ARGUMENT
BIANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL

e-ISSN 2084–1043 p-ISSN 2083–6635
Published online: 26.08.2024

Vol. 14 (1/2024) pp. 25–39
https://argument.uken.krakow.pl/

Mourning and melancholia: An analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo

Jay DITTBURNER*

ABSTRACT

This paper links the notion of melancholia as endless mourning with the political actions of the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo, a human rights group in Argentina. These mothers, grandmothers and other protestors refused to accept the death of their children and family members who were taken by the government and disappeared without a trace. The victims were known as "the missing" or "desaparecidos" ("the disappeared"). The Mothers refused to accept that they were dead, thus entering a state of melancholia and endless mourning. This refusal of death is a powerful notion and one that was used politically to protest against the state sponsored violence of the Junta regime in Argentina. This paper first explores the history of Argentina, looking at how that state and military turned on its own citizens in an act of violence and state sponsored terrorism. Second, this paper looks at how mourning functions in a society and what melancholia is by looking at Freudian interpretations. The paper concludes with a discussion of Jean Améry and how important it is not to forget what someone has endured or to be forced to forgive against their will. This leads into a discussion of the significance of mourning in our society, and how important it is to honour victims of state sponsored violence, whose lives were unjustly taken by the state that was meant to protect them.

KEYWORDS

mourning; melancholia; Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo; Sigmund Freud; state sponsored violence

* Ph.D. candidate, Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. E-mail: jaydittburner@cmail.carleton.ca.

DOI: 10.24917/20841043.14.1.2

SECTION I

Mourning is an act of grief that has been with us since prehistoric times, yet it is something we often take for granted. In our secular, western world we often scoff at religious practices as unnecessary or superstitious in our age of technology and analytic thinking. Yet mourning, whether religiously framed or not, fulfils a necessary role in helping us cope with one of the major unknowable aspects of our life: its end. This article explores the power of mourning and melancholia through an analysis of the role that collective mourning has in society. I want to look at the example of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina as they offer a unique view on death, on protest and on mourning. This is because they simply refused to mourn in any traditional sense, insofar as they refuse death itself in order to seek justice for their children and grandchildren who were victims of state-sponsored violence during the 1970s and 1980s. In discussing this unique situation, I want to touch upon how in their refusal of death and thus refusal to mourn, they are turning their loss into absence, and through this are in a state of melancholia, in Freudian terms. Yet I believe this melancholia is ideal for their protest, and while it is often thought to be an unproductive state of being, I want to argue that in this case, and perhaps in cases of state-sponsored violence in general, melancholia can be a powerful political action — to refuse to acknowledge death, to refuse to forgive and to refuse to forget.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (herein called The Mothers) started out as a loose confederation of mothers and grandmothers of victims of state-sponsored violence during the military Junta regime in Argentina during the late 1970s and '80s. During the 1960s and '70s Argentina went through many political changes, shifting violently from leftist to extreme right politics, following the political agenda of Juan Perón who had fled to Francoist Spain after his deposition in 1955. In 1973, Perón won the general election and held the office of president once again until his death in office on July 1, 1974, when he was succeeded by his wife Isabel Perón. Isabel, inexperienced in politics and facing a collapsing economy, was eventually removed from office during a military coup led by the leaders of the branches of the military at the time, the Junta. The Junta were welcomed at first, as the expectation was that their rule would add some stability and normalcy to Argentina, which over the course of the last few decades was faced with constant violence and turmoil. As Sally Thornton states,

> In 1976, with the hope and expectation on the part of most Argentines that order and stability would prevail, under General Videla of the army, Admiral Massera of the navy, and Brigadier General Agosti of the air force, the military seized total control, claiming to be the guardian of Western Christian values while vowing to eliminate opposing elements (Thornton, 2000: 280).

Argentina during this era was very conservative and religious and wanted a strong government that would hold on to Christian values in the face of the perceived violence and atheism of the communist and socialist left. However, the Junta very quickly turned on their own people and began removing individuals whom they saw as "subversives" and problematic to their new rule. They suspended the constitution and congress, censored the press, elected new people to the courts and began what they called "The Dirty War", claiming they were ridding the nation of terrorists, communists, revolutionaries, and other individuals who threatened the new government (Thornton, 2000: 280). However, it quickly became clear that the military Junta was removing anyone whom they saw as a threat or problem, including university students, professors, journalists, theologians, and other thinkers. As Thornton states,

> [i]n reality, most of the resistance movements had already been crushed by 1976, and the systematic policy of terror, disappearances, torture, and murder was carried out against those who were suspected of being or were reported by associates as being actively in disagreement with the Junta's ideology. Whole populations were "suspect" — university students and professors, anyone involved in liberation theology or social services, journalists, intellectuals (Thornton, 2000: 280).

