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Symbolic Protest and Creating Community:
The Resilience of *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*

By

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“The Mothers will continue the struggle. We always say that we’re going to continue as long as our bodies allow us. We are going to lose some Mothers on the way, some who can’t walk because they’re too old or because they’re too ill to carry on. But as long as there is some life left in us we’ll continue marching in Plaza de Mayo”

Carmen de Guede in conversation with Jo Fisher

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I. Introduction

In 2019, Chilean pop singer Mon Laferte wore a green *pañuelo*, or bandana, around her neck to the Latin Grammy Awards red carpet in Las Vegas, Nevada. On her chest was written the phrase “*en Chile torturan violan y matan*” (“In Chile, they torture, rape and kill”).¹ The year before and thousands of miles away in Argentina, protestors gathered in public squares and parks wearing *pañuelos* on their wrists, bags and heads as the Argentinian Congress considered legalizing abortion. Those in favor wore green; those opposed wore celestial blue. Each day, university students throughout Argentina and Chile sport *pañuelos* of various colors - some green or blue, others orange or purple - tied to their backpacks. In 2014, the *pañuelo* was deemed a national symbol of Argentina (Conn),² and has become a well-recognized symbol throughout Latin America, found painted on public squares and featured in murals.³ In a relatively short period of time, this triangular piece of fabric has come to symbolize activism and protest.

The *pañuelo* was first used in 1977 by a group of 14 mothers in Argentina protesting the disappearances of their children under the authoritarian military regime (Fisher 74). The *pañuelos* were meant to symbolize their lost children. The white cloth made from children’s diapers, often embroidered with the names of the missing, was worn as a headscarf as the mothers undertook their weekly protests, marching around the *Plaza de Mayo* in front of the presidential palace.⁴ The group of 14 mothers became

¹ See Appendix B, photo 1.

² Other national symbols include the flag and the national anthem.

³ See Appendix B, photo 2.

⁴ See Appendix B, photos 3 and 4.

Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo and their white *pañuelos* became ingrained in public memory as a symbol of human rights and women's mobilization.⁵ More than four decades later, the remaining Madres still march each week; most never found out exactly what happened to their children. Despite numerous changes in political structures, including the 1983 transition to democracy, the Madres remain firm in their fight for human rights, though they have broadened how they define this fight.

The Madres do not fit easily into traditional theories of social movements. Though, in many ways, they challenge gender roles, they are not focused on traditional women's issues, such as legal rights for women or gender discrimination.⁶ They are not linked to a particular political party or ideology, which are generally male-dominated. Moreover, canonical theories of social movements, which focus on structures and processes, struggle to predict the emergence and continued mobilization of these women.⁷ The Madres began publicly protesting at great personal risk. Their motivations are deeply emotional and their choice of methods deeply symbolic. Their protests are imbued with symbolic meanings and popular narratives such as the activism of mothers and politicization of motherhood, as well as the Plaza de Mayo as a historical locus of popular mobilization. Moreover, the Madres continue to protest decades later. Neither the military junta under which they emerged nor the new democratic government established in 1983 and the challenges associated with changing regimes demobilized

⁵ For histories of the Madres, see Fisher (1995), Guzman Bouvard (1994), or Navarro (1999).

⁶ One could argue that advocating for children from a maternal perspective is a gendered issue. The crucial word is "traditional" such that the types of claims made by the Madres were not well represented in feminist thought at the time. The Madres are somewhat trailblazing in their politicization of motherhood, at least in the Southern Cone (see Guzman Bouvard). This topic became more complicated over time as the Madres developed a more expansive political ideology.

⁷ See McAdam Et. al (1996).

these women. By most traditional accounts of social movements, the emergence, impact and continued protest of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* is an anomaly. Their protest - then and now - prompts important questions about the resilience of movements and the impact of certain grievances on people and communities.

When I first learned about the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in 2017, I was deeply moved by their protest; they put themselves in great danger for their children and it cost some of them their lives. I was even more inspired by their dedication decades later. Even though most never found their children and few have received any closure regarding their fate, they have remained dedicated to defending human rights in Argentina and fighting to ensure the dark history they lived through never repeats itself.⁸ Perhaps most intriguing, in the years just after democratization, they chose to continue fighting as *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. Undoubtedly, these women felt obliged to continue advocating for the issues important to them. However, dedication to a cause does not explain why they chose to keep fighting as their own, independent organization. Why didn't they join political parties or other human rights groups to continue protesting? What compelled them to continue as *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*? In this thesis, I address questions arising from this history such as why were the Madres able to remain resilient despite the regime change? How do the Madres help us better understand the impact of identity and meaning in the survival of movements and the nature of political communities?

⁸ See Appendix B, photo 5.

If a key element of authoritarian regimes is the suppression of civil society,⁹ logic suggests that social movements, which are external to the state apparatus and therefore subjected to state suppression, should struggle to mobilize under such regimes and should flourish once the state oppression is removed. However, scholars such as Christopher Pickvance have found these assumptions to be false in many cases. Pickvance argues that democratization can hinder collective action. With the reemergence of political parties and other civil organizations, social movements are less able to maintain support and momentum. This is partly because new and established organizations must now compete for human and material resources (362). Yet the Madres pose a clear challenge to this position. Not only were they capable of mobilizing under a repressive and violent regime, but something enabled them to maintain momentum and engagement when civil society reemerged in 1983. In this thesis, I consider how aspects of their protest enable this resilience.

The longevity of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* inspired my research question: why were the Madres able to remain resilient despite the challenges posed by democratization? How does this help us better understand the impact of symbolism in the sustainability of collective action? I understand movement resilience as the ability of a movement to maintain energy and involvement from committed participants. That is, movements are resilient when they are able to maintain some base level of collective action. For example, though the Madres adapted their goals and some of their methods over time, they have continued to protest each Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo, with

⁹ Civil society, depending on its interpretation, can be taken to include everything from ordinary citizens, religious organization, social movements, sports leagues to revolutionary groups (Pickvance 357).

minor exceptions.¹⁰ Note, this is not dependent on their impact or reception, which I consider a separate but related question. For the Madres, we can understand this minimum level of action as the continuation of the weekly protests and some level of coordination between Madres related to their goals, such as sharing information and pressing political leaders.

I will show that the Madres have maintained a base level of activity in Buenos Aires since 1977. Rather than limiting this understanding of social movements to organizationally defined groups, I understand social movements more broadly than their formal structures. This allows for appropriate flexibility in studying the Madres; their structure and formal organizations shifted over time. What is relevant here is the trajectory of a group of women protesting the disappearances of their children, without a formal structure or registered title, that would become world renowned for their activism across decades. Resilience, therefore, is less about structural survival and more about the maintenance of emotional bonds and practices of protest.

Drawing upon testimonies from the Madres collected from various sources, I posit that the creation and reinforcement of collective identities which remained pertinent and impactful after the transition to democracy are key to understanding the resilience of the Madres as a movement.¹¹ Symbolic appeals to motherhood and patriotism served to support corresponding community identities, thereby creating the conditions by which the Madres remained resilient. More broadly, I argue this case

¹⁰ During periods in which military repression increased, the Madres were prevented from performing their weekly vigil in the Plaza. However, they still collaborated on other tasks and sought new ways to publicly protest, returning to the Plaza whenever possible.

¹¹ Sources of testimony used include Mellibovsky (1997), Fisher (1995), and Guzman Bouvard (1994).

suggests the need for increased focus on the collective and affective aspects of social movements, as the longevity of the Madres is tied to the emotional bonds shared by the mothers. Analysis of the internal dynamics of movements can strengthen our understanding of their emergence and formation.

I shall demonstrate this by explaining the emergence and significance of symbolic appeals during the military's rule and how these appeals created and reinforced communities which continued to resonate despite the return of democracy. However, first it is important to understand the historical conditions in which the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* emerged and established themselves as an organization, as well as the scholarship on social movements foundational to my work. I begin with an account of the historical context of the Madres in Section II before turning to the groundwork of social movement theory in Section III. I then consider recent trends in the scholarship, especially those which help shed light on the Madres' resilience, in Section IV. In Section V, I explain how the community formed in symbolic protest against the military government remained significant once the military government collapsed. In Section VI, I conclude with a discussion of some challenges to my argument, and touch on broader implications and topics for further investigation.

For purposes of clarity and practicality, I shall focus on the original group of Madres active within Buenos Aires.¹² I will consider only their most consistently used symbols - the vigil in the Plaza de Mayo and the *pañuelo* - though they have used other symbols and methods throughout their history. Furthermore, I shall limit the historical

¹² Support groups/branches formed throughout Argentina during and after the military regime, choosing local areas of significance to march in.

period which I call “post-transition” or “post-democratization” to roughly the decade following the return of democratic governance in 1983. This time period is useful because it covers the transition, establishment and consolidation of democracy (Brysk, *Politics* 157) without being overly broad. I am therefore better able to focus on the particular challenges associated with democratization which arose in the following years. Aspects outside of these parameters, such as regional groups of Madres and their more recent history, present room for further research, which I discuss in my conclusion.

