

## Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

---

Vol. 16 No. 1 August 31, 2015

### Cultural Transmission and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

Elizabeth Borland  
Dept of Sociology and Anthropology  
The College of New Jersey  
[borland@dnj.edu](mailto:borland@dnj.edu)

Sarah A. Schoellkopf  
Unaffiliated Scholar  
[schoellky@yahoo.com](mailto:schoellky@yahoo.com)

Leah Ruediger, MAT  
Relay Graduate School of  
Education  
[lsrue13@gmail.com](mailto:lsrue13@gmail.com)

#### Abstract

Scholars have studied how social movements shape cultural practices, but few have examined the impact of activists as cultural symbols. This paper examines the continued relevance of Argentina's Madres de la Plaza de Mayo by analyzing fifteen years of newspaper coverage and referenced cultural objects. We found that depiction of the Madres varied depending on who created these objects. When Madres were producers, we found broadened claims. When they collaborated or approved, claims were more traditional. When Madres were not involved, sometimes they were parodied or commercialized. We argue that cultural transmission can help activists generate long-lasting social change.

#### Acknowledgement

This project was made possible with the generous support from the Mentored Undergraduate Summer Experience program at the The College of New Jersey. Many thanks to Dan Suárez for research assistance, Nancy Whittier and Sarah Soule for comments on earlier drafts, and Diego Parés and other artists and photographers who let us include their work. Most of all, we are deeply grateful to the Madres for their activism and the way that it has impacted so many people around the world.

\*\*\*\*\*

Activists have long capitalized on the communicative power of art to inform people both inside and outside of movements (Reed, 2005, p. xiii). Despite this, the relationship between movements and culture remains understudied (Swidler 1995; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Earl 2004). Though they emerged in the late 1970s to protest their children's disappearance during Argentina's last dictatorship, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo have remained active. They are widely recognized as icons of global human rights, and this makes them a good case to illuminate the impact of activists as cultural symbols. In part, the Madres' influence has been sustained over the vicissitudes of the last 37 years because of their artistic production and through their depiction in cultural objects. These encompass artistic products from a variety of media, including songs, albums, concerts, theatrical and dance productions, films, literary works, and fine arts objects, as well as television and radio programs. The range and amount of cultural objects referencing the Madres is remarkable. Howald and Hartmann (2007) argue that Argentine human rights activism has become increasingly artistic since 1996 because expressions of collective memory have taken on new shades of subjectivity (111). In fact, Bonner's (2007) analysis of 2000-2001 newspaper coverage of historic human rights groups (including the two Madres organizations) found that the groups' "organization of or participation in arts, fund-raising, and public education events" was the topic that had the most newspaper coverage (157). We contribute to this research by studying trends in fifteen years of one newspaper's coverage of the Madres and analyzing the objects referenced.

Our research illuminates how the Madres have become both cultural producers and iconic references. Following a summary of literature on the Madres, we present our innovative multi-method approach. Our analysis of articles referencing the Madres in Argentina's *La Nación*, 1996-2010, reveals that a significant portion are about artistic or cultural activities and objects. Our subsequent analysis of objects mentioned in these articles highlights patterns in how Madres appear. We find different themes and claims when the Madres are producers, compared to when they collaborate and demonstrate approval, or when they are not involved. As producers, Madres tend to capitalize on contemporary media forms to broaden their historical image and maintain their political role. When Madres collaborate, production includes both traditional representations and new artistic dialogues, and contemporary claims alongside traditional demands about human rights. Non-Madres production tends to depict the Madres in a static, historical light, but also includes

some critique of the activists and their claims. We conclude with a discussion of how the Madres and other activists build long-lasting social change through cultural mechanisms of production and representation, and how commercialization and co-optation can intervene.

### Culture and Movements

To address these questions, we draw on an approach that unites the dominant “Art Worlds” and “production perspectives” (Dowd 2004): Rhys Williams’ (1996) “five-pointed star” model. It has the following points: (1) cultural object, (2) its producer and (3) consumer, (4) the institutional context and (5) the interpretive environment where the cultural object, producer and consumer exist. This model is helpful for two reasons. First, it suggests a mutually influential relationship between movements and culture and avoids the trap that comes from studying cultural objects as value-based claims, but failing to notice materialism (Williams 1996; 2004). When we pay attention to material production, we see how the creation and consumption of cultural objects draws upon and influences the institutional contexts and interpretive environments where they exist. Second, the model spans the gap between an emphasis on systemic and performative aspects of culture—systemic aspects emphasize the contexts that constrain and enable mobilization (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Williams 2004), while performative views stress how people construct strategies for action by picking from what Swidler (1986) calls a “tool kit” of rituals, symbols, stories, and world views” (273). Williams’ model allows us to study cultural and institutional contexts in which objects arise and are interpreted, and how they are created and consumed.

Each of the five parts of this star appear in the literature. Many have noted that cultural objects can disseminate a movement’s moral vision (Jasper 1997; Adams 2002). Political art— “simultaneously a commodity and a political statement” (Adams 2001: 311)—and other cultural objects inform people outside of movements, attracting new members and media coverage (Roscigno and Danaher 2004; Reed 2005). For example, Adams (2002) documents how appliqué tapestries (*arpilleras*) created by Chilean women disseminated messages against Pinochet’s regime. Cultural objects can affect emotions, responses to a movement and its claims, and activists’ collective identity (Edelman 1995; Adams 2002; Roscigno, Danaher, and Summers-Effler 2002; Reed 2005). Messages expressed frequently undermine dominant ideologies, and can create alternative perspectives on history (Edelman 1995; Reed 2005).