This is an unfortunate common theme in military dictatorships and politically extreme regimes that often people seen as "free thinkers" or as possible sources or radical knowledge are removed. In many cases murdered by the state without any sort of trial or judgment. In the Argentinian case, these individuals were "disappeared" or abducted never to be seen again.

Estimations of the number of individuals who disappeared during the military regime differ greatly, as the state itself did not keep formal records. A rough estimate places the number at approximately 30,000 people who were disappeared during the years between 1976 and 1983; the vast majority never being seen alive again. As Margaret Burchianti states,

> [a]ccording to the Argentine human rights movement, the dictatorship of 1976–1983 disappeared 30,000 people. The dictatorship claimed that it was fighting a war against violent subversion, but in actuality, they defined the enemy in intentionally loose terms to include anyone who was suspected of opposing them politically or ideologically (Burchianti, 2004: 134).

In many ways, almost half a century later, the impact of the military dictatorship and the disappeared still exist in Argentinian society, as an entire generation of thinkers, children and adults were lost in the violence. Moreover, the official government work on these issues in the following years still falls short of what the Mothers have asked. These disappeared individuals were often removed right off the streets, their places of work and very often their

homes where the military and police would break in, capture them and leave rapidly. As Thornton states,

> [t]he victims were taken to centres hidden around Buenos Aires and the rest of the country where they would be brutally tortured for hours to days to months before being killed. Testimony has indicated that a variety of techniques were used to get rid of the bodies-burning, mass burial, pushing drugged victims out of airplanes over the ocean, or leaving bodies by the roadside. Apparently, the Junta chose “anonymous” methods so that no one abroad could claim that the military was abusing its citizenry (Thornton, 2000: 281).

The disappeared lost not only their lives but their existence, because there are no records of what happened to them, and their family and friends were not given any information on the disappeared. The victims were often not arrested in any legal sense, nor were they sent to prisons but as Berber Bevernage points out were,

> held in secret detention centres (*Centros Clandestinos de Detención*). Approximately 600 of these centres are estimated to have existed. They were true sites of horror. Torture was applied without exception, and the calvary of the victims most often ended in a journey that led to mass burials and anonymous graves or even to the Argentine rivers and the sea (Bevernage, 2012: 25).

As discussed previously, most, almost all, of these disappeared were not armed, revolutionary fighters, or were taken in any armed combat situation. Rather they were stolen from their families, friends, and communities and were never heard from again. This is what sparked the Mothers to develop from a loose group of women seeking the truth about their family members into a massive human rights organization.

The history of the Mothers started off not as a protest or a planned political action against the Junta at that time. It started because these mothers were looking for their children and went to the police, the military, the government and the Church seeking answers as to where their children were. They were never given answers but were shifted from one office to another, and this is how the mothers first met as they recognized each other waiting for answers from the various officials. After realizing they were all seeking information for their lost children, they decided to act as a group.

> In April of 1977 fourteen Mothers decided to meet in front of the main government offices in Buenos Aires’s principal square, the Plaza de Mayo. They drew up a petition and sought a meeting with the president of the Junta, asking him what had happened to their children. The mothers began actively to recruit members, so that three weeks later there were sixty of them despite the omnipresent fear [of the military] (Thornton, 2000: 282).

At first, the Junta did meet with the mothers — early in the protests three mothers were granted a meeting with the interior minister to discuss what had happened to their children. However, he simply stated that their children had probably run away or were involved in illegal activities and fled the country (Thornton, 2000: 282). The mothers were met with threats of violence, and several of them were themselves abducted by the regime. As Thornton writes,

> The women were threatened with weapons and dogs, sometimes had cocked guns put to their heads, and occasionally were sprayed with water cannons or tear gas. The Junta, whose campaign was based on creating fear among the populace so that no one would protest or disagree with it, hoped that by intimidation the Mothers would stop coming. Many Mothers indicate in their testimonies it was very difficult to overcome the fear. First of all, because they were afraid for the safety of other family members... (Thornton, 2000: 282–283).

