

The Mothers and Their Different Forms of Waiting: Reflections on the "Madwomen" of Plaza de Mayo*

[English Version]

Las Madres y sus esperas. Reflexiones a propósito de las «locas» de Plaza de Mayo

As mães e suas esperas. Reflexões a propósito das "loucas" da Plaza de Mayo

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Abstract

Objective: To explain the emotions experienced by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo as they waited for their children who had been detained or disappeared by the Argentine civil-ecclesiastical-military dictatorship (1976-1983). **Methodology:** Qualitative methodologies—such as discourse and documentary analysis—are used to provide insights for reconstructing the Mothers' perceptions regarding the abduction of their children. This framework relies on political, legislative, and organizational indicators as essential resources to interpret the reactions elicited by this (un)expected wait. **Discussion:** The article critically examines denialist perspectives grounded in the so-called "theory of the two demons," which equates crimes committed by state terrorism with acts of violence carried out by guerrilla organizations. **Results:** The findings make tracing an evolving trajectory within those experiences of waiting possible. This involves (and converges in) the categories referred to here as "bifurcated

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waiting." **Conclusions:** The research sheds light on aspects of the emotional fabric, always collectively constructed, that have shaped and continue to shape the Mothers' demands, synthesized in the slogans "appearance alive" and "trial and punishment for the guilty."

Keywords: Mothers of Plaza de Mayo; madwomen of Plaza de Mayo; Argentine dictatorship; detained-disappeared (obtained from the Argentine History Thesaurus).

Resumen

Objetivo: elucidar emociones experimentadas por las Madres de Plaza de Mayo ante la espera de sus hijos detenidos-desaparecidos a manos de la dictadura cívico-ecclesiástico-militar argentina (1976-1983). **Metodología:** se hace uso de metodologías cualitativas—como el análisis discursivo y documental— con el fin de aportar insumos para reconstruir las percepciones de las Madres ante el secuestro de sus vástagos. En este marco, se apoya en indicadores de índole política, legislativa y organizacional en cuanto recursos imprescindibles para interpretar las reacciones suscitadas ante esa (des)esperada espera. **Discusión:** se discute con miradas de sesgo negacionista amparadas en la denominada «teoría de los dos demonios», mediante la cual se homologan los delitos cometidos por el terrorismo de Estado a los actos de violencia ejercidos por organizaciones guerrilleras. **Resultados:** los resultados obtenidos permiten trazar un recorrido evolutivo en el marco de esas esperas que involucran (y confluyen en) las categorías aquí denominadas «esperas bifurcadas». **Conclusiones:** la investigación desbroza aspectos de la trama de sentires (construidos siempre desde lo colectivo) que marcaron y marcan hasta hoy los reclamos de las Madres, los cuales son sintetizados en las consignas de «aparición con vida» y «juicio y castigo a los culpables».

Palabras clave: Madres de Plaza de Mayo; locas de la Plaza de Mayo; dictadura argentina; detenidos desaparecidos (obtenidos del Tesoro de Historia Argentina).

Resumo

Objetivo: elucidar as emoções vivenciadas pelas Mães da Plaza de Mayo diante da espera por seus filhos detidos-desaparecidos pelas mãos da ditadura cívico-ecclesiástico-militar argentina (1976–1983). **Metodologia:** utilizam-se metodologias qualitativas—como a análise discursiva e documental— com o objetivo de fornecer subsídios para reconstruir as percepções das Mães diante do sequestro de seus filhos. Nesse contexto, apoia-se em indicadores de natureza política, legislativa e organizacional

como recursos imprescindíveis para interpretar as reações suscitadas diante dessa (des)esperada espera. **Discussão:** discute-se com perspectivas de viés negacionista amparadas na denominada “teoria dos dois demônios”, por meio da qual se equiparam os crimes cometidos pelo terrorismo de Estado aos atos de violência praticados por organizações guerrilheiras. **Resultados:** os resultados obtidos permitem traçar um percurso evolutivo no âmbito dessas esperas, que envolvem (e convergem em) as categorias aqui denominadas “esperas bifurcadas”. **Conclusões:** a pesquisa desvela aspectos da trama de sentimentos (sempre construídos a partir do coletivo) que marcaram e ainda marcam os reclamos das Mães, os quais se sintetizam nas consignas de “aparição com vida” e “julgamento e punição dos culpados”.