Movement scholars have also studied cultural producers and consumers. When activists become producers, it can reinforce solidarity and shared values, beliefs and tactics, and can harmonize individual differences through mutual acceptance of symbolic meanings (Jasper 1997; Reed 2005). Producing art can promote activists’ collective healing through release of negative emotions (Jasper 1997; Adams 2002). It can also capture the movement’s historical significance, even in the face of repression (Adams 2002; Edelman 1995; Reed 2005). Like producers, consumers can be both outside and within movement groups (Noble 2008; Milbrandt 2010). Movement art can mobilize diverse resources (Adams 2002, Reed 2005), in part because it can circulate near and far, an important way to gain international support (Adams 2001; 2006). Music’s lyrical content and the way listeners physically engage with collective experiences like concerts, makes it particularly important (Mattern 1998; Roscigno et al. 2002; Roscigno and Danaher 2004).

Researchers have also examined the interpretive environment for cultural objects. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) call movement art “cultural expressions which represent the past in the present” (163) through mobilization and transformation of cultural traditions. As such, production involves both drawing upon and creating signs and symbols incorporated into cultural objects (Jasper 1997). While some symbols hold more meanings than others do, all require a process of interpretation in which art takes on social currency (Kniss 1996; Williams 2004; Noble 2008).

Though institutional contexts receive less attention, some scholars have assessed how much access activists have to produce and disseminate their messages. Adams’ (2001; 2006) work on how consumer demand for *arpilleras* affected their content reminds us that we must consider the role of the market, as well as intermediaries and brokers. To the extent that they control how the message of cultural producers reaches consumers, it can enable or constrain mobilization. Sometimes, laws and bureaucratic structures are involved in this process. For instance, Roscigno and Danaher (2001) document how the influence of radio in U.S. textile mill strikes declined after the Federal Communications Commission curbed local autonomy in favor of commercial interests in the late 1930s. Dodaro’s (2009) work on trends in the use of video activism directs our attention to the institutions that produce and distribute art. He suggests that decreasing production costs have facilitated use of visual media by modern activists. Eyerman (2002) documents how technological advances have similarly affected music. It is also useful to consider media and Internet access, and the availability of spaces like galleries and theaters where artists share their work.

As Milbrandt (2010) states, “the arts give voice and form to individual and collective needs that motivate and sustain social movements” (8). Yet there is not enough attention to the role of cultural production by non-movement actors. Swidler (2005) argues that symbols make the collective concrete, “making the animating power of group life palpable” (Swidler 2005:26)—this is true for activist groups as well as the broader society. Art has the symbolic and functional power to confront social structures that do not fit activists’ moral vision by representing those structures in a negative light, or by representing activism in a positive light (Jasper 1997). Thus, objects depicting activists are relevant as a means of cultural transmission: not only forwarding, multiplying, and perpetuating their goals, but also building a culture that reflects (or critiques) collective identities and claims.

### **Sustaining Influence in a Changing Landscape**

Decades of research have documented the dynamic evolution of the Madres.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have written about them in myriad ways: from how they employed motherhood, memory and grief for resistance (Bouvard, 1994; Foss and Domenici, 2001; Schirmer, 1994, 185; Thornton, 2000), to how they utilized space and social networks (Bosco, 2001) as powerful ‘marching’ activists (Egan and Cordella, 2006, 257). Work on the contemporary Madres focuses on how they maintain relevance (Bosco, 2006; Borland 2006). Bonner (2007, 150) argues that the modern Madres have expanded claims to include broader human and civil rights issues, including economic injustice and other dominant themes in contemporary Argentina.

To study representations of the Madres, some examine their use of visual, literary, and performing arts. Many emphasize their use of *pañuelos* (headscarves made from missing children’s diapers) as a symbol to emphasize femininity. Klein (2011) argues that the *pañuelo* signals the *mater dolorosa* but has broadened and defused to incorporate other forms of “radical maternal citizenship in South America” (107). Howald and Hartmann (2007) claim the symbol’s universality lends power and allows it to take on new meanings, extending beyond motherhood (111). In fact, Milbrandt (2010) calls the *pañuelo* a preeminent “symbol of resistance and solidarity in activist art” (10).

Even so, few have approached more recent and diversified cultural forms and representations. While some scholarship has focused on art created by or for human rights-related movements (Adams, 2001, 2002, 2006; Noble, 2008), there has never been a systematic analysis of a comprehensive body of cultural objects on the Madres. Thus, in addition to illuminating cultural transmission, our research allows us to examine the quantity and breadth of Madres-related production, as well as the interpretive and institutional power that cultural objects depicting or referencing the Madres wield in Argentina.

