

**On the Madres del Plaza de Mayo: Argentina's mothers of the disappeared:
from Diana Taylor: *The DNA of Performance*.**

The spectacle of elderly women in white head scarves carrying huge placards with photo IDs of their missing children has become an international icon of human rights and women's resistance movements. By turning their "interrupted mourning process" into "one of the most visible political discourses of resistance to terror" (Suárez-Orozco 1991:491) the Abuelas and Madres introduced a model of trauma-driven performance protest.

Each Thursday afternoon, for the past 25 years, the women have met in Plaza de Mayo to repeat their show of loss and political resolve. At first, at the height of the military violence, 14 women walked around the Plaza two-by-two, arm-in-arm, to avoid prohibitions against public meetings. Though ignored by the dictatorship, the women's idea of meeting in the square caught on throughout the country. Before long, hundreds of women from around Argentina converged in the Plaza de Mayo in spite of the increasing military violence directed against them (see Taylor 1997:186-189). Ritualistically, they walked around this square, located in the heart of Argentina's political and financial center. Turning their bodies into billboards, they used them as conduits of memory. They literally wore the photo IDs that had been erased from official archives.

Week after week in the Plaza de Mayo, the Madres accused the military of disappearing their children and demanded that they be returned alive (aparicio'n con vida). After the worst moment of military violence passed, Abuelas and Madres started carrying a huge banner in front of them as they walked around the Plaza. With the return to democracy in 1983, they began to accuse the new government of granting impunity to the criminals.

Using loudspeakers, they continued to bring charges, naming their children and naming those responsible for abducting them. They called the Plaza their own, and inscribed their emblematic scarves in white paint

around the perimeter. Even now, they continue their condemnation of the government's complacency in regard to the human rights abuses committed during the Dirty War. Otro gobierno, misma impunidad means "different government, same impunity." Each claim has been backed by performative evidence—the placards with the photo IDs, the list of atrocities, the identity of repressors.

Much as the Abuelas relied on DNA testing to confirm the lineages broken by the military, they and the Madres continue to use photo IDs of their missing children as yet another way to establish "truth" and lineage. This representational practice of linking the scientific and performative claim is what I call the "DNA of performance." What does the performative proof accomplish that the scientific cannot achieve on its own? How does this representational practice lay a foundation for movements that will come after it?

DNA functions as a biological "archive" of sorts, storing and transmitting the codes that mark the specificity of our existence both as a species and as individuals. Yet it also belongs to the human-made archive, forensic or otherwise. This human-made archive maintains what is perceived as a lasting core—records, documents, photographs, literary texts, police files, fingerprint and DNA evidence, digital materials, archaeological remains, bones—supposedly resistant to change and political manipulation. What changes, over time, the archive maintains, is the value, relevance, or meaning of the remains—how they get interpreted, even embodied.

The scientific, archival "evidence" of DNA offered by the Abuelas was clearly central to their strategy of tracing their loved ones while accusing the military of their disappearance. Testimonial transfers and performance protest, on the other hand, are two forms of expressive social behavior that belong to the discursive workings of what I have called the "repertoire." The repertoire stores and enacts "embodied" memory—the traumatic or cathartic "shudder," gestures, orality movement, dance, song—in short, all those acts usually thought of as "live,"

ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge. The embodied experience and transmission of traumatic memory—the interactions among people in the here and now—make a difference in the way that knowledge is transmitted and incorporated. The type of interaction might range from the individual (one-on-one psychoanalytic session) to the group or state level (demonstrations, human rights trials).

The embodied performative dimension of these protests was as important as the scientific evidence because it brought attention to the national tragedy in the first place. Abuelas and Madres performed the proof. On a state level, human rights trials and commissions, such as Argentina's National Commission on the Disappeared (which issued *Nunca Más* [1986] to report its findings) or South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, understand the importance of live hearings in making citizens feel like co-owners of the country's traumatic past. In-between and overlapping systems of knowledge and memory constitute a vast spectrum that might combine the workings of the "permanent" and the "ephemeral" in different ways. Each system of containing and transmitting knowledge exceeds the limitations of the other. The "live" can never be contained in the "archive"; the archive endures beyond the limits of the live.