Palavras chaves: Mães da Plaza de Mayo; loucas da Plaza de Mayo; ditadura argentina; detidos-desaparecidos (obtidos do Tesouro de História Argentina).

Introduction: From the Waiting of Mothers to the Different Forms of Waiting of the "Mothers"

The waiting of mothers (lowercase), that is, of any mother, begins with pregnancy, or before, and carries a significant cultural imprint associated with gendered perspectives. This form of waiting, in its various nuances, has been widely addressed by historiography and sociology in key, well-known works. Furthermore, it cannot be labeled a priori as either desired and joyful or undesired and sorrowful, nor should it be associated with the fulfillment of any hypothetical role imposed on women. It is a type of waiting that, in many cases, gives rise to conflicting feelings, oscillating between the desire for and the fear of pregnancy, childbirth, and the act of giving birth itself, as a literal detachment from the maternal body, to the decision to either continue or interrupt the pregnancy: that is, to abruptly end that wait. There is also another (perhaps delayed?) form of waiting that begins after the child is born, marking the end of that so-called sweet wait. This second type of waiting is also marked by contrasting emotions, ranging from the immense joy of meeting, touching, and feeling the newborn, to the anxiety over the child's health and future, the real, no longer idealized, child.

However, beyond these relatively expected forms of waiting, Argentina experienced in the 1970s and 1980s a form of waiting that could be called "unexpected." Specifically, this refers to the experience of the Mothers (now capitalized) of Plaza de Mayo. This designation includes all mothers of children who were detained-disappeared in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, regardless of whether they were institutionally affiliated with the organization Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The term is used here because of the global recognition it has attained. These women, mockingly referred to as the "madwomen of the Plaza" by the genocidal regime that seized power on March 24, 1976, and held it for seven long years, had adult children who were kidnapped and "disappeared" by the dictatorship led by a Military Junta. This Junta was headed by Jorge Rafael Videla (representing the Army), with Emilio Eduardo Massera (of the Navy) and Orlando Ramón Agosti (of the Air Force) serving as his principal collaborators. These women became victims of a form of dispossession orchestrated by an authoritarian regime that, by literally taking their children from their homes, turned their lives into an open question. In this context, the contributions of Critical Theory from the Frankfurt School may be relevant, as they offer insights into the conditions under which political domination emerges and legitimizes itself, particularly the dynamic between those who make others wait and those who are forced to wait (and, most importantly, what is being waited for) under dictatorial regimes.

The Mothers made their first public appearance on April 30, 1977, with an iconic march in Plaza de Mayo. Their original goal was to secure an audience with Videla, which led them to gather in the Plaza and stage a peaceful demonstration, demanding to know the whereabouts of their children. The decision to meet there was made while a group of 14 mothers of detained or disappeared individuals was waiting to speak with the secretary of the military vicar at the Metropolitan Curia of Buenos Aires. The connections and support between the upper ranks of the Argentine Catholic Church and the military regime are well documented.¹ In that context, then unknown to many of the Mothers, Azucena Villaflor proposed that they cross the street and gather in Plaza de Mayo, reasoning that if they were seen by the *de facto* president, they might finally be heard. Thus, faced with a wait that seemed infinite, the Mothers walked to the Plaza and stood in front of the main entrance of the Casa Rosada, the seat of Argentina's national government. However, due to the authoritarian order enforced under the State of Siege declared that same March, police ordered them to disperse, instructing them to "keep walking." And so they did. They walked in pairs, the maximum number allowed under the emergency legislation, and began to circle the May Pyramid in silent protest, demanding answers from the government about their missing children. Their physical movement also served as a symbol of the real power of a society embodied in their presence. It questioned the patriarchal authority that claimed the right to regulate life and death. The white headscarves they wore, fashioned from baby diapers, symbolized motherhood. Their Thursday marches came to represent, among other things, resistance to the regime's technology of death: the enforced disappearance of their children.