### **Methods**

Our multi-method approach explores how cultural production serves diverse functions for the Madres and conveys variable, sometimes conflicting images of the Madres to the general public. We employ quantitative and qualitative analysis to examine the Madres’ cultural impact from multiple angles. First, a quantitative analysis of fifteen years of newspaper coverage on the Madres in Argentina’s *La Nación* (1996-2010) examines the significance of Madres-related cultural production during a period in which they were both critical of the government (1996-2002) and similar number of years when they were more supportive (2003-2010, under the two Kirchner presidencies). This analysis identifies the characteristics of cultural objects, producers, and audiences referenced in the aforementioned articles. Second, our focused qualitative analysis of cultural objects mentioned in these articles illuminates how Madres were depicted. The objects include artistic products from diverse media, including: songs and albums; films; theatrical, musical and dance productions; fine arts objects; literary works; television and radio programs; and activities like workshops not described in political terms (such as cooking or sewing classes). Some were produced by the Madres, some were made in collaboration with them or with their approval, and some were created without any direct Madres input.

To perform these analyses, we collected and coded all 1,671 articles that mentioned the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in the Internet archives of the newspaper *La Nación* between 1996 and 2010.<sup>2</sup> *La Nación* is the second major newspaper in Argentina (behind *Clarín*), with an average daily circulation of nearly 160,000 in 2009 (INDEC 2010). We chose it because it has the most accessible web archive, dating from 1996. We do not contend that *La Nación* captures all Madres activities; in addition to problems associated with media coverage (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, and Augustin, 2001), *La Nación* is considered more politically conservative than other papers. Therefore, the sample is a conservative estimate given the Madres’ more left-leaning position. However, when we compared the overall counts of articles mentioning the Madres in the top-selling *Clarín* for the dates in its web archive (1998 to present) the number of articles was similar (see Bonner 2007 for a discussion of Argentina’s media and human rights).

We coded all articles based on activities referenced: cultural/artistic production (“culture articles”) vs. other activities (claims about human rights, international affairs, neoliberalism, etc.—see Borland 2006 for all categories and a full description). We coded the subset of culture articles for five variables. In order to determine how different producers depicted the Madres, we separated objects into five categories: those produced by the Madres; those that involve collaboration between the Madres and another party or parties; those that involve Madres approval of a non-Madres production; those that do not involve Madres production, collaboration or approval; and those that have no producer.<sup>3</sup> To determine if nationality of the producer was significant, we also coded producers as Argentine, non-Argentine, unknown, or mixed (e.g., a quartet with one Argentine). To better understand the interpretive environment, the audience was coded as domestic (Argentine), international (non-Argentine), mixed, or unknown. To determine if type of media made a difference, we divided objects into form categories: music (live or recorded), audiovisual media (film and television), theatre and dance, fine arts, literature, multiple forms, radio, or other. We also coded whether the article appeared in the Kirchner period (2003-2010) or before (1996-2002).<sup>4</sup>

### Analysis

When we coded each newspaper article based on the type of reference to the Madres, we found that a significant portion (16.9 percent of all articles, n= 276) referenced them in relation to arts or cultural events or activities. This was the third most common type of reference, compared with references related to human rights and peace (46.5 percent) and neoliberalism (21.5 percent), and was higher than the remaining categories: international affairs, dictatorship, and the residual ‘other.’

Systematic coding of the culture articles revealed patterns in the cultural forms, producers, audiences, and interpretive and institutional environments.

**Table 1: Frequencies (Total n=276)**

		%	n
Cultural Form	Music	33	91
	Audiovisual (TV, Film)	17.8	49
	Other	13.8	38
	Theater	9.1	25
	Non-Music Radio	8.7	24
	Literature	7.6	21
	Fine Arts	6.5	18
	Multiple	3.6	10
Producer Identity	Madres	9.8	27
	Non-Madres	46.4	128
	Collaboration	26.1	72
	Approval	10.9	30
	No Producer	6.9	19
Artist National Identity	Domestic	70.7	195
	International	16.7	46
	Mixed	10.5	29
	Unknown	2.2	6
Audience National Identity	Domestic	83	229
	International	2.5	7
	Mixed	13.4	37
	Unknown	1.1	3
Year	1996-2002	44.2	122
	2002-2010	55.8	154

