

Adopting Evita’s role as mother to “her” poor and working people, abortion activists might emphasize that it is precisely poor and working women who suffer the greatest impact from criminalization. Making visible the reality that it is poor and working women who need but often cannot access safe abortions – who either cannot afford them or who live where such services are unavailable even while the wealthy are able to obtain such abortions by knowing the ‘right’ doctors or traveling to places where abortion is legal—evokes the populist spirit of Evita. Indeed, perhaps activists can use Kirchner’s framing of the Health Ministry with giant Evita portraits to advantage—by invoking Evita’s spirit while pressuring the Ministry to focus on the disparate impact of criminalization on poor, working, and women in rural areas, and the ability of the wealthy to evade consequences.

However, so long as women are trapped in a discourse that ties their value as citizens to their status as mothers, symbolic or biological, it will be very difficult to ensure access for women to reproductive resources such as contraception and abortion. This suggests the importance of a strategy to counter the widely held misunderstanding that abortion is an issue that affects only women. Groups could form such as “Fathers and Grandfathers for the

Legalization of Abortion,” so that, unconstrained by notions of maternity and self-sacrifice, they would be less vulnerable to the charge that they are shirking their duties as citizens when advocating for the right of their wives, children and grandchildren to end a pregnancy. “Children for Legalized Abortion” – could simultaneously confront the idea that to be for a legal abortion is to be against children and emphasize that reproductive rights and methods of family planning are often directly related to the welfare of children.

Not only would establishment of such coalitions represent a powerful reminder that the fight for reproductive resources is about the entire family, but it would also enable advocates to sidestep, at least to some extent, the symbolic and actual constraints on women as advocates. Finally, linking directly to and obtaining endorsements from the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo might go some way to undermining the idea that support abortion rights is somehow a denigration of their loss, and would emphasize that women’s reproductive autonomy is part of the struggle for economic equality, self-determination and justice that they continue to fight for, and that supports all human rights efforts.

While current attempts to reform the Penal Code to decriminalize abortion are unlikely to be immediately successful or well implemented, if won, they nonetheless help open up public discussion and debate. It is my hope that analyses like my own, and the strategic suggestions that might develop from them, contribute to mapping the way to change.

265 Efforts by groups like Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide) are of course critically important as well, in combatting the idea that to be Catholic is to be against abortion, and challenging the dominance of a particular view and reading of the Virgin Mary.
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