Six months later, a mother, who was also a grandmother, stepped away from the circle and asked whether any of the others were also searching for a grandchild or had a pregnant daughter or daughter-in-law. Her timely question prompted twelve women to organize a collective effort to search for their grandchildren, many of whom had been born in clandestine detention centers. The following Saturday, October 22, 1977, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo held their first meeting and began a struggle that continues to this day (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Association, 2025).

The subversive nature of the Mothers' activism (and of the Grandmothers, as "twice-mothers") is encapsulated in the phrase, "we were birthed by our children." Viewed from a historical distance, this formulation highlights how the

1 Among the extensive bibliographies on the subject, the following works are worth mentioning: Mignone (1986), Obregón (2005), Mallimaci (2015), and Rupflin (2016), to name just a few recommended texts. Additionally, Catoggio (2016) highlights the disappearance of Catholics associated with dissenting clergy groups.

associations between women, mothers, childbirth, diapers, babies, and children ensured the continuity of a demand that lacked any prior symbolism connected to political protest (Funes, 2017, p. 199).

This waiting was marked by a clear, legitimate, and precise demand: to know the fate of their children, where they were, whether they were cold, and ultimately, whether they were still alive. In other words, it was a demand to stop waiting. Any analysis of the Mothers' different forms of waiting must take into account that they embodied a distinct socialization of motherhood, shifting from being the mother of one, two, or several specific children to becoming mothers of all the disappeared.² They transcended biological bonds by grounding their demands in political principles, which became key symbols of resistance to tyranny and defining features of both national and international opposition to the dictatorship. The Mothers thus emerged as a new political subject (Gorini, 2015, pp. 19-21).

This form of socialized motherhood, embodied by the Mothers, became a foundational principle that guided their actions. These women embraced the suffering of all victims of political violence, as reflected in the powerful words of Hebe de Bonafini, co-founder (1977) and long-time president (from 1979 until her death in 2022) of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.³ In an interview at the National University of General San Martín (Argentina), Bonafini recalled that the Mothers were accused of being mothers of terrorists and terrorist mothers. Faced with the fear provoked by such accusations, each responded individually, saying things like: "my son did nothing," "he was taken because of a friend," "because of his wife," or "because of his cousin." One day, they realized the need to become mothers of all. They stopped embroidering their children's names on the white headscarves and no longer carried photos labeled with names. When asked whether the missing person was their child, they answered: "Yes, we are the mothers of 30,000" (Di Marco, 2025, p. 1).

Indeed, the Mothers quickly understood that together they were more. Not simply in a numerical sense, but as a collective force that transformed fear into strength and hope. This socialization of motherhood gave rise to a collective identity through which they also shared their different forms of waiting. They wove their intertwined and indistinct emotions into a unified narrative expressed through two powerful slogans: "appearance alive" and "trial and punishment for the guilty." These slogans have become defining markers of Argentina's political

2 This statement is expressed on multiple occasions and can be seen in the documentary titled *Todos son mis hijos* (Soto & Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 2016).

3 It should be noted that by 1986, the Mothers had split into two groups: the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the larger of the two, which continued to be led by Bonafini; and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Founding Line.

history in recent decades and embody a fundamental ethical principle central to human rights: life must not be violated for any reason of state. These slogans also express the raw desire born from a profoundly painful wait (Pecheny, 2015, pp. 213-214).

Waiting, Between Loss and *Despair/Hope*

“Hope,” “waiting,” “hopelessness,” and “despair” are terms that dwell in the depths of the human psyche and are simultaneously tied to a wide range of situations (traumatic or not) experienced by individuals.⁴ Hope, connected to the very core of religion, also involves the expectations that the Mothers had of the Church and, more specifically, of the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Rupflin, 2019). Although neither the Mothers nor their children constituted a homogeneous group in religious terms, the military government believed they posed a threat to its goal of restoring the so-called “Catholic nation” (Rupflin, 2019, p. 125).