Despite the violence and terror presented by the regime, the Mothers' protests grew and grew, and they began to get recognition and support from around the globe, as Argentinians abroad began to spread the news of these Mothers' struggles. The censorship of the state newspaper in Argentina downplayed the Mothers' protests, as they did not want this movement to gain any more support. Unfortunately, when the military regime ended in October of 1983, the Mothers had still not received the information or support they had been protesting and fighting for over the previous five years, as the regime enacted several decrees to attempt to remove any blame, liability or responsibility for the disappeared. Moreover, they wanted to turn the disappeared into the dead, which is something the Mother's fought against. The Junta, in their final months, attempted to create safeguards against the possibility of being tried and charged for their actions against the Argentinian civilians. They took three main precautions, as Bevernage points out.

> First, in April 1983, the Junta published the "Final Document on the War Against Subversion and Terrorism". This document claimed that the Junta had fulfilled its duty in the service of the nation and stated that the *desaparecidos* [disappeared], if they were not in exile or in hiding, perished in open confrontation and thus had to be considered dead (Bevernage, 2012: 26).

This was an attempt to quell the protests and inquiries into the disappeared and to remove culpability from the military and police. Secondly, they passed the "Law of National Pacification" which granted amnesty and immunity to all members of the military for any crimes committed between 1973 and June 1982, once again removing the possibility of being legally tried for their actions (Bevernage, 2012: 26). Finally, in the final days of its rule, the military ordered the destruction of all of its archives and documents,

further destroying any possibility of finding out what happened to the disappeared and removing any possibility of tying these crimes back to the military (Bevernage, 2012: 26). In these ways, the Junta regime attempted to free itself from legal responsibility for the state-sponsored violence, abductions and war crimes it committed during its regime, as well as impeding any further investigations into those who were disappeared during this time.

Raúl Alfonsín became President after being democratically elected two months after the collapse of the military Junta regime, on December 10, 1983. Five days later, he launched the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons which would begin to investigate the disappeared during the Junta regime. Despite this action into helping the Mothers and their cause, Alfonsín would pass two laws several years later that drastically impeded seeking justice and truth for the victims and their families.

> In 1986, Alfonsín helped pass the *Punto Final*, or Full Stop Law, which placed a time limit on the prosecutions of military officers. Sixty days after this law was enacted, no new criminal complaints could be brought against anyone for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship (Burchianti, 2004: 136).

This was a first step towards removing the possibility of the military leaders and the military system being found legally liable and charged with the state-sponsored violence and abductions conducted during the 1970s. Furthermore in 1987, Alfonsín passed the *Obediencia Debida* or Law of Due Obedience which effectively allowed for military members to be free of liability for crimes committed if they were following orders. This included war crimes and crimes against humanity. In 1990, President Carlos Saúl Menem, further granted amnesty for any members of the military dictatorship that had been previously tried and were facing jail time. It was not until 2005 where some of these laws were finally overturned and legal proceedings could once again be brought against any surviving members of the Junta regime. These actions were not taken lightly by the leaders at the time, as Burchianti points out,

> the rationale behind Alfonsín's and Menem's appeasement of the military was to move the country toward reconciliation. Yet Argentine human rights activists and scholars have argued that these laws have created a "culture of impunity", silencing the memory of the brutal past and leaving open the possibility of a violent future (Burchianti, 2004: 136).

So, the presidents and leaders put the notion of peace, stability, and reconciliation over that of seeking truth and justice. This is a major issue in the field of transitional justice, and many have argued that for true reconciliation, peace and stability to occur, there must be justice for victims and the truth must be found. The Mothers, of course, did not support these attempts at removing

liability away from the military for their crimes and violence, nor did they accept any attempts at monetary reparations. This is because the Mothers have a radical notion of the sort of justice they and their children ought to receive.

There are several important and radical notions in the Mothers protests surrounding what ought to be done for the disappeared. First and foremost, and perhaps their most radical belief is that they do not see and will not accept the disappeared as dead. As Bevernage states,

> *La muerte no existe* — "Death does not exist." Radical as it may be, this expression is in line with an intriguing slogan that has characterized the Madres' struggle for almost three decades*: aparición con vida* — "living appearance." Ever since the disappearance of their sons and daughters in the late 1970s, the group of mothers around Hebe de Bonafini [leader of the Mothers] has claimed that the disappearance is a "state of being," more than merely signifying death or the absolute lack of knowledge about someone's fate (Bevernage, 2012: 23).