II. Historical Background

During the second half of the twentieth century, many Latin American countries were disrupted by military coups. In Argentina, in particular, military rule was far from unusual: the country’s history is dotted with coups, and between 1930 and 1976, the country faced more years of military rule than civilian (Fisher 11). Thus, when the military ousted the leftist populist government in March 1976, much of the country was unsurprised. Many, including numerous newspapers, had been calling for or predicting a coup (Fisher 11). The subsequent military junta, which lasted from 1976 until 1983, differed from earlier coups, which typically had short-term goals. The military government sought to create a new social order through *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization) or *El Proceso*. This period is also known as *la guerra sucia* (the dirty war), reflecting the military’s assertion that it was engaged in a war against “subversives” (Fisher 27). Many welcomed the change of regime after years of political instability (Feitlowitz 23). However, it was during this period and in

reaction to the methods of *el Proceso* that the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* began engaging in civil disobedience and social protest.

a. *The Military Junta*

The new government was a bureaucratic authoritarian regime (BAR) headed by the leaders of the various branches of the military: General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera and Brigadier Ramon Agosti (Fisher 11). Generally, BAR's involve the exclusion and suppression of the popular sector by a governing elite (O'Donnell 31), and the Argentinian BAR was no different. They used various institutions to implement the key goals of the regime: "the restoration of 'order' by means of the political deactivation of the popular sector, on the one hand, and the "normalization" of the economy on the other" (O'Donnell 32). Bureaucratic authoritarian regimes often used the context of demobilization and suppression to implement extreme economic changes. In the case of *el proceso*, the changes involved the implementation of austere neoliberal policies, removing social safety nets and deregulating much of the economy (Brysk, *Politics* 35). The structure of the BAR is important to understanding *la guerra sucia*: "[the military's] control over Argentina's institutions was a preliminary measure to obtain the collaboration and guarantee of impunity they required to implement a parallel system of repression based on manifestly illegal methods" (Fisher 18). By incorporating the government, armed forces, the police and the courts into the military regime, all typical modes of recourse were party to the state-sponsored terrorism. All central structures of power were under the control and influence of the military regime.

A hallmark of *El Proceso* was the “war on subversion.” The elimination of “subversive” facets of society was deemed crucial to the restructuring of the country. The years preceding the coup had been filled with conflict between leftist guerilla groups and “right-wing squads,” which were backed by the president, and police forces (Navarro 242). The right-wing military alliance that took power in 1976 therefore sought to eliminate leftist thought and activity on the basis of the “threat” posed by the leftist guerillas.¹³ Those who were deemed “subversive” became targets of state terrorism. Initially they targeted workers, labor union members and students (Fisher 13). However, they quickly turned to those loosely suspected of subversion, those “with the capacity to question [the military government’s] ideological hegemony,” including the parents and siblings of accused persons, labor union participants, intellectuals and students (Brysk, *Politics* 40). Utilizing the various apparatuses of the military regime, the junta kidnapped, tortured and disappeared thousands. Thus, the verb *desaparecer* (to disappear) was transformed into a state of being in reference to those taken by the regime and never seen again: *los desaparecidos*, or the disappeared.¹⁴ “Disappeared” conveys a different meaning than “kidnapped” or “murdered”; those who are murdered or kidnapped can be physically returned to their families. The bodies of many *desaparecidos* are still missing and their families have little information about what happened to them.

¹³ The armed forces greatly exaggerated the threat of insurgent groups. The guerilla groups, the Montoneros and the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), were almost entirely defeated by mid 1977, and, according to the junta, no longer posed a threat. Nonetheless, forced disappearances continued into the 1980s (Feitlowitz 7).

¹⁴ *Los desaparecidos* are also referred to as *los detenidos-desaparecidos* (detained and disappeared) to reflect the forced nature of their disappearances.

Kidnapping is a common tool used to suppress political opposition. The Pinochet dictatorship in Chile also kidnapped hundreds and Isabella Perón disappeared political dissidents in Argentina before she was overthrown by the 1976 coup (Guzman Bouvard 23).¹⁵ However, *la guerra sucia* differed from other instances of political kidnapping both because of its clandestine nature and because of the scale of its execution.¹⁶ The junta denied their involvement, downplayed the prevalence of disappearances and lied about the fates of the kidnapped.

People were taken from their homes at night or plucked off the street.¹⁷ When planning on kidnapping an individual, the military would often ensure in advance that the police would not interfere (Brysk, *Politics* 37). They would storm and ransack a home, stealing valuables and tying up all present family members before hauling off the targeted individual in an unmarked car. They often orchestrated blackouts around a home to be raided (Guzman Bouvard 32). They accomplished all this with anonymity, never identifying themselves and transporting victims in unmarked vehicles.¹⁸ Clandestine detention centers were constructed in government buildings where “subversives” were detained for days, weeks, or even years.¹⁹ Many were tortured

¹⁵ Augusto Pinochet led a military coup in 1973. The Chilean military government also systematically abducted and tortured people. It is estimated 10,000 people were disappeared during Pinochet’s regime (Krause 370).

¹⁶ It is estimated between 20,000 and 30,000 people were disappeared by the military junta, though the official investigation reported around 9,000 (Brysk, *Politics* 37). Because of the clandestine nature and efforts by the military to hide information, there remains much uncertainty.

¹⁷ How were public kidnappings clandestine? The military controlled the press and many citizens supported the military takeover. Thus, until one was personally impacted, citizens likely had little understanding of the nature and scope of the disappearances (Fisher 25).

¹⁸ Ford Falcons were often used by military forces in plainclothes when abducting people (Guzman Bouvard 24). Critics of the regime often use this to evidence American state-support for the military government.

¹⁹ See Appendix B, photos 6 and 7.

brutally,²⁰ murdered, cremated and buried in mass graves, or pushed from planes over the ocean (Guzman Bouvard 42). It was the complicity of state structures that made the regime's power so totalizing. At least initially, the public believed the story told by the military, of the war against domestic terrorists and the non-existence of concentration camps and *desaparecidos*.²¹ The junta's unique structure would frustrate the attempts of citizens to hold them accountable, during and after their rule. This dynamic is partly responsible for the emergence of the Madres as it led the founding women to meet and take action out of mutual frustration with the system.

Initially, victims and their families had no paths for recourse: the courts, the press, the churches and the police all remained silent regarding the disappearances. The military denied all involvement. Much of the Argentine public believed the state rhetoric, denying their own culpability and claiming the missing people had fled the country or disappeared of their own accord. The collaboration of the various institutions controlled by the bureaucratic authoritarian regime made it nearly impossible for families to find answers or seek justice, and kept the truth of state terrorism hidden from much of the public. To this day, activists in Argentina are searching for and discovering new information regarding those who were taken during this time. This created a difficult dynamic for parents: "as long as they lacked any proof of her death and her body had not been recovered and accorded the proper ritual, parents could hope that she was still alive or that her death was somehow avoidable"

²⁰ Torture methods included confinement in coffin-like cells, electric prods applied to sensitive area, beatings, sensory deprivation and burning (Brysk, *Politics* 37).

²¹ Feitlowitz (2011) offers an in-depth and evocative account of life within the clandestine detention centers, and Argentina more broadly, during the Dirty War through a series of interviews. Her focus on a "lexicon of terror" details the blend of civility and horror that characterized the period.

(Navarro 256). There were many instances of pregnant women and young mothers disappearing with their unborn and young children. Grandmothers began searching for their grandchildren, many of whom were given to military families to raise (Brysk, *Politics* 39). These *abuelas*, or “grandmothers,” formed their own organization: *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*.

In the first year of the coup, thousands disappeared. Most victims were young, including many university students. The parents of these missing individuals were left distraught and confused when their children vanished. As parents began to inquire at different government offices, they found their efforts hindered by the bureaucratic structure of the regime and the military’s secrecy. For example, mothers would often wait in line at a government office for hours only to be turned away (Guzman Bouvard 66). Many mothers also filed writs of *habeas corpus*, a legal procedure responding to unlawful imprisonment. However, the police usually claimed there was no record of the individual being detained or the court denied the writ outright, due to pressure or enticements from the military regime (Guzman Bouvard 41). This demonstrates how the military exerted control over Argentinian society: by threat and enticement and the imposition of military officials in positions of power.

b. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo

The time-consuming and largely unsuccessful work of investigating what had happened to their children became the work of mothers, who, unlike their husbands, generally did not have full-time jobs. Men and women responded to the disappearances differently; the fathers tended to be more willing to accept that there was little hope of

finding their child (Navarro 256). Moreover, the women's identity as mothers afforded them some degree of protection such that, "they were implicitly excluded from the different groups defined as 'subversives'" (Navarro 257). The women who would later form *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* first met in 1976 as they petitioned various government apparatuses for information about their missing children. They began by coordinating visits to government buildings together. They built an informal network of mothers of disappeared persons. They wrote notes on paper currency and left flyers in public spaces (Fisher 53).