The concept of “waiting” involves an infinitely broad spectrum of possibilities and may be evaluated either positively or negatively. Such judgment, usually made retrospectively, is often linked to the outcome of that wait. Whether it be waiting for a partner, a child, state authorization to access life-saving medication, or an organ transplant, or even waiting for a dignified death through euthanasia, all of these are just a few examples among many. Yet, these diverse experiences share a commonality: they are all, in essence, forms of waiting, regardless of the emotional or moral weight they carry.

The waiting experienced by the Mothers inevitably encompassed a range of conflicting emotions. In effect, the emotions (or affects, in line with a well-established historiographic debate) (Zaragoza, 2013) associated with all forms of waiting make them context-dependent and, at the same time, shaped by gender. The same cultural forces that often conflate sex with gender and gender with socially imposed roles also influence the expression of emotions, typically manifested differently in women and men, particularly when they act as or identify as mothers and fathers. This leads to a concept embedded in dominant patriarchal culture: that a woman becomes a mother from the moment of gestation, while a man becomes a father through a kind of psychological adoption that occurs after birth. Without resorting to deterministic assumptions, this helps explain the emotional distance often observed between their most primal responses. It also sheds light on the absence of a parallel group of

⁴ For insights into the relationship between trauma, tragedy, and religion, though focused on another event in Argentine history, see: Korstanje (2013).

"Fathers of Plaza de Mayo." This is not to say that the fathers were unaffected by the disappearance of their children, but rather to highlight the emotional differences reinforced by our culture. Moreover—as Hebe de Bonafini once noted—men were perceived as unable to sustain the mission that served as the unifying force among the Mothers. For the Mothers, their children were above race, religion, and politics, whereas the fathers often clashed over more circumstantial matters, which ultimately led to requests that they no longer attend the meetings (Di Marco, 2025, p. 5).

Revisiting Butler's reflections, beyond the pandemic context in which they were originally framed, the Mothers can be seen to embody a way of living that recognizes the inherent value of each individual life, regardless of its market value. They affirm that the flourishing of each person occurs not only for oneself but for the collective (Butler, 2022, p. 10). This belief forms the basis of the socialization of motherhood, as expressed through the reconstruction of their detained-disappeared children as children of all.

However, acknowledging that the comparison between losing a child due to the pandemic (or illness or accident) and losing a child to state-sponsored disappearance as not entirely equivalent is important. Indeed, a key difference between the pandemic reality analyzed by Butler and the political reality brought about by the dictatorship lies in the fact that, in the former, no social, ideological, or sexual category was guaranteed absolute immunity (Butler, 2022, p. 13); whereas in the latter, the disappeared generally shared the ambiguous category of "otherness." This was an undefined category from which, according to the regime's discourse, "decent people" needed to be immunized.⁵ Nevertheless, as in the pandemic, the Mothers' experiences were characterized by emotional waves, peaks and troughs, related phenomenologically to hope and despair.

The obvious question—what did and do these women of the Plaza expect?—triggers a series of unavoidable reflections when attempting to outline their emotional history. Their different forms of waiting were permeated by feelings anchored in the barren hope of recovering their children alive, but also by others rooted in a different register: the pursuit of justice and punishment for those responsible. There is an implicit fading of hope for their children's survival, for once again, time seemed to favor the repressors.

The powerful global impact of these "madwomen" reached universal proportions, even though their different forms of waiting were rooted in a microworld located in the deep south of the Global South, and within it, an even smaller and statistically insignificant space: the "otherness" within Argentina.

5 The notion of 'immunity,' originating in the life sciences, refers to the strengthening of an organism's immune process to protect itself against external agents that may threaten the individual's life or health. Its transposition into the realm of biopolitics was developed by Roberto Esposito (2005, 2009).