Because of their rejection of death, all attempts by the government, in which they offered blanket decrees (such as stating that anyone disappeared during the regime is presumed dead) was met with great resistance. Furthermore, the Mothers are united by their existence as the Mothers of the disappeared, and not the Mothers of the dead. Hebe de Bonafini stated once that "the mothers of the disappeared will not be converted into the mothers of the dead" (Bevernage, 2012: 23) meaning that they will not accept the notion that their children are dead and will not enter into a state of mourning for them. Moreover, they have rejected many traditional means of justice and legal redress that is given to the families of victims of state-sponsored violence. As Bevernage quotes, the Mothers rejected economic reparations on the grounds that, "what has to be repaired [is] with justice, one cannot repair with money" (Bevernage, 2012: 33). Moreover, accepting reparations for the disappeared would be both accepting their death and accepting what that government did, solidifying the crimes against humanity. Secondly, the Mothers rejected the notion of memorials, of tombs, and of moments for the deceased. As the Mothers stated,

> [o]ur children have physically disappeared but live in the struggle, the ideals and the commitment of all those who struggle for justice and the freedom of their people. The remains of our children have to stay where they fell. There are no tombs to bury a revolutionary. A handful of bones does not identify them because they are dreams, hope and an example for the generations to come (Bevernage, 2012: 33).

Often the Mothers discussed their children in the present tense, and continued to celebrate their birthdays, anniversaries and other such celebrations as if they were still present with them. This rejection of mourning was fundamental to their political cause and went against the idea of national/state

sponsored mourning and other calls to mourn for the dead. The military Junta was aware of the notion that for proper mourning to occur, along with legal responsibility, there needed to be a body for each victim. Lacking a corpus delicti, future criminal prosecutions would be impossible, as well as proper funerals and mourning practices (Robben, 1991: 220). However, after the Junta regime was over and the new democratic government wanted to search for the bodies through exhumations, the Mothers were faced with a tough choice and the faction splintered over their choice.

As early as December 1984, there was disagreement between the Mothers on exhumation, forensic identification, and reburial of the disappeared. It was not that the Mothers did not want mourning to occur, or for their children to be laid to rest (second death) but rather they saw it as a way to diminish their political activism, as the government was attempting to depoliticize their cause (Robben, 1991: 68). In 1986, there was a division between the Mothers and the group split into two: one, led by Bonafini, continued to reject the exhumations, reparations, and memorialization while the second group, supported by external human rights organizations, were willing to proceed with exhumations, accepted reparations and focused on the individual grief and suffering of the families over the political protest. However, it is important to note that the larger group, led by Bonafini, did not reject exhumation, grief and reburial lightly: they were well aware of the sorrow and suffering felt by the Mothers, and how a proper funeral can help people move on and deal with their grief. Robben notes,

> Hebe de Bonafini has said: "It cost us weeks and weeks of meetings at which there were many tears and much despair, because the profound Catholic formation of our people creates almost a need to have a dead body, a burial, and a Mass." Despite the anguish, the de Bonafini group decided to keep the wounds inflicted by the disappearances open to resist a national process of forgetting (Robben, 1991: 225).

In this way, the Mothers kept the burden of grief and sorrow on themselves. What started as a vigil and quest for the truth turned into a human rights protest that gained international recognition. It is very important to note the role that religion, notably Catholicism, played in this decision. Catholic funerals are very much based upon the remains of the dead being placed in a sacred space, a vigil being held surrounding the body, a funeral mass with the body present, and a graveside service with the body present. So, in the wake of not having a body to enter into proper funerary proceedings, Catholic funerals seemed impossible for the Mothers. Moreover, in holding a traditional Catholic funeral, they would need to exhume the body which would mean accepting the death of their children or relatives.