**Table 2: Cultural Form by Producer ID, Artist and Audience National ID**

Cultural Form		Music	Visual	Theatre	Fine Arts	Literary	Other	Multiple	Radio
Producer Identity*5	Madres	1.1% n=1	4.1% n=2	4.0% n=1	0.0% n=0	19.0% n=4	13.2% n=5	0.0% n=0	58.3% n=14
	Non-Madres	41.8% n=38	69.4% n=34	68.0% n=17	66.7% n=12	38.1% n=8	26.3% n=10	50.0% n=5	16.7% n=4
	Collaboration	30.8% n=28	24.5% n=12	16.0% n=4	27.8% n=5	33.3% n=7	21.1% n=8	40.0% n=4	16.7% n=4
	Approval	24.2% n=22	0.0% n=0	8.0% n=2	5.6% n=1	4.8% n=1	7.9% n=3	0.0% n=0	4.2% n=1
	No Producer	2.2% n=2	2.0% n=1	4.0% n=1	0.0% n=0	4.8% n=1	31.6% n=12	10.0% n=1	4.2% n=1
Artist National Identity*6	Domestic	45.1% n=41	81.6% n=40	92.0% n=23	83.3% n=15	76.2% n=16	81.6% n=31	50.0% n=5	100.0% n=24
	International	30.8% n=28	16.3% n=8	4.0% n=1	0.0% n=0	14.3% n=3	10.5% n=4	20.0% n=2	0.0% n=0
	Mixed	24.2% n=22	2.0% n=1	4.0% n=1	5.6% n=1	0.0% n=0	5.3% n=2	20.0% n=2	0.0% n=0
	Unknown	0.0% n=0	0.0% n=0	0.0% n=0	11.1% n=2	9.5% n=2	2.6% n=1	10.0% n=1	0.0% n=0
Audience National Identity	Domestic	80.2% n=73	77.6% n=38	88.0% n=22	72.2% n=13	85.7% n=18	89.5% n=34	70.0% n=7	100.0% n=24
	International	2.2% n=2	0.0% n=0	8.0% n=2	5.6% n=1	0.0% n=0	2.6% n=1	10.0% n=1	0.0% n=0
	Mixed	16.5% n=15	22.4% n=11	4.0% n=1	22.2% n=4	14.3% n=3	5.3% n=2	10.0% n=1	0.0% n=0
	Unknown	1.1% n=1	0.0% n=0	0.0% n=0	0.0% n=0	0.0% n=0	2.6% n=1	10.0% n=1	0.0% n=0

N=276, \*Chi-Square<0.5

Frequencies for all variables are in Table 1. While the most common forms were music and film, production was diverse. Not surprisingly, an Argentine interpretive context dominated: domestic artists for a domestic audience produced the vast majority of the objects. Most production (46 percent) did not involve the Madres, while Madres collaboration/approval produced 37 percent and Madres solo production accounted for less than percent.

Table 2 shows trends between cultural form and producer identity. While the Madres produced the majority of non-music radio referenced in the dataset (8.3 percent), non-Madres generated the majority of visual media (69.4 percent), theatre (68.0 percent) and fine arts (66.7 percent). Music production was split between non-Madres (41.8 percent) and collaboration (30.8 percent) or approval (24.2 percent). Similarly, literary work involved Madres production (19.0 percent) or collaboration (33.3 percent) in addition to non-Madres production (38.1 percent). Collaboration was also common for visual (24.5 percent) and fine arts (27.8 percent).

While quantitative analysis can show who is producing which cultural objects for whom, we must look beyond numbers to explore the messages embedded in order to understand how cultural objects fit into the interpretive and institutional environments. When the Madres are creating an object, they control their own image, but the representation varies when production is out of their hands.

### ***The Madres as producers: Limited forms, expanded claims***

When the Madres were producers, the most common forms were non-music radio (51.9 percent) and literature (14.8 percent), and the residual 'other' category (22.2 percent) that captured unconventional forms.

Madres-produced objects were for domestic audiences (96.3 percent). A good example is the Madres radio station, "La Voz de las Madres" (AM530), founded by the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo in 2005. It has diverse programming, including shows that feature authors, artists, and politicians. While the Madres' early self-published poetry allowed them to give artistic voice to their struggle, radio allows them to speak to a broader audience. As an underground station, AM530 started as a challenge to institutionalized media and exemplified Madres' expanded claims (against corporate media control). When AM530 became official—early in a wave of local non-commercial programming that culminated in the 2009 media law—the station was no longer a protest, but its content continued to voice the Madres' contemporary claims.

With help from younger allies, the Madres manipulate new and old forms of media (band and Internet radio, TV and YouTube) to spread messages about their vision of the past, present, and future. This allows them to reach out to different and younger audiences, and even across international borders with streaming media. As prominent Madres leader from Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo Hebe de Bonafini said in their inaugural TV program, it contrasts with "spokespeople" who act as mouthpieces for others (Madres de la Plaza, 2008). She asked the viewer to put the program timeslot on a "little piece of paper and stick it on their refrigerator with a magnet" so they can welcome the Madres into their home. This introduction underlined the Madres domestic presence and their humble beginnings. However, later editions of the program's title sequence quickly move from dictatorship-era photos of Madres carrying photos of their children to images of the Madres embracing important contemporary political figures: Fidel Castro, Cristina and Nestor Kirchner, Evo Morales, and Dilma Rouseff, among others (Madres de la Plaza, 2011).

In other forms, the Madres used similar vocabulary and symbols, but to new political ends. For example, during the gastronomy conference 'Cocinas del Bicentenario' organized as part of Argentina's 200-year independence celebration, de Bonafini held the first of a series of what became weekly workshops titled 'Cocinando la política' (Casanovas 2010). Though she may have been in a kitchen, de Bonafini was cooking up something that might be harder to digest than traditional dishes: politics. With this and other Madres-produced examples, they create a space to communicate contemporary claims alongside traditional ones.

### ***Collaboration and approval: Replaying the past, creating dialogues***

When the Madres collaborate in cultural production or offer their approval, objects tend to replay historical images. While collaboration includes a variety of cultural forms, particularly music (38.9 percent), visual media (16.7 percent) and literature (9.7 percent), the vast majority of Madres approval is with music (73.3 percent). By approving or collaborating, the Madres help create producers and consumers. Collaboration presents opportunities to direct new dialogues between cultural and political actors, making room for new models of activism. During the collaborative process, the Madres often initiate dialogues between artists. For example, singers Teresa Parodi and Liliana Herrero, quoted in *La Nación*, said that working with the Madres led them later to hold concerts together (Plaza, 2006).

