

# Poner el Cuerpo: Women's Embodiment and Political Resistance in Argentina

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between women's embodiment and political resistance in Argentina during 2002–2003. This was a time of socioeconomic crisis, influenced by neoliberal globalization. In this tumultuous context, women's bodies became embattled sites, shaken by the crisis but also actively engaged in constructing a new society and new forms of womanhood. Bodies are important to understanding political resistance, as reflected by the meanings attached to *poner el cuerpo*, a common expression in contemporary Argentine social movements. This article analyzes how women construct embodied subjectivities through their activist practices and how they define *poner el cuerpo* in terms of collective protest and daily activist work, coherence between words and actions, embodied sacrifice, and risk taking and struggle. As life in Argentina deteriorated because of the crisis, women's bodies represented not only suffering but also resistance and renewal.

In December 2001, the world's attention turned to Argentina. The Argentine economy collapsed, protesters populated the streets, and their cry *¡Que se vayan todos!* (They must all go!) pressured the nation's president to resign and leave the presidential palace by helicopter. I watched these images of my home country from the United States, and a few months later, I returned to Argentina to conduct sociological research. This was a time of despair and hope after a decade of rapid economic changes in line with the neoliberal prescriptions of international lending institutions. Argentina's economic crisis and political protest captured media interest around the world, pointing to both the violence of globalized capitalism and the solidarity and innovative responses that the crisis inspired. In these tumultuous conditions, women's bodies became embattled sites, shaken by the crisis but also actively engaged in the construction of a new society and new forms of embodied womanhood.

This article examines the significance of women's bodies in social activism and the role of political resistance in the constitution of women's embodied subjectivity at a time (2002–2003) and place (Argentina) in which women's political protest became particularly salient. It considers the following questions: How does the body, and particularly the female body, become a vehicle and agent of resistance?

How does women's political resistance engage and contest hegemonic modes of feminine embodiment?<sup>1</sup> In her article "Protesting like a Girl" (2000), Wendy Parkins suggests that feminist theorizing should pay attention not only to the social control of women but also to their political agency.<sup>2</sup> She argues, "we cannot think of political agency in abstraction from embodiment" (2000, 60). Indeed, political resistance involves, first and foremost, putting the material body in action to affect the course of society. Activists' bodily performances, capabilities, and vulnerabilities during political protest produce social, cultural, and political effects (De Lucca 1999; Peterson 2001). Wounded bodies, tortured bodies, defiant bodies, bodies that confront repression, bodies that protest in surprising ways, and out-of-place bodies shape both the political landscape and the embodied consciousness of participants.

In Argentina, the bodily dimension of political resistance is evoked through a common expression in some activist circles: *poner el cuerpo*. Literally, this phrase means "to put the body," which does not quite translate from Argentine Spanish to English. *Poner el cuerpo* overlaps somewhat with "to put the body on the line" and to "give the body," but it transcends both notions. With respect to political agency, *poner el cuerpo* means not just to talk, think, or desire but to be really present and involved; to put the whole (embodied) being into action, to be committed to a social cause, and to assume the bodily risks, work, and demands of such a commitment. *Poner el cuerpo* is part of the vocabulary of resistance in Argentina, and implies the importance of material bodies in the transformation of social relations and history. This article examines women's ways to *poner el cuerpo* in political resistance and the meanings attached to these actions.

## THE STUDY

This article emerges from a 14-month qualitative research project on the politics of women's bodies in Argentina, conducted during 2002–2003. The study is based mainly on 50 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups with women in the City of Buenos Aires and the surrounding metropolitan area. The research also included ethnographic observations of everyday life and social movement actions and analysis of print media information, especially from the conservative newspaper *La Nación* and the women's supplement of the left-leaning newspaper *Página 12*.