SECTION II

I want to now focus upon the role of mourning, or the lack thereof in the case of the Mothers. As a group, they have been analysed by various scholars (Bevernage, 2012; Burchianti, 2004; Clark, 2019; Robben, 1991; Thornton, 2000) and members of different professions — philosophers, psychoanalysts, psychologists, social workers, theologians and so on — and they have faced varying degrees of criticism for their beliefs and practices. Early in the protests of the government newspapers, trying to discredit the movement and lessen public appeal to the Mothers' cause labelled them as the "Locas", or the crazy ladies, and later continued to discredit them (Thornton, 2004: 283). Moreover, their protests have been noted by scholars as a form of psychopathology, melancholic (in the Freudian sense), mental illness and a distortion of reality. Bevernage states that,

> scholars have indeed tried to grasp the [Mothers] denial of death in terms of psychopathology related to the problematic of mourning without a body. The relatives' endless waiting for the [disappeared] to come home is sometimes described in psychological terms as "mummification." The demand for *aparición con vida* [live appearance, live apparition] similarly has been analyzed as hope against hope or, worse, as pre-rational or even magical thinking (Bevernage, 2012: 24).

There is a lot that can be said, and a lot that has been said about the psychological state of the Mothers, as they are in a constant state of grief for their disappeared family members. It is easy to equate their protest with a form of melancholia, insofar that they are stuck in an endless cycle of mourning. However, it is important to note that the Mother's refusal to move past the disappeared is not a psychological issue, as they are well aware of the need for grief, mourning and moving on. The refusal is, rather, political in nature. Thornton writes,

> because of their denial, according to psychologists, the Mothers should not be able to complete in a traditional way the first essential task of mourning, i.e., to accept the reality of the loss through death. However, the Mother's denial is not psychological, but rather political. Their refusal to acknowledge the reality is a public position designed to deny the government an excuse to forget and move on without acknowledging its complicity and failure to bring the guilty to justice (Thornton, 2004: 286).

Furthermore, they do not want to accept the abduction, murder and death of their children on political and ethical grounds. They believe that if they accept the death of their children, they are in fact "killing them" insofar as they are consciously changing their state from disappeared to deceased. This is problematic because they want those guilty for the crimes, the murders and

the abductions, to be found guilty as they are the ones who truly killed their children. Thornton notes from her interview that mother of Mercedes Mereno stated: “I want to know who killed her and I want the assassin to be put in jail. If I ask for her as a corpse, then I am killing her, not the one who assassinated her”. Another mother insisted: “For my son to be dead, his murderer has to go to jail” (Thornton, 2004: 285). So, it is important to note that the Mother’s refusal to mourn, to grieve, and to move past this trauma is not backwards thinking, a lack of caring, psychopathy, or anything of the sort, but is rather an effort to hold steadfast in their political “action to ensure” that what occurred to them, the disappearance of their children, will not happen to others in their country or elsewhere.

SECTION III

This paper will finish with a discussion of mourning and melancholia, as it relates (very much) to the Mothers’ political struggles. First, let us discuss what these two notions are, how they are similar, and how they differ. Mourning and melancholia are both,

> a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revealing (Freud, 2005: 244).

The main difference for Sigmund Freud between mourning and melancholia is what object or abstract is being mourned for and how long the grief process goes on for. Mourning is acceptable in terms of loss and grief, as one is mourning for someone and the period of mourning ends. When the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited by grief once again (Bevernage, 2012: 149). The work of mourning is painful, but it performs a useful task insofar as it allows us to test reality and draw distinctions between what is alive (the ego) and that which is not (the someone). Melancholia, in contrast, is grief and loss of an object of love, not necessarily a person. As Freud states,

> [l]et us now apply to melancholia what we have learnt about mourning. In one set of cases, it is evident that melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object. Where the exciting causes are different ones can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (Freud, 2005: 245).

Melancholia relates to the loss of an object; mourning relates to a loss of someone. This distinction can also be understood through the notion that

mourning is related to loss, insofar as there was someone that is no longer there. Melancholia, on the other hand, is related to absence, insofar as there was nothing external to the individual, but rather a deep unknown within themselves. As Pierre Macherey writes,

> the difference between mourning and melancholia. Mourning turns on the experience of something lost. In melancholia, it is this loss itself that is lost or denied: what is cut off is no longer the object but its absence, experienced as an absence interior to the subject itself, who integrates it as an absence denied and not assumed as such (Macherey, 2004: 15).

There is an effective turning in of the self onto the self, instead of mourning for something external and thus something that has been lost those in a state of melancholia are stuck dealing with the absence within themselves.