In 1977, as their numbers and frustrations grew, they decided to publicly challenge the junta in the Plaza de Mayo (Fisher 29). After a bit of trial and error, they decided that each Thursday they would gather in *La Plaza de Mayo* in front of *La Casa Rosada*, the presidential palace, and complete *la ronda*, a silent march around the central obelisk, topped by a figure representing liberty (Fisher 27, 54).²² The Madres were the first to publicly challenge the regime in a time when all political activity was banned (Brysk, *Politics* 47). Thus, the mothers relied on apolitical methods; they walked in pairs, for if they sat or gathered in large groups, they could be accused of breaking the law. Though generally supportive, the husbands did not join the Madres in the Plaza largely because of the somewhat mistaken belief that the regime would not harm women but would not hesitate in attacking the men (Feitlowitz 109).²³ In publicly protesting, the Madres put themselves at great risk. Unlike much of the public, they

²² See Appendix B, photo 8.

²³ The junta's repression was gendered in many ways. See Appendix A for more details.

were intimately aware of the military's posture towards 'subversive' activities, especially its penchant for kidnapping political dissidents.

Though a symbolic act, the decision to don the *pañuelo* was born of necessity. In 1977, the Madres, before adopting the weekly protest which would become the hallmark of their activism, decided to participate in an annual Catholic pilgrimage in honor of *la Virgen*, the Virgin Mary.²⁴ As the pilgrimage covered a great distance, it presented an opportunity to teach others about their cause as they conversed to pass the time (Guzman Bouvard 74). However, as Madres would join in at different points along the route, they needed a way to be visible to each other. Azucena Villaflor de Vicente, a mother who would be detained and disappeared by the junta several months later, suggested they wear headscarves made of cloth diapers saved from their children's early years, as this was something mothers were likely to have (Fisher 54). During the pilgrimage, the white *pañuelos* drew much attention; many participants asked them why they wore them. As a result, the Madres decided to continue using them in their protests. Thus the *pañuelo* quite literally united the Madres for practical reasons while also reinforcing their image as mothers and communicating this identity publicly. This use of symbolism would be key to shaping the Madres' collective identity.

The Madres ranks grew as more people vanished. At times they faced repression and violence, but they continued to protest for the duration of *El Proceso*, adopting new methods but maintaining their weekly vigil in the Plaza. They petitioned domestic and foreign governments and organizations, took out advertisements criticizing the junta,

²⁴ *La Virgen* is considered a symbol of motherhood and is connected to the Latino cultural ideal of *marianismo*, which exalts motherhood.

and staged larger rallies to coincide with other events, such as the 1978 World Cup hosted in Buenos Aires.²⁵ They earned international attention and in 1980 they were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize - before the fall of the military regime or the truth of the disappearances became well known (Fisher 111).²⁶ In August 1979, they registered as a legal organization, formalizing the name *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the Association of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Krause 372). Moreover, mothers across the country began to protest in their communities, performing *la ronda* in public spaces with white *pañuelo* on their heads. Importantly, the Madres also created an informal network within which mothers could share information, tactics and suggestions and find support for their shared trauma.

El Proceso lasted until 1983, when a combination of domestic and international factors forced the junta to begin the transition to civilian rule. Its decline began in earnest as their key promise of improving the economy did not materialize. Instead, increasing economic troubles alienated the junta from many of their allies. Internationally, the regime faced increasing criticism as civilian groups, including the Madres, drew the attention of the international press. These events laid the groundwork for the fall of the junta. It was Argentina's defeat by Britain in the 1982 Malvinas/Falklands conflict that initiated the junta's collapse in earnest.²⁷ However,

²⁵ The military leadership sought to keep the focus of the international press on the matches. However, the Madres drew the attention of foreign reporters nonetheless.

²⁶ They were awarded instead the Peace Prize of the People which is given to a Nobel Nominee who does not receive the prize. The Nobel Peace Prize was given to Pérez Esquivel, the leader of another Argentinian human rights organization, *Servicio Paz y Justicia* (Guzman Bouvard 99).

²⁷ Argentina had long claimed sovereignty over *Las Islas Malvinas*, a group of islands off the country's Atlantic coast. The islands were seized by Britain in 1833 and deemed the Falkland Islands (Guzman Bouvard 119)). In an attempt to garner public support through nationalistic appeals, the junta decided to annex the islands in 1982 but were quickly defeated by British forces, discrediting the junta in the public's eyes. As a result, the military leaders began a process of negotiations for a return to civilian rule.

before conceding power, the military took actions to protect themselves, including passing amnesty laws and destroying documentation of their crimes and the spaces in which they occurred.

During and after the democratic transition, the Madres maintained their independence as a movement. Though they sought to voice their demands in the negotiations regarding the transfer of power, the coalition of major parties which reemerged prior to the transition, denied them access (Fisher 112). Partly due to their experiences with politicians before and during the junta, the Madres remained wary of traditional politics and demonstrated a distrust of the parties and newly elected government, that of President Raul Alfonsín (Guzman Bouvard 129). Alfonsín's politics sought to calm both the disaffected military and the masses, including the human rights movement. As a result, neither were placated: there were numerous military uprisings and many civil organizations remained highly critical. The Madres in particular were highly critical of his "theory of two devils" in which Alfonsín condemned both the violence perpetuated by the junta and the anti-state violence it sought to destroy (Guzman Bouvard 132).²⁸ The Madres saw this as an attempt to justify the crimes of the military by suggesting they were reacting to violence perpetrated by civilians, namely guerilla organizations, prior to the coup.²⁹ Though Alfonsín made unprecedented strides by prosecuting numerous top military officials, he also sought to turn the page

²⁸ This line of argument was used by the military to justify their actions. They claimed they were doing that which was necessary to respond to the threat of leftist subversives.

²⁹ Most guerilla activity had been suppressed by the end of 1976 and few *desaparecidos* had ties to the guerilla groups.

on the Dirty War by limiting prosecution of members of the armed forces and taking steps to declare *los desaparecidos* legally dead (Guzman Bouvard 139).

In the years following the transition, the Madres adopted numerous stances on various decisions and changes which were not limited to the *desaparecidos* and human rights abuses. Over time, the Madres have become more invested in broad political ideals rooted in motherhood and the defense of life such as eradicating hunger and distributive justice. However, their core demand has remained constant: they expect nothing short of justice for all the *desaparecidos*.

During this time, the Madres lost some of their members. Some felt that they ought to collaborate with the new government or be patient so as to protect the new democracy. Others felt that the only way to achieve this very goal - that of establishing a strong democracy - was through demanding justice from the military. This rift within the Madres was reflected in the public perception of them. They were at times lauded for their activism. However, they were also criticized for challenging the new government, accused of threatening its shaky stability. Despite these changes, the Madres were constant in their weekly protest, adorned with white *pañuelos*. They remained an organization of aging mothers whose children had been taken from them.

The Madres emerged in response to the disappearance of their children, however, I am interested in why they continued to protest long after they had lost hope of finding their children alive.³⁰ Before and after the transition to democracy, the Madres actively challenged those in power to hear their demands. They became

³⁰ The success of individual mothers varies greatly but has little effect on their organizational purpose. Mothers who were given answers, such as the location of their child's body, continue to protest alongside mothers who know nothing.

internationally recognized for their advocacy. They would develop broad political ideals rooted in their love for their children: “the Mothers came to include in their new view of maternity not just their *disappeared* children but all the present and future youths of Argentina” (Guzman Bouvard 181). Their unwillingness to conform to expectations challenges assumptions regarding when and why women engage in politics.

As a result of both their unique approach to politics and their broad impact, the Madres have been examined from a myriad of perspectives. They have been compared to their counterpart movement, *Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*,³¹ in terms of their success lobbying the government (Bonner). Studies of the Argentine human rights movement have included them amongst other organizations (Brysk, *Politics*). They’ve been studied for their role in the formation of collective memory (Jelin). Diana Taylor considers them within the field of motherist movements. Their use of space and networks was examined in order to understand how movement networks create dispersed action (Bosco). They are subject to such rich and diverse study because of the uniqueness of their emergence, form of protest and claims, and their characterization.

What fascinated me, however, is the fact that, as a movement, they survived the transition to democracy and continue to protest decades later. The diverse scholarship on the Madres struggle to explain this dynamic. However, in examining the development, methods and rhetoric of the Madres, we can draw conclusions regarding their resilience by building on the work of other scholars.

³¹ *Las Abuelas* are an organization of grandmothers focused on finding their grandchildren who were either kidnapped with their parents or born in detention centers. Children were often given to military families without the child or members of that family knowing the child’s origins. *Las Abuelas* have located more than 100 stolen children. For more details, see Appendix A.

III. Traditional Theories of Collective Action

The study of social movements lies at an interesting intersection of disciplines: that of policy studies, sociology, psychology and political science. Moreover, since movements can take a variety of forms with a variety of goals, it is important to clarify both what we mean by social movements as well as the key scholarship employed to understand them. In this section, I begin by defining key terms before considering some of the key claims in the scholarship.