By collaborating with others—even across borders—the Madres can shape a dynamic discourse for the next generation of activists. As Hebe de Bonafini said to the audience at the 1997 '20 Years of Struggle' concert: "Music united us tonight. Rebellion must keep uniting you. You must be firm rebels" (1999, Track 14). Echoing the desires of the *desaparecidos*, de Bonafini wants young people to be inspired to "rebellion." In an interview with Argentina's *Rolling Stone*, she highlights the Madres' desire to embrace cultural production as a way to commemorate the lives, not the deaths, of the disappeared (Seselovsky 2010). The theme of life over death parallels the Madres' claims; they recall their children as "full of dreams" while they continue to expand their fight for social justice.

In these cultural objects, we can see the Madres as gatekeepers to historical memory, safeguarding the representation of the past by people who seek their approval. One example is the provocative rocker Charly García, who planned to throw life-size dolls into the Rio de la Plata as a backdrop to his performance at a 1999 rock festival in order to commemorate the military's 'flights of death'(when planes dropped drugged victims into the river). The Madres urged him not to do the reenactment and, in the end, García acquiesced.

The Madres then joined García onstage at his concert, an event captured in a *La Nación* photo (Ramos, 1999). Because concertgoers and newsreaders likely would have been familiar with the preceding scandal, the Madres' presence onstage is an act easily interpreted. It exemplifies how the interpretive environment mediates between cultural object (the concert), producer (García), and consumer (concertgoers). This was a festival in a massive stadium: a setting that draws our attention to myriad institutional and organizational actors.



Fig. 1: Untitled photo by Miguel Acevedo Riú (*La Nación*, 8 May 1999). García embraces the Madres; an emotional moment in a show that is now a live album

The Madres also encourage the next generation of activists to emulate their sons and daughters. They promote up-and-coming artist-activists who embrace the Madres' expanded claims. For example, during their 'Recital against the War' they worked with artists, unions, and other human rights groups to oppose the Iraqi invasion. A more unusual collaboration was in a theater performance of *Beauty and the Beast*, where Madres in *pañuelos* appeared on stage in a bizarre lineup with Disney characters from the show. Proceeds went to one Madres organization and the article suggests children in the audience might ask, "Who were those ladies with white headscarves?" (Molero, 1999), introducing the Madres' claims to a new generation.

When showing approval by attending and appearing on stage, the Madres may have less control over artistic content or the use of their image than when they are producers, but they do have some. In many institutional environments—including the film, TV, and music industries—others' help is necessary. By utilizing contemporary forms to connect with diverse audiences, producers, and institutions, the Madres expand their visibility via objects they themselves could not create alone.

#### **Non-Madres produced objects: On a pedestal or under fire?**

Production separate from the Madres depicts them in a range of ways, from exalting them, to sketching them as ambient references, to parodying them. The most common forms are music (29.7 percent), visual media (26.6 percent), and theatre (13.3 percent). Non-Madres produced cultural objects primarily reach domestic audiences (75.0 percent), but mixed audiences are also common (21.1 percent).

Many of these cultural objects portray the Madres as historic heroes. The news articles reported plays staged around the world where actors played Madres. Most rely on familiar themes from the Madres activism in the dictatorship, and symbols like the *pañuelo* and *ronda* (march around the Plaza). The most famous example is Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*, a 1986 remake of the Greek tragedy where the title character—who wears a white headscarf—is mocked and trapped as she tries to challenge injustice and violence. Figurative depictions of the *ronda* also appear in a bicentennial parade float performance by Teatro Bruta where a circle of women wearing glowing headscarves walked under rain. A more elaborated representation is Luis Bacalov's opera *Estaba la Madre*, staged in Buenos Aires in 2004 and 2007. The female lead is a dictatorship-era Madre and the opera presents a nearly religious depiction of her sacrifice and desperation. The tone of these pieces, while reverential, nonetheless implies a rooted vision of the past. One creator, Ana Woolf, whose work *Semillas de memoria* depicts scenes of torture, admitted that some Madres asked why she focused on "death and funerals, not life and the future" (Varley, 2009), suggesting that the Madres had moved on from this paradigm and challenged Woolf's focus on the past.

Some celebrations of the Madres are abstract or oblique. We see this most vividly in songs dedicated to the Madres' legacy and struggle. Both Sting and U2 have written songs about mothers of disappeared people and have referenced the Madres on stage during massive concerts in Argentina, but the cultural objects at hand (songs, albums, concerts) were not produced in collaboration with the Madres. In fact, U2's Bono and Sting have both said that their songs are about other groups of mothers: in an interview with *La Nación*, Bono discusses the universal connection between such group, and his desire that the Madres de Plaza de Mayo accept his song as representative of their work (Franco, 1997).

Films also emphasize the Madres' historical role. Over the last decade, there has been a boom in Madres-related film production, due in large part to increasing availability of digital cameras, decreasing production costs, more interest in cinema, and better federal funding for film projects. Documentaries exploring the 30-year commemorations in 2006-2010 are prominent. For example, in the 2007 documentary, *Mundial 78: verdad o mentira*, individual Madres comment on Argentina's hypocrisy as hosts of the World Cup in 1978, when the Junta disappeared thousands while the populace was distracted (even as Swedish and Dutch players supported the Madres in the Plaza). In this and other documentaries, the Madres are depicted in historic terms, but not as part of the present.