Mourning is a response to the phenomenon of loss in one's life, usually based on the loss of a loved one, a family member or a dear friend. Melancholia is a response to the phenomenon of absence, as Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson state,

> [t]he crux of melancholia, however, is precisely that loss is unavowable, unconscious, and therefore radically unknown. For the melancholic, nothing is ever lost in the sense of having once been possessed, and so whatever remains of an object is utterly unknowable (Mladek & Edmondson, 2009: 210).

The melancholic individual knows whom they have lost, but not what has been lost inside of themselves (Mladek & Edmondson, 2009: 211). This is because absence is often confused with loss as they both deal with a lack, but this lack is radically different in its origins. First, when loss is converted into absence, then one is faced with endless melancholy and the impossibility of mourning, for there is no object to mourn (LaCapra, 2014: 46). Second, when one converts absence into loss, they are stuck in this misplaced nostalgia for a time that never truly existed and end up trying to fulfil their need from the lack in their life, which is impossible (LaCapra, 2014: 46). The lack always existed and there is an anxiety attached to the indefiniteness and absence of this object. This discussion of absence and loss I believe is fundamental to understanding the Mothers' protests and their unique form of grief. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo offer a unique view on the political aspects that melancholia can have. For this reason, I chose to focus on their protest and the ways in which their melancholia aids in their ongoing struggle to find out what happened to the disappeared members of their family. The first aspect of the political notion is the way in which it can support personal memories and experiences, as Mladek and Edmondson state, melancholia's political potency lies in its ability to turn memory against the official narrative of remembrance

(Mladek & Edmondson, 2009: 219). In this way a melancholic state was the correct response in the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, because they were fighting back against an unjust official narrative of what happened, and they demanded the truth of what happened to their loved ones. This protest, the unjust regime and the demand for the truth have far reaching implications in truth and reconciliation work, where personal memories and narratives are often at odds with the official account of what occurred. The Mothers' protests and successful human rights campaigns show the power of melancholia. Moreover, I think that this discussion of holding onto grief and sorrow directly relates to Jean Améry's notion of resentment, which will be explored in the final section of this paper.

Jean Améry was a holocaust survivor and scholar who wrote on his experiences and later responses to the unbelievable pain and suffering he went through. I would like to put forward the notion that resentment, while often seen as a negative emotion (like melancholia) holds an important place in protesting injustice in state-sponsored violence. Resentment stands as a response to ongoing acts of injustice, stemming from past instances of state-sponsored violence and crimes against humanity. Often, survivors and the families of victims who have faced state-sponsored mass violence are expected to eventually "forgive and forget" and to "move on" from what they experienced. The Mothers and Améry share the common belief that one ought to hold onto the past and the injustice they faced and to not let those responsible avoid justice, which is something that the military Junta worked very hard in doing. Améry states,

> I believe to have recognized that a forgiving and forgetting induced by social pressure is immoral. Whoever lazily and cheaply forgives, subjugates himself to the social and biological time sense which is also called the "natural" one. Natural consciousness of time actually is rooted in the physiological process of wound-healing and became part of the social conception of reality. But precisely for this reason it is not only extra-moral, but also anti-moral in character (Améry, 1980: 72).

By giving into cheap forgiveness[1] generally presented by states after periods of conflict, state-sponsored violence and crimes against humanity, you are giving up part of yourself to the extent that you do not want to forgive and forget. This is, crucially, why memory, collective memory, testimony and truth-seeking endeavours are fundamental in a discussion of state-sponsored violence, because they all act against the push to forgive and forget. As noted

[1] Forgiveness is not something that victims can be forced to give perpetrators of harms against them. As Martha Minow writes in her text *Between vengeance and forgiveness*: "Forgiveness does not and should not take the place of justice or punishment. Forgiveness marks a change in how the offended feels about the person who committed the injury, not a change in the actions to be taken by a justice system" (Minow, 1998: 15).

