

**Inauguration: Archives of an Activist: Celebrating the Donations of Rita Arditti to  
UMass Boston: Healey Library April 22 2013**

Good afternoon. It is very gratifying to be celebrating the official opening of Rita Arditti's archive as a research source.

I would like to say a few words about the importance of Rita's work on social movements and human rights and the work of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo within the field of Latin American Studies – and beyond.

Latin American Studies, like other area studies fields, emerged from Cold War imperatives to investigate regions considered strategic to U.S. policy. Latin American governments responded to U.S. geopolitical motives with terrifying creativity and used them to justify national politics by any means. During the 1960s, '70s and '80s Latin American governments carried Cold War logic to horrific extremes. It was National Security Doctrine that provided the supposed rationale for Latin American governments to wage war against their own citizens whom they labeled subversives. In Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Brazil, the victims of those dirty wars were mostly young adults and many were adolescents. It fell to the surviving older generation to confront their children's torturers and murderers and their grandchildren's abductors.

Rita made profound contributions to celebrating the people who found the courage to confront those horrors. First, as both a scientist and a humanist, she engaged with and gave ongoing support to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo of Argentina and their campaign to discover the fate of their young-adult children, to locate their grandchildren, abducted and concealed by Argentina's military regime between 1976 and 1983, and to restore their grandchildren's rightful identities. Out of that engagement came Rita's enduring book, *Searching for Life*, illuminating the Grandmother's quest for justice and the myriad forms it took – from the famous weekly marches circling the Plaza de Mayo, to their pioneering work in forensic genetics, to their contributions to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Rita was neither the first nor the only scholar-activist to study and celebrate maternal activism in the Southern Cone. But the importance of the topic and of Rita's approach cannot be overestimated. Her work combined key strands of inquiry in pioneering ways to highlight the connections among: the complex political and human legacies of dictatorships; what came to be called "new social movements"; an approach to activism and scholarship on human rights that focused on gender and childhood; and her particular stamp – the connections with grass-roots science initiatives and the application of science, forensic genetics in particular -- to human rights. In recent years, these areas of scholarship have helped transform the field Latin American Studies -- and redeem it – from its Cold War origins.

My own area of research is family history. Students and other scholars sometimes ask me why I study the family when there are other far more important, more political topics. Rita's activism and scholarship provide a ringing rejoinder. The family *is* political and it is key to our understanding of politics on intimate, national and global scales. Rita's work with the Grandmothers centered on family. Her study embraced the complex interactions among three generations as family relations were projected onto national and international politics. The Argentine military regime was brutally astute: they made state terrorism a family affair. After torturing and murdering the young activist parents, the regime concealed the family origins of their victims' children and placed many of them with the parents' torturers to raise. Surviving children lost their parents. The loss of their children and grandchildren inflicted searing emotional pain on the elder survivors. Rita's scholarship spotlights the ravages brought about by the deliberate politics of targeting the institution of the family and depriving the state's political opponents of the life-giving satisfactions of family bonds across generations. The inspiring courage of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, acting first as caregivers to their children and grandchild and later as nurturers of the nation's conscience, was to expose that brutality, to seek justice for its victims, and to seek an end to impunity for the perpetrators.

I would also like to say a few words about Rita's contributions to Latin American Studies here at UMass Boston. Every year in my introductory course I teach Rita's book, *Searching for Life*. I teach her book because it is accessible to students at the introductory college

level, because it is a way to teach about gender and social movements, and because it is a way to transcend prevailing cultural stereotypes about the Latin American family. I also teach Rita's book so that new generations will know what happened and will not forget.

Rita was unfailingly generous to our department and our students. She never declined an invitation to speak to students about her book and its larger context, whether in a small classroom setting or a larger forum. She came even when we could afford no more honorarium than parking and lunch. She and her partner, Estelle Disch, helped bring representatives of the Grandmothers to campus to speak to our students. The last time they came, young and articulate members of HIJOS, the organization formed by restituted grandchildren, accompanied them. I am proud that UMass Boston awarded the Grandmothers an honorary degree in 2000.

For today's student, 2000 was a long time ago: the 1970s are ancient history. Rita's work makes those issues present and urgent. Every year I encounter a former student who, without fail, speaks of the powerful experience of learning about the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Thank you, Rita. When I teach your book, I feel like you are teaching by my side.

For these reasons, the collection we celebrate today will quickly become a valuable source for students of Latin America in many fields: scholars of new social movements; of gender and family; of the politics of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century democratization; students of literature, life writing and testimonial writing; scholars of social studies of science. It was Rita's vision to understand that these fields converged in the work of the Grandmothers. It is Healey Library's vision to make these records accessible to the world. I cannot think of a better way to honor Rita's contributions to Latin American Studies or to honor the work of the Grandmothers in global human rights.

And for her acute awareness of these strands of meaning, there could have been no better transcriber of these important documents than Doris Cristóbal. Doris has a personal and astute first hand insight of the complexities of the gender and family politics in the Southern Cone. She dedicated her great intelligence and fine sense of language to the process of transcribing the interviews with the Grandmothers. Thank you, Doris, for your

invaluable contribution to making these records publicly available. Thank you also to Joanne Riley, University Archivist, for undertaking this transcription project; to Daniel Ortiz, Dean of University Libraries, for supporting the project of making this archive available for research; thank you to Sandra McEvoy, Associate Director of the Center for Gender, Security and Human Rights, for suggesting a brilliant transcription system; and always, thank you to Estelle Disch, beloved colleague and inspiring teacher, now retired, for arranging the donation; and thanks also to María Cisterna of the Latin American and Iberian Studies Department for facilitating it.

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