This context invites a microhistorical reading to unearth both their past and present emotions. Thus, in attempting to offer a possible response to Butler's question: What kind of world is this? Reconstructing part of the world (or more precisely, the microworld) that enabled the disappearance of people, and, in parallel, the even smaller world that experienced that disappearance firsthand becomes relevant. For the Mothers, as subjects who wait, the pain of loss is sometimes intertwined with a kind of *despair/hope*. This emerges from the premise that "grief moves between life and the world, between the singular and irreversible event of loss and a world now rendered unimaginable, immersed in grief" (Butler, 2022, p. 36).

The world, in its supposed universality, falls short of capturing the tragic reality of the Mothers. Beyond the common waiting experienced by all mothers, the waiting endured by these Mothers is marked by unique features: the forced disappearance of their children, the uncertainty surrounding their fate, the silence of the perpetrators, and the torment of questions left unanswered, in short, the epistemic inconsistency at the core of disappearance itself.

In this light, their different forms of waiting can be analyzed through a combination of variables such as *time*, *behavior*, and *submission*, as proposed by Javier Auyero (2016) in his study of how marginalized sectors experience waiting (pp. 18-19). Given the context-dependent nature of waiting, it can be argued that its experience is conditioned by the social space where it unfolds and by the complexity of the social fabric surrounding those who wait and those who are waited for (Palumbo and Marentes, 2013, pp. 10-11). For the Mothers, that space was especially hostile; those who should have listened and responded to their legitimate claims were unwilling to do so. In such circumstances, the ones who waited and the one who made them wait stood in absolute opposition.

The Indefinite Postponement of the Right to Grieve

The act of waiting, as staged in Plaza de Mayo and transformed into a symbol of resistance by these women, Mothers of detained-disappeared children, is characterized by a specific emotionality encompassing the full spectrum of what might be called "torn motherhood" (Miranda, 2020, pp. 223-232). These forms of waiting were embedded in structures of political domination imposed by a power that claimed ownership over human lives, specifically, their children's lives. This necropolitics produced what have rightly been called "beings on unstable ground," as they are the dead who are not quite dead and the living who are not quite alive (Tello, 2025, p. 14).

In this regard, and drawing on the reinterpretation of Foucault by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2011), recalling that the notion of "necropolitics" refers not merely to the power to decide who lives and who dies, but to the orchestration of murder and the management of death is important. From this perspective, torture and the strategic use of corpses exemplify forms of power that multiply death among a state's citizens (Navarro, 2021, p. 415).

In this context, time—an essential frame of reference—also transformed the Mothers' waiting (Elías, 1989). This occurred without disregarding the inherent subjectivity of the emotions involved, which are not immune to distorted or even contradictory interpretations regarding the fate of the awaited person. Furthermore, the issue of memory must be considered—at times forbidden or suppressed in the case of these Mothers. From this arises the question of what they are able to remember and what they are able to forget. In line with Michael Pollack (2006, p. 19), this calls for a deeper look into those spaces of domination that shape clandestine memories, memories which, in this case, can only go as far as the Mothers can remember without endangering their own maternal identity, and even more critically, the identity of their children. On this point, and following Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi (2006, p. 491), it is worth recalling that the greatest distortion of a crime's memory is its suppression. Yet Levi also acknowledges that, at times, reality itself may be altered for self-protective reasons. The author describes this through his personal experience with the case of Alberto D. during the Nazi era (Levi, 2006, pp. 494-495).

Still, it must be acknowledged that breaking the initial silence—both imposed and, perhaps, self-imposed—was a risky endeavor. That silence had originally been justified by the instinct to protect their children, but the Mothers confronted it. They broke it first to hear one another, and then to make their voices heard by society, recreating a kind of birth scream. This new scream, however, was triggered by the pain of a violent separation, tragically resembling another birth, this time defined by uncertainty, anguish, and death. In essence, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo formed a remarkable collective, notable among other things for disrupting the original submission. Faced with fear and repression, they chose resistance.