Fig. 2: *La primera ronda de las Madres en la Plaza*, 1977 by Diego Parés

Some images or symbols invite myriad interpretations. Visual artists often rely on the *pañuelo* motif, depicting headscarves or female figures wearing them to signal the Madres. The *pañuelo* appears in *Primera Ronda* (1977), by cartoonist Diego Parés, a dark and ominous scene of the Plaza de Mayo with bright white *pañuelos* that seem to float (see Figure 3). Another example is a series of works by the painter Jorgela Agarañaraz based on historical photos of the Madres, some with added metaphoric references, such as skeletal dinosaurs representing the dictatorship. Sometimes, Madres appear as part of the urban landscape. In the 2002 film *Luca vive*, they are glimpsed in the Plaza as the protagonist returns home on “un jueves cualquiera” (any old Thursday—the day of the *ronda*). This shorthand establishes Buenos Aires just as a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower triggers Paris. More interpretive interaction was possible with life-sized sculptures temporarily erected on the street for the Bicentennial. In these works, the Madres (in seventies attire) are literally frozen in time. For better or worse, passersby interacted with the sculptures, touching them and making gestures as they snapped photos (see Figure 4). This sort of interaction might help the audience feel closer to the Madres, quite literally, but the Madres have no control over how their images—representations of their bodies—are treated or used.



Fig. 3: Untitled photo by Aníbal Greco, published in *La Nación*, 2010. Statues of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, a fundamental symbol in the bicentennial festivities.

While still celebrating the Madres, some artists bring them forward in time. In the three-dimensional work *Pampa mía*, by Sol Storni, a mounted deerskin painted with hieroglyphics depicts the Madres with *pañuelos*, people being shot, and everyday scenes from Argentina, what the artist calls ‘a graphic chronicle’ that places

the Madres side by side with *cacerolazos*, the pot-and-pan protests that emerged in 2001 during Argentina's economic crisis. The work depicts the contemporary Madres and connects them to expanded claims. Like this work, Spanish-speaking singers are most likely to include references to the Madres' continued struggle. In the 1998 song by Spaniard Ismael Serrano, 'A las madres de mayo,' Serrano sings of a disappeared son "en mis luchas y me acompaña/ entre las llamas de cada nueva batalla." Serrano quotes Madres' slogans: "Guían mis manos sus manos fuertes,/ hacia el futuro, hasta la victoria siempre." Singer León Gieco, a frequent collaborator, depicts the Madres as active saints. He quotes from Madres lexicon in his 2002 song 'Las Madres del Amor': "pariendo mucha más vida." In 'Madres,' by Los Cabelleros de la Quema, the imagery is classic, discussing the *ronda*, *pañuelos* and memory. A more humanizing reference is to the Madres' "ovarios de hierro" (ovaries of iron, a play on slang linking testicles and strength), but again the Madres are placed in a specific space (the Plaza) and time (the weekly *ronda*).



Fig. 4: Untitled photo from the Latino América fashion show at the Salón Internacional de la Moda de Madrid, IFEMA 2007. Black, Dior-style, and asymmetries with volume

All of these works stand in contrast with the commercial use of *pañuelo* symbols. This was rare in our sample of cultural objects, but quite flagrant in an example by Christian Dior models in Spain's 2007 fashion festival by Salón Internacional de la Moda de Madrid—an obvious commercialization of the symbol (see Figure 5). By dressing models in black couture dresses and white headscarves, the fashion elite add historical shock value to their runway show in a consumer context that stands in striking contrast with the aging bodies of the actual activists. After all, Madres are women who march (rather than strut) each week in the Plaza in the name of social justice. While this example serves as another shorthand way to reference Argentina, it appears in a commercial context that cheapens historical and contemporary claims. While it seems to endorse democracy and protest, it coopts the Madres symbol as an advertisement.

Such cooptation and commercialization of the Madres' message can skew their images and potentially hinder continued cultural transmission. A recent television parody demonstrates the potential harm of coopting the Madres' image. Throughout 2009 and 2010, the late-night television show 'Un mundo perfecto' used a representation of de Bonafini as a recurring character in sketches about topics from soccer to film criticism. Each sketch involves a screenshot of de Bonafini, altered to make it seem as if she were speaking, and a crude imitation of her voice and verbal style. In one of the most outlandish instances, host Roberto Pettinato and actress Moira Casán mock the Madres and de Bonafini. While the screenshot of Hebe yells "¡Putal!" at Casán's vulgar gestures, Casán and Pettinato suggest that Hebe should remove her *pañuelo*. De Bonafini's response was to sue for libel, calling the *pañuelo* sacred, a lawsuit she ultimately lost. This case shows the danger of being a public icon: your image can be manipulated and mocked. As a recognizable figure, de Bonafini's image morphed into a vulgar artistic representation before a huge TV audience.