Broadly defined, social movements are collective actors working towards a shared social goal via sustained collective action. Snow and Soule identify five key facets which illustrate the purpose, structure and methods of social movements:

Social movements are collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity, partly outside institutional or organizational channels, for the purposes of challenging extant systems of authority or resisting changes in such systems in the organization, society, culture or world system in which they are embedded. (Snow and Soule 6)

This definition raises several important claims. First, social movements are collective and we ought not over-prioritize either the individuals themselves or the collective as a whole. Second, social movements are embedded within a particular context and having some understanding of that context is important to examining the movement itself. At the intersection of these two claims is the assertion that movements are shaped by their context and shape the experiences of their participants. Movements are more than their goals and methods; they interact with the identities and values held by participants and observers alike. Allison Brysk notes, “whatever its form, the movement shares a sense of collective identity, a complex of common goals that

challenge the existing social order and some history of organizational contact” (Brysk, *Politics* 7). This definition is useful in understanding the resiliency of the Madres, highlighting the importance of symbolic components of the movement to its survival. However, such an approach has not always been reflected in the scholarship.

Early models, rooted in social psychology, characterized most social movements as random and dysfunctional (Brysk, *Politics* 7). Quickly, new scholarship emerged in response to the explanatory limits of these early models, drawing upon economic models and defining individuals as rational actors who make cost-benefit analyses to determine whether or not to participate in collective action (Oliver 276). This canonical approach was relatively unchallenged until the end of twentieth century when scholars began asking new questions. Rather than focusing on individual actors and psychology, their organization-centered approach studied the processes and structures that facilitate or hinder collective action.

A survey of this scholarship performed by Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald identified three sets of factors emphasized by diverse theoretical perspectives in analyzing movements: political opportunity structures, mobilizing structures and framing processes (2). Political opportunity structures reflect the shifting opportunities for action perceived by movement activists. This approach often focuses on changes in power structures, such as the weakening of an alliance between parties or the possibility of support from elite actors. Mobilizing structures are the resources available to movements, such as the existing networks which activists can use to mobilize resources and people. Framing processes are ways in which movements portray and understand grievances. Frames can be understood as mechanisms for

interpretation; a framing processes approach, therefore, is examining how movements actively portray and interpret symbols and meanings (Noonan 86). Taken together these frameworks constitute the political processes model (Simmons, "Grievances" 513). They are useful in understanding factors that enable or inhibit the coalescence of mass protest.

Though insightful, these three approaches remain somewhat limited. Political opportunity and mobilizing structures struggle to explain why movements emerge absent changes in political structures, or why those without resources choose to and are able to mobilize. They take a primarily material and structural understanding of collective action, with the former focusing on economic resources and the latter drawing our attention to perception of institutional frameworks and social structures. For example, The Madres emerged slowly through their combined efforts, rather than as a reaction to political changes. Moreover, they lacked material and immaterial advantages: they were mostly housewives, many were poor and few had existing political networks with which they could mobilize their limited resources. A further critique is a tendency within the literature to view entire movements as the actor subject to investigation, as a unified body. Such an approach remains "uninterested in who engages in collective action and how they view themselves and their allies in struggle" (Buechler 227). Thus, the movement as a whole is prioritized at the expense of the experiences and interactions of those who comprise the movement.

Furthermore, the scholarship has primarily considered Western democracies, leaving much to be said of how the political processes model might operate in

authoritarian contexts, especially in Latin America (Noonan 84).³² The theoretical limits of the political processes model have been met with an increased focus on contextual factors which shape movements, examining the reasons people feel compelled to participate in collective action. My intention is not to reject or endorse this model. Rather, I hope to shed light on one particular aspect of collective action that I believe is underrepresented in this scholarship and is crucial to understanding social movements.

More recently, scholars have responded to these limitations by expanding the forms and aspects of collective action subjected to analysis. This new scholarship, which I discuss in further detail in section IV, supplements the political processes model by focusing on aspects of collective action pertaining to meaning and culture. Although recent scholars have made strides in deepening our understanding of collective action, several shortcomings remain, two of which are relevant to my work.

First, when considering identity-based movements, scholars tend to focus on those movements which act in defense of or against structures relating to that identity, rather than around other issues. For example, the study of women's social movements centers feminist mobilization, which seeks to advance the rights of women. There exists little scholarship on how these identities interact with other types of claims, as in the case of the Madres. The Madres mobilized as women and as mothers, but their focus was not explicitly gendered. They did not protest existing social structures regarding

³² Scholars have begun challenging this trend by shifting focus to the global south. See Noonan (1995) for an examination of political opportunities and framing in Chile.

motherhood.³³ Scholars rarely ask why women mobilize along gendered lines if not for gender equality.

Second, scholarship tends to prioritize the conditions under which movements emerge, rather than their resilience or impact. There are, nonetheless, scholars breaking with this pattern. Bunnage offers a synthesis of “existing research related to the endurance of social movement activists, noting the levels and factors that matter most” (434). Though her focus is on movement participants, she provides useful insight into the resilience of movements as a whole by examining the importance of factors such as social networks and collective identities. I return to Bunnage’s work in Section IV (D).

In spite of the explanatory limits of the scholarship as it pertains to the Madres, there is much we can learn from existing theories and adapt to this particular case. Like much of the new scholarship, combining frameworks and adjusting their focus can prove insightful in examining movements which challenge many assumptions in the study of social movements.

IV. Developing a Synthesized Framework: Symbols, Framing and Community

In this section, I consider important shifts in the study of social movements as they pertain to my focus. Then, I consider three mechanisms - symbols, framing and community - to understand how they contribute to the resilience of the Madres. I argue

³³ The argument could be made that the Madres did indeed challenge social structures by politicizing that which had been relegated to the private sphere. Given also the Madres complicated, and somewhat critical, relationship with feminism, this question is beyond the scope of my work. See Howe (2006) for more.

that framing or communicating symbols with regards to significant and relevant shared ideals fostered a sense of community amongst movement activists. Symbols have emotional and informational importance which is instrumental in understanding both the salience of the frames used and the formation of collective identity. The images and practices used by the Madres connected to the identities of motherhood and patriotism. My use of patriotism here requires clarification, for I could use “national identity” instead. What I mean to convey here is more than simple identification but rather a sense of national pride or duty.³⁴ By framing their activism in terms of socially relevant and legitimate symbols which appealed to motherhood and patriotism, the Madres formed bonds which rendered their community stable in light of challenges.

a. New Trends in Scholarship

Recent scholarship has interpreted cultural, historical, anecdotal, and symbolic aspects of protest as significant in understanding collective action. Such scholarship has critiqued the political processes model for ignoring ideational or emotional aspects of protest in favor of prioritizing rational structures and processes. Buechler notes, “the rational actor is ‘fictive’ precisely because this concept detaches social beings from their cultural contexts of values, norms, meanings and significations” (230). Where traditional scholarship downplays the role of meanings in collective action, these new waves of scholarship take seriously grievances and the meanings embedded within them. This new work offers a useful starting point for understanding the resilience of

³⁴ This is not to say they are uncritical of the government or their compatriots.

the Madres providing the groundwork for investigation into the significance of identities and meanings.

The work of Alison Brysk builds on canonical scholarship and offers insight into the Madres. In her book *The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina*, Brysk uses a symbolic politics framework focused on the politics of persuasion to illustrate the impact on Argentine society and politics of the human rights movement after the transition to democracy. Brysk defines symbolic politics as “the maintenance or transformation of a power relationship through the communication of normative and affective representations” (“Hearts and Minds” 561). Put simply, symbolic politics are appeals to shared ideas and values in order to foment social change. Brysk uses symbolic politics to examine the affective impact of the human rights movement. Where Brysk studies the effect of symbolic politics outside of the movement, I will examine how symbolic politics manifest within a movement.

Often, a movement’s impact is deemed indeterminable or irrelevant such that it is difficult to link changes to movement activities. For example, it is nearly impossible to definitively attribute a shift in societal culture or institutional structures to the actions of one movement. Brysk’s analysis helps us understand the success of the human rights movement in Argentina during and after the last junta by analyzing several measures of movement efficacy. She does so by considering three factors: “formation and institutionalization of a social movement, impact on the state, and effect on society” (Brysk, *Politics* 17). By shifting public opinion, through affective protests and the dissemination of information, the various human rights organizations laid the groundwork for the transition to democracy and influenced the post-transition period

(Brysk, "Hearts and Minds" 154). Moreover, she argues such an approach can help us understand how identity, culture and communication relate to political consciousness and collective action.

Although it provides interesting insight, Brysk's work does not fully explain the Madres resilience. Importantly, Brysk focuses on the entire human rights movement in Argentina, including but not limited to *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. She includes different kinds of human rights organizations, such as religious groups and secular civil liberty organizations as well as family-based groups. As the Madres are distinct from the other groups in their methods and composition, Brysk's generalized approach provides limited insight into the Madres. They were one of the most visible organizations with a clearly defined identity and steeped in symbolism, from their white *pañuelos* to their choice of location. My specific focus on one group enables me to deepen our understanding of the Madres by emphasizing their resilience and, in doing so, explaining the importance of symbols to social movements in general.