At this point, it is worth revisiting the statement made by Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla in 1979 during a press conference, in response to a question from journalist José Ignacio López. Videla said:

I will tell you that, regarding the disappeared, insofar as they are such, they are an unknown; as long as they remain disappeared, they cannot have a special treatment because they have no entity. They are neither dead nor alive... they

are disappeared. [He concludes:] If the person were to appear, they would receive treatment X; if their death were confirmed, treatment Z; but as long as they remain disappeared, they cannot receive any special treatment, they are disappeared, without entity; neither dead nor alive, they are disappeared. In such cases, we cannot act, though we do attend to the relatives. (Archivo Prisma, 2022, 5m22s-5m49s).

The gestures accompanying his words underscored the concept of vanishing, as if he were describing a kind of disappearance “into thin air.” This hypothetical dematerialization implicitly absolved the state of responsibility, effectively postponing the act of mourning, and consequently, denying the dual right to grieve. The phrase: “neither dead nor alive, just disappeared” barred the Mothers from grieving, from saying goodbye, and from ending their wait. This uncertainty, although tragically more conclusive today, compounded the anxiety of not knowing their children's fate.

In sum, the dictatorship's genocidal campaign forced the Mothers to deal with separation anxiety, whether through the projected search for their children's remains or through an internalized affirmation of the revolutionary ideals their children held before being abducted. Their journey was further complicated by the underlying sense of guilt felt by many of these women, the belief that they had failed in their maternal duty to protect their children (Robben, 2006).

This suggests that their different forms of waiting involved a combination of anguish and anxiety, operating in synergy through a crucial expectation. The appearance of their children's bodies, beyond the undeniable right to condemnation that they (and everybody) are entitled to, would at the very least help them process their grief and bring closure to the chapter of their children's murder; it would allow them to complete the unresolved mourning they still carry among their most painful emotions.

Indeed, as Freud taught, “mourning” is the natural response to the loss of a loved one or an abstract equivalent, such as one's homeland, freedom, or ideals. It is not a pathological state and should not be treated medically. This perspective led the Austrian master to trust that, after some time, it will disappear on its own, and that disturbing it would be inappropriate or even harmful. An examination of reality reveals that the loved object no longer exists and demands that the libido withdraw all its attachments to it (Freud, 1992, pp. 241-242). However, in the case at hand, the loved one is not officially dead—he or she has disappeared. The mother, now transformed into a Mother, is trapped in an endless wait that indefinitely delays the possibility of mourning. In other words, the presence of expectation prevents the process from reaching closure,

a process that would otherwise be marked by the child's death. Accepting this, beyond the tragedy, might allow them to process that individual and social rupture from another place, to close what was undoubtedly the most sorrowful chapter of their lives, and, in some way, to bring an end to or at least cope with that torturous waiting.

It is essential to stress that this unresolved waiting turns into an infinite one, an open-ended waiting sustained by ungrieved loss, without a body and without certainties. A mourning that, ultimately, still harbors, however unconsciously, a glimmer of hope. Meanwhile, the laws enacted in 1979 by the de facto government established procedures to declare disappeared persons as deceased, thereby preventing any investigation into what had actually occurred. On this matter, it is necessary to refer specifically to Laws 22.062 (B.O.R.A., 24240, September 3, 1979, p. 2) and 22.068 (B.O.R.A., 24247, September 12, 1979, p. 2). The first law established that the absence of a person from their place of residence or domicile in the Republic, without any news of them for a period of one year, granted entitlement to individuals whose rights, recognized under national laws on retirement, pensions, or non-contributory benefits, depended on that person's death. Furthermore, after three years had passed from the moment the pension or non-contributory benefit began to be collected, the beneficiary was required to present proof that judicial proceedings had been initiated to declare the presumption of death of the missing person, in accordance with Law 14.394 (B.O.R.A., 17805, December 30, 1954, p. 1), a piece of legislation enacted in an entirely different historical context. For its part, Law 22.068 established the possibility of declaring the presumed death of a person whose disappearance from their place of domicile or residence had been reported with no news of their whereabouts since November 6, 1974 (the date of the declaration of the state of siege). The legislation emphasized the non-contentious nature of the procedure, requiring the presiding judge to order the publication of notices for five consecutive days in two of the most widely circulated newspapers in the corresponding locality, as well as in the Official Gazette, summoning the missing person. If, after ninety days from the last publication of the notices, there was still no news of the disappeared person, their presumed death would be officially declared.