The four targeted focus groups consisted of charity volunteers, domestic service workers, women living in poverty, and lesbians. In addition, a combination of snowballing and convenience sampling was used to recruit individual interviewees. These women were diverse in age, socioeconomic background, and life experience.<sup>3</sup> About half of them were activists, including feminists, lesbian rights activists, labor

organizers, *piqueteras* (picketers), members of *asambleas populares* (popular assemblies), communal kitchen organizers, and members of human rights groups and organizations promoting the rights of Afro-Argentines, indigenous peoples, Latin American migrants, women in prostitution, and people with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

The interviews, which were audiotaped, followed a semistructured format (Rubin and Rubin 1995), relying on an interview guide but allowing flexibility for respondents to introduce additional issues and concerns. Interviewees answered general questions about bodily awareness, feelings, and practices, as well as more specific questions about their bodies in relation to the economic crisis, work, sexuality, reproduction, and the meanings of womanhood. Focus groups drew on similar themes, revealing how gender discourses are collectively constructed. Interviews also included a technique based on cards with body-related words that individual interviewees could choose and talk about.<sup>5</sup> In this article, pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the interviewees.

Most interviewees seemed at ease talking about themselves and were willing to share very personal experiences. The influence of the "psy culture" in Argentina, and especially in Buenos Aires, might help to account for the self-reflective mode of many of these women and for some of the concepts they relied on (e.g., a factory worker saying, "the economic crisis serves as a catharsis").<sup>6</sup> During interviews, an attempt was made to construct a safe space. Some women voiced sorrows or secrets held in for many years, sometimes crying during the process. Some told hard stories about rape, clandestine abortions, domestic violence, prostitution, torture, sexual humiliation, and hunger.

During my stay in Buenos Aires, I participated in multiple social movement actions and gatherings, such as protests to stop violence against women, to decriminalize abortion, to halt war and state repression, and to demand solutions to hunger, poverty, and unemployment. I also traveled to the 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, with a delegation of movement organizations from Argentina. In these events, I paid particular attention to what women were protesting about and how they were doing it. As part of my activist work with women in Buenos Aires, I was able to observe and reflect on women's collective responses to the crisis and to issues concerning women's bodies; for example, gender violence, health care, contraception, abortion, and hunger. Many of my solidarity and political activities involved interactions with women in social movements, especially middle-class feminists; and poor and working-class activists, including women in a shantytown. My participation in such women's networks responded to a deeply felt desire to be involved in social change struggles, strengthened by a climate of social movement effervescence.

Research, politics, and comradeship became tightly entwined in my involvement in social movement actions. I was not a distant or neutral observer. Like other activists, I wanted to affect the course of events, be it the wording of a flyer for International Women's Day or the kinds of actions we would engage (e.g., whether to protest in front of the cathedral or government buildings, the kinds of protest songs, the signs we would carry, and whether it was more important to conduct a "massive" event or remain fewer, but closer to specific political framings). I straddled the border between my allegiance to explicitly defined feminist causes and my hope to organize with, learn from, and support poor and working-class women whose political agenda was not always a smooth fit with that of middle-class feminists.

I became enmeshed in discussions and political analysis with other activists, and I tried to influence outcomes along with everyone else. I experienced conflict and frustration, bodily tiredness and exhilaration during political protests, and the empowering feelings that derive from collective action. I attended and took notes at multiple conferences, workshops, panel discussions, and informal meetings to discuss or devise practical strategies to redress social injustice and gender inequality. In these venues, I was an active participant who listened, asked questions, expressed opinions, helped put some women in contact with each other, and sometimes shaped discussions. This participation informed my understanding of women's bodily experiences and helped me to put my interviews into political perspective.

As an Argentine originally from Buenos Aires, I was well positioned to conduct a project about women's bodily experiences there. Yet my previous years living in the United States meant that Argentina was a familiar and strange terrain at the same time. While I felt connected to Argentina in profound ways, my experience as a foreigner in the United States had changed me, my worldview, my feelings about being a woman, and my ways of relating to other people.<sup>7</sup> Thus I entered Argentina as an insider-outsider, a person who already knew important aspects of the culture but could notice other things that were novel, surprising, or even shocking. I embarked on my research with the familiarity of a long-gone daughter and the curiosity and eyes-wide-open approach of someone who explores uncharted ground. My study required me to see and feel my own country anew, drawing from old wisdoms, remembering things I had forgotten, and learning to operate in new ways, as required by the rapid changes that the socioeconomic crisis was triggering.