Second, Brysk focuses on movement impact, evaluating the societal changes fostered by the human rights movement. Brysk's assertion that the human rights movements had a significant impact supports my claim that the Madres did indeed remain relevant following democratization. However, my focus is on movement resilience. I seek to explain what about the Madres enabled them to remain relevant despite regime change; what held them together despite the odds. Nonetheless, Brysk's analysis is useful in that it stresses the importance of symbols to collective action by focusing on their external impact. I adapt this understanding to investigate how

symbols support collective action through their internal impact on participants and potential participants.

It is important to address why the Madres fit into this framework and how the framework is useful in understanding them, for it would be misleading to say the Madres only protested in the square. As I have shown, they employed numerous other methods. However, they operated within a context of civil society suppression and state terror. As a result, traditional modes of communication and activism were suppressed or more risky. Therefore, the ability of the Madres to communicate their identity, purpose and goals to the Argentine public, the global community, and other mothers of *desaparecidos* was paramount to their success. Moreover, the Madres did much more than simply advocate for their children: they formed a network of support stretching through time and space.

Using the Madres as a case study, Fernando Bosco's study of the role of emotional ties in the maintenance of transnational networks suggests the usefulness of a symbolic politics approach ("Place" 312). He argues that, by imbuing certain places such as Plazas with symbolic import, the Madres were able to maintain a network of emotional ties across the country. At the localized level, affective representations such as symbols and stories offer an important dimension of movement resilience. Symbolic politics play out within framing processes; however, they can also "create new political opportunities by revealing, challenging and changing narratives about interests and identities" (Brysk, "Hearts and Minds" 561). Thus, the Madres use of socially relevant symbols enabled them to communicate by nontraditional methods both their demands and their identity. The latter is also transformed by their use of symbols.

b. Symbols

It is important to clarify what we mean when we say “symbol.” A symbol, whether it is an action, image or item, can be defined as that which is “used by human beings to index meanings that are not inherent in, nor discernible from, the object itself” (Elder and Cobb 28). However, this definition tells us little about how symbols interact with politics and society. Socially significant symbols are crafted through intentional and unintentional processes (Elder and Cobb 30),³⁵ and carry affective and cognitive responses (37). The affective response is the emotional reaction to an object. The cognitive response refers to the meaning with which the symbol is infused. Consider, for example, a cross. Physically, the cross is a vertical line with a shorter, horizontal line crossing it about two-thirds of the way up. The cognitive response may be associating the symbol with Christianity. The affective response, if you are a follower of Christianity, might be a sense of hope or loss attributed to the biblical stories involving the cross. Neither of these meanings are inherent in its construction, the crossing of two lines in a particular way. Rather, the meaning has been created over time. This is an apt example of how, though there may be universally understood associations with the cross, the significance it holds cognitively and emotionally are deeply embedded in culture and community. Thus, the symbols employed by the Madres had an impact because they were easily interpreted and inspiring.

³⁵An existing symbol might be found useful in expressing new ideas. Or, a symbol might be designed to communicate some message (Elder and Cobb 31). However, the processes which create symbols are not necessarily clear-cut and self-evident.

How then do symbols affect or interact with political mobilization? Elder and Cobb note that, “by recognizing the importance of affective identifications in particular, we begin to appreciate the potency that symbols have” (116). Put differently, symbols can evoke strong emotions and identifications towards issues. This helps us understand why protests may arise around an idea or symbol. Humans don’t always act rationally insofar as that implies acting in strict pursuit of their material interests. We are also emotional and empathetic creatures, who form bonds and often act in the interest of others or against our own interest. Put in conversation with changes in social movement theory, Elder and Cobb’s claims support the trend seeking to understand nonmaterial aspects of social movements and collective action. Brysk argues “theorists within the economic tradition are eventually forced to recognize this symbolic ‘something else’ ... but they cannot *explain* it” (*Politics* 8). This is especially important in understanding how the disempowered, those without material resources, mobilize. Symbols help those without existing networks or material resources to foment support and facilitate change. I argue that, for the Madres, symbols helped them not only challenge the regime but also supported their continued protest by affecting the identity of the Madres. Let us consider those symbolic appeals, to motherhood and patriotism, in turn.

The symbols and imagery surrounding the Madres evoked powerful messages which appealed to Argentinian societal assumptions regarding motherhood. Argentina of the 1970s was traditional in many ways. Heavily influenced by Catholicism, a traditional family structure maintained prominent cultural relevance. Mothers tended to stay home and care for children while the fathers were the primary breadwinners.

The Madres were no exception. Most had never engaged in politics or activism (Guzman Bouvard 59). They were, above all else, mothers. It was on the basis of this identity that the Madres mobilized; the identity united them and motivated them. When a mother's child was disappeared, it often fell upon her to find answers. It was through these chance interactions that the collaboration between mothers began. They viewed their activities as part of their duty as mothers, as protectors and care-takers of their homes and families.

This identity defined the movement in many ways. It influenced their choices and activities. The white *pañuelos*, though serving a functional purpose, also evoked images of *La Virgen*, the Virgin Mary, a visible and beloved figure central to the Argentinian and Catholic reverence for motherhood (Taylor 188).. The *pañuelo*, the pictures of their children they carried and the demands they made all centered around their identity as mothers who had lost their children. Importantly, as a self-defined movement of mothers, it also shaped the community that formed through their collective experiences.

Choices made out of necessity by the Madres became integral to their survival and importance as a movement. Through a process of trial and error, the Madres decided to protest in the Plaza de Mayo. Their choice of location was practical: the Plaza is a center of social and political life in Buenos Aires. Located in the financial district, it is surrounded by the Presidential Palace, the Cabildo,³⁶ the Metropolitan Cathedral, the city hall and the headquarters of the national bank. Aside from its practical importance,

³⁶ The Cabildo, a fixture in Spain and many Spanish-speaking countries, was the meeting hall of the colonial government (Navarro 250).

the plaza also holds deep symbolic, national importance: “the traditional site of the establishment and celebration of national independence, military parades, government speeches, Peronist populist rallies³⁷ and most previous protest” (Brysk, *Politics* 12). In occupying this space, the Madres not only made their movement visible in the heart of the capital of their country, but also introduced themselves as actors on the stage of Argentina political theater (Brysk, *Politics* 12). Furthermore, their method of protest was both practical, meaningful and symbolic. Forced to keep moving by the police, they chose to walk in silence around the center of the plaza, circling the May Pyramid, a symbol of Argentina’s pride and independence.³⁸ Joining a symbolic place with meaningful action, the vigil would become a collective ritual and crucial part of their shared identity. Furthermore, it gave their protest and identity added levels of significance by linking their activism to ideas of patriotism.

The power of conveying these two identities, motherhood and patriotism, jointly through symbolic means is not to be understated for two reasons. First, they gave the Madres a level of protection. Motherhood and patriotism lent the Madres social legitimacy because these were ideals the junta claimed to protect (Brysk, *Politics* 2). Fisher notes “[The military] found themselves confronted by the very image which, in a vision they shared with the church, personified the stability and order of family life. They did not know how to react to the silent accusing presence of the Mothers in the

³⁷ Peronism as an ideology is hard to define and is rooted in the populist legacy of Juan Perón, former president of Argentina. Important features of Peronism are the political incorporation of the working-class and elements of social justice. This is an oversimplification but is useful in understanding the historical importance of the Plaza. For more information, see James (1988). Characterizing Peronism as a leftist ideology is too simple, however, for it also involves right-wing and authoritarian elements.

³⁸ The choice to walk in silence also holds meaningful and symbolic importance. However, this aspect is beyond the scope of my present focus.

square” (Brysk, *Politics* 60). The junta was unprepared to face challenges from what it sought to protect. Second, and more relevant to my argument, the combination of these two identities supported the creation of a new understanding of their identity: collective and politicized motherhood.³⁹ I shall focus on the collective aspect of this reinterpretation wherein the Madres understood themselves as the mothers of all the disappeared, not just their own children.

These two symbols became emblems of the Madres. However, symbols alone do not explain the Madres’ resilience. Rather, what they represent - in this case, motherhood and patriotism - had the power to unite and mobilize. Thus how those symbols are conveyed and interpreted is key to understanding their significance: “frames resonate precisely because they tap into or evoke particular affective states” (Simmons 101). Thus, it is necessary to understand how those symbols are framed in order to understand symbolic politics as a tool for fostering community and shared identity.

c. Framing

Fundamentally, framing has to do with how individuals “understand what happens around them, identify sources of their problems and devise methods for addressing their grievances” (Noonan 85). Given that framing is important to how movements understand grievances, how do symbols fit into the process of framing? If symbols play out in framing processes, how then does symbolic protest stem from, and

³⁹ In more recent years, the Madres also developed a unique political consciousness rooted in an ethic of care and maternity. For more on socializing maternity, see Guzman Bouvard (1994), Chapter 7.

also change, the individuals engaging in protest (Brysk, "Hearts and Minds" 561)? I found the answer to this question in the scholarship on framing processes and meaning making (Tarrow, Baldez). There are three mechanisms by which social movements engage meaning making to foment collective action: they frame contentious politics, define collective identities and mobilize emotions (Tarrow 142-143). Put differently, meaning making or framing processes redefine the way individuals interpret and relate to society. Through these methods, movements can create the narratives and ideas behind which their participants rally. In the case of the Madres, they used symbols to frame their activism in relation to particular groups. They defined a collective identity based on their shared loss and experiences. Finally, the symbols draw upon individuals emotions by communicating the mothers' loss.