This macabre plan systematically denied families reliable information about the fate of their loved ones, thereby stripping them of the rights to proper burial and mourning (Robben, 2006, p. 14). As confirmed by the dictator's iconic words regarding the disappeared, the regime trampled the victims' right to be mourned. Mourning, the capacity to be grieved, is, as Butler argues, a prerequisite for any life that matters. It is a condition for the emergence and continuation of life itself (Butler, 2010, p. 32).

Memory and Bifurcated Forms of Waiting

As previously mentioned, the emblematic Mothers of Plaza de Mayo were socially identified by the use of a diaper worn as a headscarf. This image reinforced their maternal role and symbolized the vulnerability they perceived in their adolescent and adult children, whom they still viewed as needing maternal protection, like a baby. These Mothers identified themselves as housewives and mothers simply seeking news of their disappeared children. In doing so, they merged their maternal feelings, clearly private and intimate, with the public sphere, dominated by a repressive patriarchal state (Robben, 2006, p. 24).

This characterization of the Mothers and their children is both real and symbolic, and it continues to distinguish them to this day, positioning them as particularly unique expressions of waiting. It is a form of waiting that can also be analyzed in terms of its bifurcation or division, based on two fundamental dimensions that go beyond their temporal connection.

Thus, considering that every act of waiting carries an expectation of resolution—regardless of whether the outcome is welcomed or not by the one who waits—it is possible to identify certain emotions, partly shared among all of them, that are linked to an unresolved waiting, one that appears to lack any real possibility of closure. This first form of waiting, in which the presence of unprocessed grief becomes particularly evident, is encapsulated in the phrase: “appearance alive,” referring to those whose survival was becoming increasingly unlikely. Many of the Mothers came to accept this death: some assumed it, while others denied it.

However, one can also observe in these women a form of waiting oriented toward a possible resolution, one tied to the verdicts in crimes against humanity trials, encapsulated in the slogan, which complements the previous one: “trial and punishment for the guilty.” In both cases, the subject who waits is the same, while the one who makes them wait represents the power of the State, whether authoritarian or democratic. Under the dictatorship, this power sought to anonymize and render itself indistinct, a strategy upheld through the fallacy of the “theory of the two demons,” built around a supposed and hypothetical symmetry between the crimes committed by state terrorism and the acts of violence carried out by guerrilla organizations.

Thus, in the first case, the aim was to reinforce impunity, articulated through the underlying ambiguity of terms such as “homeland,” “nation,” or “national being,” entities the regime claimed to be protecting. However, thanks to the return to democracy in 1983, those responsible for the genocide began to be identified, especially with the initiation of the so-called “Trials of the

Juntas"—later classified as crimes against humanity—which targeted specific individuals and therefore allowed for the possibility of prosecution. This second form of waiting, if one may call it so, was more likely to result in a concrete outcome through convictions and thus offered a real opportunity to formally close the circle of pain.

Indeed, considering that waiting is one of the defining elements of judicial processes, and based on the idea of justice as one of the most significant expressions of state power, the waiting for the outcomes of crimes against humanity trials is associated with the need for reparation and truth. In this sense, one observes how these expectations and ideals came into play during the last dictatorship, but even more so how that waiting has continued into democratic times through the verdicts issued in those trials, verdicts that carry a fundamental characteristic: their non-expiration. And in the convergence of both types of waiting—the hope for their return alive, and the demand for a just sentence—there necessarily exists a power that makes people wait.

The narratives that characterize both forms of waiting experienced by the Mothers were, and continue to be, deeply political, yet also lived as misfortune or injustice (Pecheny, 2013, p. 27). These forms of waiting, reinforced by kinship ties made visible through the demands of the claimants, allowed those family bonds to enter the public sphere, not merely as metaphors or symbolic images, but in a literal (and biological) sense.