On a basic level, the widespread creation of cultural objects by non-Madres producers suggests a deeply embedded cultural significance that reflects the Madres' past and present claims. At the same time, when cultural production is out of the Madres' hands, there is little that they can do to control interpretation. Cooptation of their message can undermine both historical and contemporary significance in their own production and collaborative work. Commercialization becomes a threat to continued relevance as new institutions demonstrate limited understanding of the Madres' role in Argentine society. In some cases, it may be hard to correct a misrepresentation spread in institutional environments like the marketplace, where Madres have less voice. In short, while non-Madres production reflects public perception of the Madres and their cultural transmission, it can intervene by obstructing or obscuring their expanded claims.

## Conclusion

Our research examines an important yet neglected mechanism by which movement relevance can be maintained: cultural transmission. The Madres are part of Argentina's cultural landscape, not just as political activists but also as cultural actors and symbols. Each year, *La Nación* articles referenced newly created cultural objects, and we found that these references account for a significant portion of all articles over the fifteen years studied. This period represents only part of a history that extends back to the dictatorship. We

found that when the Madres were producers, they utilized new media to broaden claims and maintain influence. When they collaborated or approved, they fostered new artistic dialogues, though they tended to appear in traditional ways.

Perhaps, it is most interesting to consider the potential for criticism or misrepresentation of the Madres' expanded claims when the message is out of their control. Institutional environments that are less open to the Madres—and to activists more generally—are the mainstream film, TV and music industries. Along with the consumerist/capitalist marketplace, these industries are riskier in terms of opening the Madres to critique and misrepresentation. The danger of parody or misappropriation shows the extreme side of how symbolic environments operate: messages can be twisted and mocked. Though this was rare in our study, it may be common in other movements. Paradoxically, ridicule may bring some support to activists if others defend them. For example, when de Bonafini lost the 'Un Mundo Perfecto' defamation lawsuit, news programs chided Pettinato and suggested he had been mean-spirited to pick on the Madres. Ridicule and critique may be more or less damaging, depending on interpretive contexts—how audiences interpret and respond to cultural objects. Thus, we must recognize the material and performative aspects of culture, the interpretive and institutional contexts in which cultural objects arise, and the processes by which they are created and consumed. To the extent that intermediaries control how activist producers' messages reach consumers, they can enable or constrain mobilization. As this case illustrates, bureaucratic structures sometimes get involved in this process.

In Argentina, and elsewhere, many activists have used cultural production to exercise greater control in how they communicate (Dodaro, 2009, 239). The Madres are able to produce their own cultural objects because they have employed a strategy of controlling institutional spaces: from publishing venues and La Voz de las Madres Radio to the Universidad de las Madres, 'Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos' (ECUNI, a cultural center), and their YouTube station. The Madres create platforms where they can disseminate their messages and build bridges between cultural actors. By collaborating with allies, they can access broader institutional settings like galleries, cultural centers, and museums that attract diverse audiences, and established media venues like the newspaper *Página/12* and even *La Nación*. While the majority of non-Madres objects we studied illustrate that the interpretive environment is one where Madres are static icons, placed on a pedestal and frozen in history, Madres production allows them to make contemporary claims. It is when Madres have solo or (sometimes) collaborative control over production that they are dynamic agents who invite and even challenge audiences to connect past, present and future in demands for both memory and justice.

Moreover, while some cultural objects are ephemeral in nature, many have the potential to appear and re-appear for many years to come, especially given the increasing use of the Internet to store and share art. The longevity of objects referencing the Madres is one avenue by which the Madres' message can continue into the future, even as the Madres themselves age and die. How they leverage collaboration and approval now is critical for how we will remember them later.

Finally, while most movements do not have the recognition that the Madres maintain in Argentina, this case can help us to understand how activists affect the arts, and how art influences movements. Activists and movements inspire people who create cultural objects, but artists have not received sufficient attention as movement allies or audiences. Whether or not they collaborate with movement actors, artists and other producers can create work that magnifies and reproduces movement claims. They can bring awareness about claims to new audiences, and can have an impact on how others perceive and receive activists. The effect of these activities is mediated through the institutional contexts in which cultural objects are made accessible to the public. Regardless of such mediation, cultural objects provide a way for movements like the Madres to amplify, echo, and extend their messages. As individual Madres age and even as they die, this cultural form of amplification will continue to help maintain the relevance of their movement and its legacy for Argentina and the world.

## Notes

- 1** While they formed as one, Madres groups split in 1986 into the Línea Fundadora and the Asociación.
- 2** The sample excludes editorials, letters to the editor, and Sunday magazine articles.
- 3** Items coded 'no producer' were abstract statements in which Madres were mentioned without a specific object.

4 In some cases, the object's original creation was years before the article (e.g., a poem that was remembered).

5 Additional crosstabs were run between Producer Identity and eight variables that isolate each form. These reveal Chi-Square significance for music, fine arts, literature and radio.

6 Additional crosstabs were also run between Artist National Identity and eight variables that isolate each form. These reveal Chi-Square significance for music, visual media, other and radio.

## References

Adams, J. (2001). The Makings of Political Art. *Qualitative Sociology*, 24(3), 311-348.

Adams, J. (2002). Art in Social Movements: Shantytown Women's Protest in Pinochet's Chile. *Sociological Forum*. 17.1 (2002): 21-56.