Both framing and symbolic politics stress the importance of recognizing movements and actors as embedded within particular contexts. Thus, symbols and frames function because the meanings and narratives communicated through them resonated within their specific context. For the Madres, donning the *pañuelo* and protesting within the Plaza de Mayo were both somewhat practical decisions, satisfying their needs and circumstances. However, more important is the meanings embedded in those symbols and the social legitimacy they hold. Therefore, it is worth taking time to examine in what ways the framing of these symbolic appeals resonated in order to understand why they facilitated the formation of a community and supported collective action.

Appealing to motherhood resonated for several reasons which are distinct but related. First, it linked activism to the idea of a mother's duty: "Argentine women are

expected to protect the family unit and human life” (Feijoo 61). Thus, the mothers understood their actions as part of their traditional roles as mothers and caretakers. In her discussion of women in Argentina, Feijoo notes, “women perceive themselves as being in the right place only when dealing with problems related to their supposedly natural interest in motherhood” (64). This frame lowered the barrier to participation by incorporating protest as part of their traditional roles as mothers. However, more importantly, by defining their protest as part of a mother’s work, they gave mothers of *desaparecidos* a space to fulfill their sense of duty.

We can understand the mothers’ refusal to give up as “a coherent expression of their socialization” (Navarro 256). The totalizing control of the military made all official action fruitless. Where a mother once could have used contacts to get information or petitioned in the courts, the mothers of victims of the Dirty War were shut out. Participation in this movement helped them feel like they were doing something. Something that this explanation struggles to convey is the emotion behind this framing. I cannot do justice to the sense of desperation and powerlessness the mothers felt. In their testimonies, many Madres describe feeling powerless and confused, for example: “it was terrible, we could not understand what was happening to us” (Mellibovsky 32). During the Dirty War, they had little reason to assume their children were dead and were therefore compelled to search for them. Framing their activism with regards to motherhood, rather than human rights or some other frame, made their sense of duty inherent in their protest.

A further reason the appeals to motherhood proved a salient frame was the emotional support and validation offered by the group. Mothers throughout the country

faced similar tragedies. Thousands of individuals were disappeared during this time. Many mothers lost one child, some lost multiple. The junta created a generation of mourning and confused mothers and then refused them answers or support. For many women feeling lost and frustrated, the Madres that provided support. One mother said: "For me, it was as if I found in those people what I could not find in anyone else. We spoke the same language, we understood each other, we shared the same problems" (Mellibovsky 144). Many mothers describe their friends and family growing impatient with their incessant search for information on their missing children. The mothers of the disappeared constituted their own category or group. They legitimated each other's emotions and showed that they were not alone. It was their shared identity as mothers that facilitated their cooperation and actions and built a practical and supportive community.

Taking these interpretations of the salience of appealing to motherhood together, I argue that the Madres gave voice to a sense of duty, provided a space to fulfill that duty and legitimated participating in such activities, despite the illegality of such actions. The salience of motherhood as an appeal is linked closely to a sense of national pride. However, this appeal to patriotism is worth considering on its own first. The important aspect of this appeal is that it facilitated the incorporation of apolitical actors into the national political stage. Few Madres had been politically engaged prior to 1976. Thus, by locating their activism within the heart of the national political culture, they framed their actions within established and socially legitimate ideals. Furthermore, the appeal to national pride connected to their sense of duty. By locating their collective ritual, the weekly vigil in the Plaza, they communicated something distinctly Argentine

about their protest. I discuss this further below, therefore for now it suffices to say that the appeal to national pride or patriotism carried with it the idea of civic duty. The method and location of their weekly protests were embedded with symbols of patriotism and Argentine heritage, thereby framing their protest in socially relevant ways.

As I mention above, the appeals to motherhood and patriotism cannot be separated. Not only did these appeals reinforce each other, but they also created a new identification formed by the synthesis of the two. Important to understanding this dynamic is a brief account of the rhetoric used by the junta. The military government claimed their actions were necessary for the wellbeing of all Argentina, declaring themselves the defenders of the nation. They espoused the maintenance of traditional values, especially the home embodied by the dutiful wife and mother. Thus, when the embodiment of that which the regime sought to protect began to protest against the regime, it proved a powerful message. In occupying the Plaza, the Madres reclaimed and embodied the ideas of motherhood and patriotism. In doing so, they created a new understanding of their identity: collective motherhood. This shared identity is important to understanding their resilience and I shall discuss it further below.

The collective identity of the Madres emerged through intentional and subconscious processes of engaging in collective rituals and symbolism. I argue that the use of symbols, a necessary measure given the context, enabled the Madres to frame their movement in socially legitimate and relevant ways thereby fostering community.

d. Community

The symbols and appeals to motherhood and patriotism held weight because they were socially legitimate and meaningful within their context. However, these symbols also reflect particular identity groups with shared bonds, or communities. They capitalized upon respect for ideals of motherhood and patriotism and drew upon the bonds inspired by those labels. Thus, the appeal was to both ideals and also to affective relationships. The use of symbols framed the way participants understood themselves and their grievances while also engaging emotional ties.

Community has a practical role as it pertains to collective action; communities facilitate mobilization of resources and human capital through existing interpersonal relationships. However, it also holds an emotional power, which is articulated by Erica Simmons in her book *Meaningful Resistance: Market Reforms and the Roots of Social Protest in Latin America*. Simmons argues that threats to material goods can spark mobilization when they are perceived as threatening imagined and quotidian, or daily, communities.⁴⁰ For example, Simmons considers how water privatization in Bolivia threatened the nation, an imagined community, and local communities that emerged surrounding local water practices. Though the case I present here differs significantly, Simmons' work demonstrates the importance of considering the way actors interpret grievances and frame them in relation to their identity. In the cases Simmons considers, communities were catalysts for mobilization, as in the case of the Madres.

⁴⁰ Quotidian or daily communities are those constructed out of ordinary life. For example, your neighbors or coworkers might be part of your quotidian community.

Simmons' scholarship draws on protests which emerged out of existing communities. For example, she considers how threats to water access in Bolivia were understood as threatening local water practices as well as national identity (Simmons, "Grievances" 532). However, what interests me is how communities sustain protest. Simmons offers insight into the coalescence of broad action through bonds of shared identity, but not how those bonds are maintained over time. An important aspect of community is a sense of collective identity, especially when those communities become politically engaged (Bunnage 438). Frames and meanings can arise out of and change an existing community as well as create a new sense of community. Bunnage argues that "identities can hasten initial social movement participation and also that [those identities] can develop during the course of this activism" (438). This insight is particularly useful in understanding the development of the Madres as an organization: a shared identity united them but their shared experiences as activists also changed their collective identities. Thus, wearing the *pañuelo* and partaking in the weekly vigil manifested their existing identities and created a new one born out of the repetition and framing of these acts. Collective rituals are an important mechanism by which communities form and are maintained: "collective rituals bring activists together with some consistency and revitalize the kind of emotional ties that keep people involved" (Bunnage 438). I argue that by framing their symbols in terms of culturally relevant identities, the Madres mobilized an existing community and formed a new one. There are three claims here - that existing communities were engaged, that a new community formed and that symbolism was instrumental to this - which I will consider in turn.

The most basic claim I make here is that, by framing their protest to appeal to motherhood, and to a lesser extent patriotism, through the symbols of the *pañuelo* and the Plaza, the Madres were able to mobilize a group of people with a shared identity in such a way that they formed a new community. Though they generally did not know each other prior to their activism, the Madres found common ground in their identity as mothers: “motherhood created the bond that allowed them to pool the information they obtained and the rumors they gathered and develop a sense of solidarity from which they drew the strength to press for an answer to their questions” (Navarro 257). The Madres capitalized on an existing identity group which would support the development of a new community.

Through the experience of protest and the frames employed, the Madres created a new community and collective identity. Their appeals to motherhood and to patriotism cannot be separated, for their society “glorified motherhood and exalted women as domestic beings (Navarro 257). In this sense, there was something patriotic and respected about the identity of “mother.” However, this dynamic took on new meaning for the Madres as a movement. Through their actions and decisions, they politicized and redefined their motherhood as collective motherhood. They became the mothers of all of *los desaparecidos* in Argentina: one mother said, “So one child is converted into thousands of children and the struggle takes on a different meaning” (Fisher 149). The Madres began to understand themselves as defenders of life for their nation. The emergence of this new identity, built upon love for both children and nation, would support the Madres as an organization as they navigated the challenges presented by democratization in 1983. The symbols of the *pañuelo* and the Plaza de

Mayo were linked to this collective identity, reinforcing and reinvigorating the community over time.