Hence, this bifurcated form of waiting can also be read through two additional, overlapping perspectives. One is the public-political waiting, in which judicial bodies intervene to convict the guilty and enforce the call for their judgment and punishment. This form of waiting, embedded in society, endures even beyond the life of the woman whose child was taken. The other is the private, maternal waiting, which does not end with the real or presumed death of her child, but with the death of the mother herself—even though it may also continue in other forms and intensities through others who reflect, in their own way, the emotional continuity and the pursuit of justice carried forward by the Mother(s). Among them, a kind of existential unity developed, one that helped them grow stronger, survive the tragedy, and above all, recover those missing children.

Thus, in order to reconstruct their experiences of waiting and the potential persistence of those emotions today, the most accurate approach would be to investigate the emotions of those who wait—infinitely—for the appearance alive, while at the same time, finitely, for judgment and punishment of the guilty (Pollack, 2006; Ricoeur, 2000). This form of waiting has persisted despite the years of enforcement of the Full Stop Law (Law 23.492, B.O.R.A. 26058,

December 29, 1986, p. 1) and the Law of Due Obedience (Law 23.521, B.O.R.A. 26155, June 9, 1987, p. 1), as well as the presidential pardons.⁶

Among the many questions that arise in an effort to shed light on the topic, emphasizing aspects that help understand how these two types of waiting were and are experienced is important: What is the predominant emotion as time passes? And, in some way, can it be said that the Mothers anticipate the end of the wait? These individual emotions converge into a sketch of the collective emotion that defines the waiting. After the dictatorship ended, the Mothers faced the dilemma of whether to maintain hope, which implied the search could continue indefinitely, or to begin mourning, abandoning expectations and accepting their child's death, yet without being able to provide a final resting place or proper funeral to bring closure, even if painfully, to that prolonged waiting (Robben, 2006, p. 32).

Conclusions

The impact that the dictatorship's population policy still generates today becomes tangible through its anchoring in motherhood and its dramatic parallel with the "birth," in 1977, of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. These women's response to the abduction of their children by the genocidal regime went beyond subverting maternalistic and gender norms reinforced by the so-called "National Reorganization Process." Their actions crossed a threshold, where the collective they formed re-politicized what had already been politicized by the military government through the disappearance of their children (Domínguez, 2007, p. 22).

In fact, alongside "traditional motherhood," there emerged the figure of "torn motherhood." The waiting associated with that traditional form of motherhood was soon replaced by another, one whose resolution depended entirely on the will of the kidnappers' power, a power that had contempt for life (and the waiting that comes with it) granted by those mothers decades earlier. This form of motherhood corresponded to a denied childhood or, as has been well described, an "appropriated childhood," through the disappearance and substitution of identity of their children's children, newborns or toddlers whose

⁶ Some authors have attempted to discredit the end of impunity by reviving the theory of the two demons, through which they denounce a supposed political use of human rights (see, for example: Korstanje, 2014).

mothers and fathers had also been murdered by repressive forces.⁷ Thus, another form of waiting emerged, embodied by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. These women, if the phrase may be used, experienced a multiplied anguish: not only were their children disappeared, but they also knew with certainty that babies (their grandchildren) had been born in captivity or taken from their parents' arms and appropriated by a genocidal State.

All of these strategies took shape in a context where the dissolution of families—considered a threat to the nation—was one of the main objectives of the de facto government, and where the regime's view of women, including the Mothers, played a central role. It was claimed that "subversive" women exhibited extreme sexual liberalism, were bad housewives, bad mothers, and bad wives, and therefore had to be eradicated to restore the archetype of the conventional wife and mother, based on a model of female subjectivity imposed through reeducation and disciplinary logics rooted in totalitarian systems (Álvarez, 2000, p. 76).⁸

In this context, the de facto regime regarded the Mothers' demands and mobilization as an impossible project, a delusion. Yet they continued, and will continue, in their waiting, encapsulated in the slogans "appearance alive" and "trial and punishment for the guilty."

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⁷ On this matter, see: Villalta (2018).

⁸ The logic of the dictatorship from this perspective has been extensively analyzed by Pilar Calveiro (2001).

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