Adams, J. (2006). When Art Loses its Sting: The Evolution of Protest Art in Authoritarian Contexts. *Sociological Perspectives*, 48(40), 531-58.

Bacalov, L. (2004). Estaba la madre. Buenos Aires.

Bonafini, H. de (1999). Discurso de Hebe de Bonafini. On *¡Ni un paso atrás!* CD. Buenos Aires: Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

Bonner, M.D. (2007). *Sustaining Human Rights: Women and Argentina Human Rights Organizations*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press.

Borland, Elizabeth. 2006. "The Mature Resistance of Argentina's Madres de Plaza de Mayo." Pp. 115-130 in *Latin American Social Movements: Globalization, Democratization, and Transnational Networks*, edited by Hank Johnston and Paul D. Almeida. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.

Bosco, F.J. (2001). Place, Space, Networks, and the Sustainability of Collective Action: The Madres de Plaza de Mayo. *Global Networks*, 1(4), 307-329.

Bosco, F.J. (2006). The Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights' Activism: Embeddedness, Emotions, and Social Movements. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 96(2), 342-365.

Bouvard, M.G. (1994). *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Madres of the Plaza de Mayo*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Casanovas, L. (2010, December 3). Talleres de cocina y cultura del Bicentenario. *La Nación*. Retrieved from <http://www.laNación.com.ar>

Coscia, J. (Director). (2002). *Luca vive [Motion picture]*. Argentina: SBP.

Dodaro, C. (2009). El videoactivismo. Experiencias de resistencia cultural y política en la Argentina de los años noventa. *Palabra Clave*, 12(2), 235-244.

Edelman, M. (1995). *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press.

Egan, G. & Cordella, M. (2006). Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo: Prensa, ideología y resistencia. *Spanish in Context* 3(2), 255-271.

Foss, K.A. & Domenici, K.L. (2001). Haunting Argentina: Synecdoche in the Protests of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87.3 (2001): 237-258.

Franco, A. (1997, November 23). 'Todos somos voyeurs.' *La Nación*. Retrieved from

<http://www.laNación.com.ar>

Gambaro, G. (1986). *Antígona furiosa*. In *Teatro 3*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor.

Gieco, L. (2002). *Las Madres del amor*. On *Bandidos rurales* [CD]. Buenos Aires: EMI.

Howald, C & Hartmann, Y.L. (2007). La reivindicación de verdad y justicia en Argentina. ¿Una primavera democrática? *Revista Jurídica de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*. 16, 111-132.

INDEC [Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de la Republica Argentina]. (2010). Circulación neta de diarios. Total del país. Años 2007-2009. Buenos Aires: INDEC.

Klein, E. (2011). Spectacular Citizenships: Staging Latina Resistance Through Urban Performances of Pain. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 32(1),102-124.

Lee, C. W., & Lingo, E. L. (2011). The "Got Art?" Paradox: Questioning the Value of Art in Collective Action. *Poetics*, 39(4), 316-335.

Madres de la Plaza. (2008, January 5) Episode 1. TV Pública, Buenos Aires. [Television program].

Madres de la Plaza. (2011, July 11) Episode 166. TV Pública, Buenos Aires [Television program].

Milbrandt, M.K. (2010). Understanding the Role of Art in Social Movements and Transformation." *Journal of Art for Life* 1(1), 7-18.

Molero, M. (1999, March 25). Un musical solidario. *La Nación*. Retrieved from <http://www.lanacion.com.ar>

Noble, A. (2008). Travelling Theories of Family Photography and the Material Culture of Human Rights in Latin America. *Journal of Romance Studies*, 8(1), 43-59.

Parés, D. (1997). *Primera ronda*. 1997. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Plaza, G. (2006, September 4). Las dos orillas de la canción. *La Nación*. Retrieved from <http://www.laNación.com.ar>

Ramos, S. (1999, May 8). Charly García, irónico y testimonial. *La Nación*. Retrieved from <http://www.laNación.com>

Reed, T.V. (2005). *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press.

Rémoli, C. (Director). (2007). *Mundial 78: Verdad o mentira* [Documentary]. Argentina.

Roscigno, V.J. and Danaher, W.F. (2004). *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1943*. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press.

Schirmer, J. (1994). Body Politic within National-Security States. In J. Boyarin (Ed.), *Remapping memory: The politics of timespace* (pp. 185-220). Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press.

Serrano, I. (1998). A las Madres de Mayo. On *La memoria de los peces* [CD]. Madrid: Sonoland.

Seselovsky, A. (2010, February). El ama de casa que se hizo guerrera. *Rolling Stone Argentina*, 143.

Smith, J., McCarthy, J., McPhail, C., & Augustin, B. (2001). From Protest to Agenda-Building: Description Bias in Media Coverage of Protest Events in Washington, D.C. *Social Forces*, 79(4), 1397-1423.

Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51, 273-286.

Storni, Sol. n.d. *Pampa mía*. Retrieved from <http://www.solstorni.com>

Thornton, S.W. (2000). Grief Transformed: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 41(4), 279-287.

Varley, J. (2009). Semillas de memoria. Retrieved from <http://www.anawoolf.com.ar>

Williams, R.H. (1996). Introduction: The Sociology of Culture and the Sociology of Religion. *Sociology of Religion*, 57, 1-5.