How then do collective rituals relate to this community of mothers? The symbolic acts used to frame their protest, donning the *pañuelo* and performing the silent vigil in the Plaza de Mayo, were staples in their toolkit of contentious politics. The Madres understood these acts as part of their identity, as individuals and as a community. Therefore, returning to the Plaza de Mayo was understood as both their duty and as a way of connecting with each other. They could not be *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* without maintaining their presence there.

To summarize, framing symbols in terms of socially relevant labels created community through shaping shared understandings and experiences. In doing so, the Madres built a community based on their shared identity but also created a new collective understanding of themselves. I argue that drawing upon and redefining collective identities such as motherhood and patriotism, which carried social legitimacy and remained pertinent and impactful after the transition to democracy, was key to the resilience of the Madres' movement. Symbolic appeals to motherhood and patriotism served to support their corresponding community identity, thereby creating the conditions which helped the Madres remain resilient.

V. Resilience and Democratization

The ability of the Madres to maintain commitment and activism post-transition to democracy is quite surprising. As explained above, democratization can actually hinder the ability of social movements to maintain participation. The reemergence of

political parties means that social movements must compete for the time and energy of engaged citizens (Pickvance 362). In addition to the difficulties posed by political parties, social movements formed under authoritarian regimes face new challenges from the young democratic government. The methods employed by social movements can be less effective under the new regime: “the human rights movement in Argentina arose in a political environment in which bargaining was impossible, but the new democratic environment rewarded the logic of bargaining more than persuasion” (Brysk, *Politics* 20). Thus, the very thing that made movements impactful under authoritarianism - symbolic and expressive protests - can come to hinder them post-transition. In terms of impact, Bonner argues *Las Abuelas* were more successful than the Madres in accomplishing their goals because of the framing of their goals, and to a lesser extent, their willingness to compromise with the government (55). Thus, movements must often contend with increased frustration amongst participants.

A further challenge to social movements is the ability of new regimes to employ democratic tools to manage and deflect movement demands.⁴¹ This is especially true of the Argentine case wherein the Alfonsín government used tools such as symbolic support, limited concessions and postponement to minimize the impact of the human rights movement (Brysk, *Politics* 20). The Madres therefore faced numerous hurdles as they negotiated a new environment and new government. Nonetheless, the Madres maintained a base-level of collective action following democratization in 1983. They continued protesting, collaborating and pressuring political figures. Whether or not

⁴¹ Such methods include small concessions, symbolic support, avoidance and government-sponsored organizations (Brysk, *Politics* 20).

their activity increased during this later period is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is safe to say that the Madres continued their protest with vigor.

Symbolism and framing helped the Madres to survive and protest a violent and repressive government as well as to remain united and autonomous in the face of the challenges brought by regime change. The symbolic appeals to motherhood and patriotism, manifested in the performance of collective rituals, built upon existing identities and created a new collective identity and associated community thereby fostering resilience at an organizational level. As I have shown, the creation of community is crucial to sustained activism. In the case of the Madres, this activist community and the identity of collective motherhood remained important to the mothers despite the changes brought by the transition to democracy: changing political conditions, the reemergence of political parties, the efficiency of movement tactics and the tools available to democratic government. In this section, I shall unpack how the identities of collective motherhood and place-based patriotism were unifying despite these changes.

a. Collective Motherhood

The sense of collective motherhood, an identity that defined their movement, was not rendered irrelevant or undesirable by the transition to democracy: their children were still missing and the government was unable to address their demands satisfactorily. Thus, the sense of duty associated with their motherhood was renewed. They still understood themselves as the mothers of all *los desaparecidos*. One mother said, “we stayed together because we were desperate and we were the only ones who

understood what was happening to us” (Bosco, “Embeddedness” 350). Still, one might ask why, with the reinvigoration of civil society, did the Madres not turn to traditional organizations for their support? Could they not continue to protest as mothers, but from within another organization?

Why did they not abandon their community when other, perhaps more effective, spaces emerged? The first reason they group kept momentum is practical: prior to their mobilization, the Madres had been largely uninvolved in politics and therefore they did not have pre-existing loyalties to the re-emerging organizations, such as political parties. Such organizations therefore did not present a serious threat. However, even some women who had been politically active remained loyal to the Madres. Moreover, many mothers felt that traditional political parties and politicians did not truly represent their interests, before, during and after the junta. Though in their experiences they became politicized, they did not want the fate of their children to become a politicized issue, “a bargaining chip in the adjustment of interests” (Guzman Bouvard 130). They felt that only they, as mothers, could truly represent and advocate for the interests of their children and it was this identity that kept them pushing forward as a movement: “they were compelled to act not on moral or political grounds or out of concern for gross human rights violations, as in the case of other groups, but because they were mothers” (Navarro 256). Their collective experience of politics during the military junta had imbued them with a deep sense of distrust for traditional politics that survived the transition to democracy.

However, most crucial, is that by framing and shaping their actions in specific ways, the women created a community rooted in shared emotion and support. For, at

the core of their resilience, in light of democratization and even 30 years later, are the shared bonds which brought these women together and developed through their years of protest. It was a sense of collective and shared motherhood following a terrible loss. Their acts of symbolic protest - occupying the Plaza de Mayo, supporting other mothers of *desaparecidos*, wearing the *pañuelo* - became a key part of their identities. It was returning to the Plaza and being together that renewed their commitment to one another: "Once we were in the Plaza, the fact of being arm in arm, or of walking together, compelled us to return" (Mellibovsky 85). They understood protesting together as part of their individual identity. Protesting, or partaking in their collective rituals, renewed their emotional ties.

b. Place-Based Rituals

As I discuss above, the reason for their protest activities remained under the new president. Many still hoped their children would be returned alive and all feared *los desaparecidos* would be forgotten. They understood the weekly protest in the Plaza de Mayo as a tool for maintaining their children's memory. Therefore, the motivation to occupy the Plaza de Mayo remained significant. Yet, even mothers with little hope of finding their children continued to protest. The purpose as a community wasn't to fight for any one child, but for all *los desaparecidos*. The vigil took on new meaning with the reemergence of civil society. Considering their weekly protest no longer had the same strategic function it had under the junta, this new significance is important in understanding what drove aging women to continue traveling to a square to complete their silent vigil. The performance of collective rituals - the weekly protest in the Plaza

de Mayo - helped the Madres remain resilient in that it maintained their collective identity and reinforced their sense of community.

In their struggle to maintain a presence in the Plaza de Mayo during the years of the junta, the Madres came to associate the Plaza with their group identity. One mother said, "From the beginning the Mothers went to the streets and the others [human rights organizations] worked from their offices...If we didn't go to the square we wouldn't exist any more" (Fisher 143). The act of returning to the original stage where they had fought for their children connected them to each other and to their lost children. Another mother notes "For the Mothers the square signifies the best of our lives because the square is the place of our children...From 30 [A]pril 1977 we've always been there because this square is ours" (Fisher 108). These testimonies demonstrate the significance the square bore for the Madres. Their symbolic actions brought new meaning to the already symbolic square thereby redefining their understanding of the plaza and giving it a personal dimension. The impact of these weekly protests should not be understated: research shows "collective rituals bring activists together with some consistency and revitalize the kind of emotional ties that keep people involved" (Bunnage 438). Thus, this place-based collective ritual helped Madres connect to their community while also reinforcing their sense of community.

The symbolic appeals to motherhood and patriotism cannot be separated entirely from one another. The Madres redefined motherhood by connecting it to ideals of the nation. They created a new sense of patriotism rooted in motherhood and human rights. Thus, the impulse to continue protesting rooted in their sense of collective

motherhood was not just to protect or advocate for *los desaparecidos*. Rather, it was also linked to their self-identification as “defenders of the nation.”

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that, through framing symbolic protest to appeal to their identities as mothers and Argentinians, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* created a community rooted in existing and emerging identities to which they remained loyal and committed despite challenges associated with democratization. The use and effect of the *pañuelo* evoked ideas of a mother’s duty and pointed to the commonalities between them: motherhood and loss. Protesting in the Plaza de Mayo conveyed their activism as uniquely Argentinian, and changed their identities by politicizing their maternity. The involvement of these two identities fostered the development of a new shared identity, collective motherhood, in which they understood themselves as mothers of all the nation’s children. Embedded in these identities, individual and shared, were emotional bonds, tying the community of Madres together. Their practices - wearing the *pañuelo* and occupying the Plaza de Mayo - became collective rituals key to their deepening community. Thus, these bonds of community, maintained and reinforced by the use of symbolic, collective acts, fostered their resilience as a movement following democratization in 1983.

However, I would be remiss not to address one crucial moment in the development of the Madres post-transition: in 1986, a group of mothers, disenchanted with the organization’s methods and leadership, split off to form a separate organization, *Línea Fundadora* or Founding Line (Guzman Bouvard 163). However, I do

not think this fact is incompatible with my argument: the split in organization does not necessarily indicate the decline of the community and collective identity. Nor does it challenge their resilience. The women who formed a new organization continued to advocate for *los desaparecidos*, but through different means. Moreover, one could argue that the women who split were so dedicated to their collective purpose that they chose to start a new organization, rather than cease activities all together. *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, both the Association and the new *Línea Fundadora*, continued with their activities long past 1986. I contend that the split indicates a structural change rather than a change in the way the mothers understood their identity and duties.