previously, the presidents who came after the military Junta regime wanted to work on reconciliation by bringing together two separate groups to form a notion of peace, friendship, and cooperation between them. In acts of reconciliation, the focus is on peace and stability first. This means pushing aside the pain, trauma, and suffering that the victims of the conflict, the military regime, and subsequent oppressive regimes have gone through. Améry rejects the view that, "victims of persecution […] ought to internalize our past suffering and bear it [in] emotional asceticism, as our torturers should do with their guilt" (Améry, 1980: 69). One ought to be able to fully feel and express their pain and sorrow for the suffering they went through, this is inclusive of someone's desire to express it through a political action. This erroneously suggests that wounds should be kept private, and the past should be forgotten for progress to occur. This kind of conception of progress is premised on a false account of what is required for a state to function — stability and peace in the here and now, not dealing with its past actions, trauma, and crimes. This is precisely why the Mothers continued to hold their protests, and why they continue to seek justice for their children and families. Thornton writes, "their refusal to acknowledge the reality is a public position designed to deny the government an excuse to forget and move on without acknowledging its complicity and failure to bring the guilty to justice" (Thornton, 2004: 286). This is largely because, as discussed previously, Argentina (like many nations in a period of transitional justice) focuses on stability and peace over truth and justice. Robben notes that in Argentina the ability to prosecute and seek justice and truth by grass roots, local organizations such as the Mothers while the state focused on the exhumation of mass graves, creating memorials which generally pushed against what these grassroots organizations were trying to do. Moreover, the state's response to issues of legal relief for state-sponsored violence and terror fell short, "while the country's restoration orientation remained limited to the failed amnesty of convicted perpetrators and half-hearted reparation measures" (Robben, 1991: 5). This placed the onus of justice onto the people, namely onto the Mothers, to continue their work to make the state accountable for the crimes they had committed. Yet, it seems problematic to task mothers and grandmothers who had lost family members, and who had struggled with a violent and chaotic regime, to have to bring it down and bring those responsible to justice.

The work that the Mothers have done and continue to do has shaped the world of human rights organizations and protests, as they continue to do work in Argentina and South and Latin America. Moreover, their unique form of protest as an act of mourning, of grief, of melancholia offers many new ways in which we can think about the effects of collective mourning, the power of communal mourning and the role in which resentment and melancholia have in political protests. What these women went through is unimaginable:

losing your children to the injustice and brutality of a state which is sworn to protect you. The betrayal, the suffering and the trauma inflicted by the state pushed these women to seek justice, not only for their loved ones, but for all victims of state-sponsored violence in Argentina. Coming together and bringing their sorrow and grief together to protest the unjust regime helped these women support one another and help other survivors and the families of victims come together. As Robben states,

> collective mourning helps to draw people closer together and invigorates the weakened social group. This social function of mourning rituals is not limited to the death of individuals. Mourning is a general expression of loss for a social collectivity under threat (Robben, 1991: 8).

While I have circled around the idea of calling the Mothers protests "mourning" (comparing it with melancholia) it is important to note that they were doing the work or task of mourning, to the extent that they continued to do ritualistic work in order to help their disappeared relatives. This work of mourning was to honour them, and the political work involved in mourning was meant to bring justice to them and to hopefully prevent more individuals from disappearing under the military regime. Mourning has a fundamental place in our world and the work of mourning — be it ritualistic, atheistic, theistic, modern, political, or spiritual — is fundamental to our human condition to cope with the harshness of loss and death and to help the bereaved feel less alone in this chaotic existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Améry, J. (1980). *At the minds limits: Contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bevernage, B. (2012). *History, memory, and state-sponsored violence: Time and justice*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Burchianti, M. (2004). Building bridges of memory: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the cultural politics of maternal memories. *History and Anthropology*, *15*, 133–150. DOI: 10.1080/0275720041000l689954.

Clark, Z. (2019). The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: Trauma after the disappearance of their children and the trafficking of their grandchildern (pp. 13–24). In: K. O'Donnell (Ed.). *Ruptured voices: Trauma and recovery*. Leiden: Brill.

Freud, S. (2005). *The essentials of psychoanalysis*. (A. Freud, Ed.). London: Vintage Classics.

LaCapra, D. (2014). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Macherey, P. (2004). Out of melancholia: Notes on Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*: Theories in subjection. *Rethinking Marxism*, *16*(1), 7–17. DOI: 10.1080/0893569042000193371.

Minow, M. (1998). *Between vengeance and forgiveness: Facing history after genocide and mass violence*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mladek, K. & Edmondson, G. (2009). A politics of melancholia (pp. 208–233). In: C. Strathausen (Ed.). *Leftist ontology: Beyond relativism and identity politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Robben, A. (Ed.). (1991). *Death, mourning, and burial: A cross-cultural reader*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Thornton, S. (2004). Grief transformed: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo. *Omega*, *41*(4), 279–289. DOI: 10.2190/YVKV-7601-8VKD-VM5T.