Las Abuelas e la memoria - Doris Cristóbal

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Doris Cristobal and I have the honor of being with you today in this tribute to Rita Arditti, “Archives of an Activist: Rita Arditti and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.” Truth be told, my involvement is that I created the transcriptions of Rita’s interviews with the Abuelas.

In the interviews, the grandmothers tell their stories; I believe that each of us also has a story to tell. My story is of a middle-aged Latino woman who started college studies at Bunker Hill Community College in the Fall of 2007 and earned an Associate degree in Liberal Arts in 2010; I am also a recent graduate of UMass Boston in the Latino-American Studies-Spanish program, in the Literature track, Class of 2013. My dream is to teach Spanish in a public school in Massachusetts.

In addition, I am also a janitor and union steward in the SEIU 615, which has 18,000 janitors and security officer members in New England-Nova Scotia; and I participate in the SEIU Political Committee and work in the political campaign to support Ed Markey as a candidate for Senate. At the same time, I have been working on the “Abuelas” project since July 2012 for the University Archives at the Library at UMass Boston, creating the transcripts for the interviews that Rita Arditti conducted.

I was born in Peru; I have two children, Doris, a computer engineer in Peru, and Dante who is establishing his own family business in MA. In 1997 I left my country, leaving my 16 year old daughter in Peru. I took the bus to Argentina along with my 10 year old son. I dream of the day I may return to my country, visiting my daughter and the family I left behind.

I lived in Buenos Aires in Argentina for four years, and during my stay in this country I learned about the effects of the military coup of 1976. I met children, mothers, and grandmothers of the disappeared and learned of their amazing work fighting for the observance of human’s rights in Argentina. I also learned that there exist strong ties of solidarity between the Argentinian people and other Latin American peoples. For example, I was told that during the dictatorship, many exiles were granted asylum by the Peruvian government; and in the time of the “Malvinas War”, Peru sent Peruvian soldiers to defend Argentina from the British. I had participated in some demonstrations, accompanying Mothers and Grandmothers in their daily
rounds on Thursdays at 3 pm at the Plaza de Mayo. So, in July of 2012, when Professor Coll-Tellechea, with the support of Ann Blum, the director of the Latin-American studies program, invited me to participate in the project about the Abuelas I thought that life, in an inexplicable way, was letting me know what I had to do; once again I was linked to my beloved Argentina and I accepted with all my heart.

For me, transcribing Rita’s interviews has been a great experience, since by listening to the “Abuelas” I could more deeply know them. In their stories I learned about their pain and loss after the military broke their lives when they took their children, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, and grandchildren. These were mainly young people, students, workers, political activists, employees, teachers, journalists, artists and intellectuals. They were tortured, and murdered; and the babies who were born in prison were treated as “spoils of war”. To this day, the grandmothers have not found their children’s bodies; they were not allowed to mourn them or to bury them.

When Rita Arditti became aware of the grandmothers’ work it was 1986, the ending of the military dictatorship and the beginning of a process of democratization in Argentina. The aftermath of the atrocities occurred in Argentina became better-known at national and international level because mothers and grandmothers had made so many complaints as witnesses of the dictatorship. Rita wanted to show us the delicate and dedicated women who became the standard-bearers, the champions of human rights, who were denouncing and prosecuting the military for their crimes against humanity. The Abuelas did that, accepting risks and danger on their lives.

Every grandmother, when telling her story, is aware of the present, of living in a conflicted country that is learning how to function as a democracy; but the grandmothers do so without losing their unshakable tie to the tragic past in order to turn towards the future, thus becoming important figures in the fight against impunity.

For the grandmothers, memory is a private and individual space that turned into the collective memory of Argentina, by creatively using bold words and symbols. When the grandmothers marched in Plaza de Mayo, they held up pictures of their children along with a phrase “aparicion con vida”/ “we want them alive.” They also wore white handkerchiefs on their heads with the names of their children, they travelled on trains talking to
people about the military coup and about their missing children and grandchildren.

The task of the grandmothers has been to build a new generation, an extension of themselves. They celebrate every found grandchild as a victory over death and oblivion. They seek the restitution of the identity of the abducted grandchildren through organizing them along with their relatives, who are also survivors of dictatorship; in all of this their purpose is to continue the work that grandmothers started to ensure the restoration of the true identities of their stolen grandchildren.

The admiration that Rita had for the grandmothers was demonstrated in her book “Searching for Life” when she stated, “I decided to tell their stories because I wanted to pass on to others what I had learned about them. Despite the pain and terror that were part of their lives, those women had been radiating an irresistible and contagious positive energy. Their inspiring courage facing danger was a challenge to my stereotypes about women, and aging” (23).

My dears, every question Rita asked was delving into the Abuelas’ thinking and feeling; she shared hard moments with the Abuelas, when they were remembering and telling their stories, she wept with them, and also laughed with them while drinking a “mate” or a coffee. Rita made public the lifelong work of the grandmothers; her interviews, writings, lectures, all her legacy has contributed to and will contribute strongly to the grandmothers’ goals. They, with more than thirty years of struggle were breaking the silence to build collective memory in order that the disappearance of persons and dictatorship that violate peaceful life of democratic societies might happen “Nunca Mas”/Never again.

Finally, Rita Arditti, the grandmothers and the disappeared, with their sacrifice, hope, and strength, teach us how worthy it is to work with others in the pursuit of Justice, memory and truth. I would like to end by paraphrasing what Rita wrote in her book: “my hope is that the resurgence of interest in human rights in Argentina’s society will prosper; and that the work against impunity, soon, will bear its fruits [...] I look forward to the day where truth and justice, once unthinkable in Argentina, are a reality”.


Thank you very much for listening to me, and thank you to the team here in the Library who I have worked so closely with on this wonderful project.

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