In keeping with the Madres' commitment to truth and justice, I also think it important to acknowledge my own nation's complicity in the Dirty War. Though I have portrayed the Madres as the protagonist to the regime's antagonism, the issue of responsibility for the crimes committed is far broader. Other governments, such as that of Uruguay, cooperated with the Argentine government in the capture of Argentine nationals abroad (Fisher 24). The U.S., in particular, supported the military junta financially, ideologically and even physically. During the Cold War, the U.S. government backed numerous right-wing authoritarian regimes across Latin America. In fact, members of the Argentine armed forces were trained in counter-insurgency tactics by the U.S. military, including instruction in the theory and practice of torture (Fisher 81). I mention this, not to criticize, but rather to endeavor to maintain the memory of what occurred in the dark history of the Dirty War.

The claims I advance here have broader implications for the study of social movements, particularly motherist movements. We can learn something about the

longevity and resilience of collective action by examining the experience of movement participants and how they relate to their movement as a whole. While my argument centers around culturally specific symbolism, such as the Plaza de Mayo, the underlying assumptions about community and protest are not entirely culturally bound. Therefore, I have reasons to think similar dynamics could be observed in protests around the globe so long as such observations pay close attention to cultural elements including local narratives and values.

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on relationships and emotions in relation to the activism of this group of mothers could prove useful in the study of social movements elsewhere. Motherist movements have emerged throughout the world, particularly in Latin America, where numerous other groups of mothers protested similar authoritarian regimes in the latter half of the 20th century. Why does the frame of motherhood resonate in Latin America?⁴² How does this compare to other regions of the world? The Madres offer reflections on the mobilization of maternal bonds as a political force that could find parallels elsewhere.

An area of research that my thesis would prompt me to investigate further concerns the significance of symbolism and collective rituals more broadly. Fernando Bosco considers the role of symbols in transnational communities in his work, "Place, space, networks, and the sustainability of collective action: the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*." He examines how place-based rituals sustained a broad network of Madres activists. However, the dynamics Bosco and I consider ought to be analyzed from an

⁴² I do not mean to generalize the diversity of local and regional cultures, but rather to suggest the possibility of a connection between the salience of motherhood and some shared regional traits, such as colonial histories and the influence of Catholicism.

international or temporal perspective as well. As many Madres support groups have arisen throughout Latin America and the world, how might symbolism create community across borders? Moreover, how have the dynamics I consider been maintained or changed since the 1980s?

Recently, the protest chant “Un violador en tu camino” (“A Rapist in Your Path”), spread from Chile, throughout Latin America and into the rest of the world. The chant, accompanied by dance movements and performed generally by women wearing blindfolds, criticizes gender-based violence and, in particular, the state’s role in maintaining patriarchal systems (Barbara). The words include “patriarchy is our judge / that imprisons us at birth” and “the oppressive state is a macho rapist” (“Lyrics and Dance”). Though these manifestations are relatively new and the occurrence has decreased recently,⁴³ I believe this protest offers an interesting opportunity for examining the ways symbols unite distant communities. That this symbolic performance created in Chile resonates in a nation as far away as Turkey is significant. Notably, many participants in Latin American manifestations can be seen wearing *pañuelos* of various colors,⁴⁴ a subtle nod to the women who defied violence and fear out of love for their children.

I have endeavored to do justice by the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, whose protest moved me deeply and continues to inspire me. The Madres are a complex organization, not easily explained by traditional frameworks due to their uniquely maternal approach to politics. They continue to challenge what it is to be a woman, a mother and a

⁴³ It is too early to account for this as, at the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic prevents such large gatherings.

⁴⁴ See Appendix B, photo 9.

grandmother. I have argued that the emotional and practical communities born out of their appeals to motherhood and patriotism bound these women together, sustaining a resilient movement for many decades despite numerous challenges.

VII. Appendix A: Gender and the Junta

The 1976 coup took on distinctly gendered dimensions which, though not directly impacting my arguments, are worth noting here. Part of the military's plan for the nation was the protection of the traditional family structure: male breadwinners and female caretakers. The masculine armed forces viewed this as their responsibility and therefore began their "war on subversion." Treatment of citizens and *desaparecidos* alike reflected gendered norms. Generally, the husbands of the Madres did not join their wives in the Plaza as they were more likely to be employed full-time. Moreover, both husband and wife often felt that the mothers' gender provided them a layer of protection (Feitlowitz 109). To a certain extent, they were right: the military allowed their biases to blind them to the threat posed by the Madres (Fisher 60). They underestimated them because they were women. However, this did not protect them completely as Madres were detained periodically and several were disappeared.

The experiences of *desaparecidos* within clandestine detention centers was sexualized. One of the most common methods of torture was the application of electric cattle rods to sensitive areas and genitals. Women, making up roughly a third of *los desaparecidos*, were subjected to treatment reflecting the ideological plans of the regime. This is not to suggest women were treated worse or better. Rather, they were treated differently because they were women. For example, some female detainees were tortured in front of an image of the Virgin Mary, highlighting the regime's understanding of what a woman should be (Taylor 186). Female detainees were raped and beaten, among other forms of physical abuse. Pregnant women, roughly 3% of victims, received unique treatment within the centers (Taylor 186). They were at times

given special allowances: one survivor describes the captors allowing the pregnant women to sit in a sunny patio and visit a nearby park on one occasion (Feitlowitz 96). However, they were often forced to give birth in dangerous and horrific conditions, without receiving proper medical care. Babies born in detention were often given to prominent families and their mothers were killed (Feitlowitz 78). These examples of gendered life in and outside of the detention centers indicate the contradictions in the military's ideology: violence and civility, reverence for motherhood and degradation of pregnant prisoners.

VIII. Appendix B: Visualizing Protest

Photo 1:



Mon Laferte, a Chilean singer, is pictured at the 2019 Latin Grammy's Awards, in Las Vegas. The writing on her chest states "In Chile, they torture, rape and kill." The green bandana represents the movement to legalize abortion.

"Mon Laferte posa topless en los Latin Grammy como protesta por Chile." <https://www.mediotiempo.com/otros-mundos/musica/mon-laferte-topless-protesta-chile-latin-grammy>, accessed 24 April 2020.

Photo 2:



Pañuelos with the names of desaparecidos are painted in the Centro Cívico (Civic Center) in San Carlos de Bariloche, a large town in Argentina's Patagonia region.

Author's photo, taken in November, 2018

Photo 3:



Protesters move around the *Pirámide de Mayo* (May Pyramid) in the Plaza de Mayo.

Villoldo, Carlos. "10 de diciembre de 1981. Primera marcha de la Resistencia" in "Las Viejas: fotos y voces de la historia de Madres de Plaza de Mayo." Archivo Infojus Noticias, <http://www.archivoinfojus.gob.ar/nacionales/las-viejas-fotos-y-vozes-de-la-historia-de-madres-de-plaza-de-mayo-7898.html>. Accessed 23 April 2020.

Photo 4:



Madres protest in the Plaza wearing their typical white *pañuelos*. Often, the *pañuelos* would have the name of a disappeared loved one or "*los desaparecidos*" embroidered on it.

Garcia, Daniel. In "30,000 People were 'Disappeared' in Argentina's Dirty War. These Women Never Stopped Looking" by Erin Blakemore. <https://www.history.com/news/Mothers-plaza-de-Mayo-disappeared-children-dirty-war-argentina>. Accessed 23 April 2020.

Photo 5:



Author pictured with members of the Mendoza regional branch of *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. These Madres protest each Thursday in the Plaza San Martín.

Author's photo, taken in November, 2018

Photos 6 and 7:



Memorial outside of *El Espacio para la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos exD2* (The Space for Memory and Human Rights ex D2) in Mendoza, Argentina. This space operated as a clandestine detention center during the Dirty War. The memorial reads “Here functioned the clandestine detention center D-2/Political Center from 1974 and systematically from the civil-military dictatorship which seized state power between 03/24/76 and 10/12/83.” The vertical columns read “Justice, Truth, Memory.” (Author’s translation).



The entrance to *El Espacio para la Memoria*. During the dictatorship, this building functioned as a government office and clandestine detention center. It is located just off a busy road near downtown Mendoza.

Author's photos, taken in December, 2018

Photo 8:



El Pirámide de Mayo (the May Pyramid) is meant to represent national liberation and is embedded with various symbols of Argentinian heritage.

Author's photo, taken in October, 2018

Photo 9:



Protestors in Santiago, Chile perform “A Rapist in Your Path” wearing *pañuelos* of various colors on their wrists.

Barbara, Vanessa. “Latin America’s Radical Feminism is Spreading.” The New York Times, 28 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/latin-america-feminism.html>. Accessed 29 April 2020.

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