## **ECONOMIC CRISIS AND POLITICAL PROTEST**

The social eruption in Argentina of 2001–2003, with its epicenter in Buenos Aires, made more visible the matrix of power relations that

shape women's lives. The crisis proved to be catalytic, and many women spoke out clearly and loudly about the problems they experienced. As known ways of life and expectations started to crumble, different women's groups and organizations challenged aspects of the economy, the family, the state, and the Catholic Church. This critique gained momentum with the wave of social protest that mounted during the period of this study. The unfulfilled promises of formal democracy, the continuities with a past of brutal military dictatorship (1976–83), the impoverishment of the population, the corruption of political and economic elites, and the neoliberal economic model all came under the scrutiny of ordinary citizens (Argumedo and Quintar 2003; Armony and Armony 2005; Cafassi 2002; Dinerstein 2002; Petras 2003; Pérez 2002). They voiced discontent in the streets, put their bodies on the line in protest, and engaged in embodied practices of care and solidarity in their neighborhoods, communities, and social movements.

The story of Argentina transcends the nation's borders, as it is about both the patterns of global economics and the ways that resisting voices and bodies emerge when the political ground shifts. During the 1990s, Argentina experienced a dramatic restructuring of the state and the economy. The administration of Carlos Saúl Menem (1989–99) embraced neoliberalism as a strategy to "modernize" the country and make it competitive in the globalized capitalist economy. The government implemented structural adjustment measures, privatizing many of the state-owned companies, instituting a Convertibility Plan that pegged the national currency to the dollar, cutting social expenditures, applying reforms that undermined the labor sector and favored big business, deregulating the market, and opening the economy to foreign investment. This model, which promised "efficiency" and economic growth, promoted the concentration of capital and neglected redistribution (Giaracca and Teubal 2001; Argumedo and Quintar 2003). The brief presidency of Fernando De La Rúa (1999–2001) continued many of these policies, fostering greater social polarization.

By the end of 2001, De La Rúa's government could not longer sustain the Convertibility Plan. To prevent a run on banks, the government ordered the freezing of bank accounts, trapping the savings of large numbers of people. Early in 2002, an interim government devalued the national currency, and price inflation, particularly of basic foodstuffs, followed. At the same time, Argentina announced the biggest foreign debt default in history. Hunger, poverty, and unemployment swelled. Per capita income dropped about 20 percent from 1995 to 2002, and during the same period, the number of people living under the poverty line increased from 29.4 percent to 53.3 percent (De Riz et al. 2002, 36). The percentage of people who could not access basic nutrition grew from 7.9 percent in 1995 to 25.2 percent in 2002 (De Riz et al. 2002, 49).

Unemployment reached a high of 21.5 percent in May 2002 (INDEC n.d.). Many in the population, especially the poor, but even members of a declining middle class, had to struggle harder than ever before to make ends meet.

As Argentines had to reinvent themselves in order to survive adversity, and as they demanded political and institutional changes, many saw Argentina as a place to try out collective responses to globalization. Ordinary people experimented with diverse forms of organizing, such as neighborhood *asambleas*, worker-run factories, bartering clubs, communal kitchens, collective bakeries, and vegetable gardens.<sup>8</sup> Many of these projects were connected to broader political protest. For example, the *piquetero/a* movement, composed of unemployed workers and poor people, sustained communal kitchens, health and education initiatives, and microenterprises and, at the same time, demanded economic justice with roadblocks (*piquetes*). *Asambleas populares*, including middle-class members, organized handicraft street fairs and other economic projects, created cultural centers in squatter buildings, and staged street *cacerolazos* (banging pots and pans) in protest (Di Marco et al. 2003).

Women played significant roles in these struggles. Early in the field research, activists were talking not only about the "feminization of poverty" but also about the "feminization of resistance" (Korol 2004). The latter term refers to women's growing participation in political organizing and protest, particularly in connection with survival strategies, such as communal kitchens and other neighborhood-based projects. Many of these women questioned long-held gender norms and were deeply transformed by their own political participation (Chejter 2002a; RIGC 2003). Some women felt compelled to become politically active for the first time, out of sheer necessity and rage over the social conditions in Argentina, and they became engaged in previously unimagined political actions. Other women connected past experiences of activism to these new struggles; for instance, linking militancy in leftist organizations in the 1970s, human rights activism during and after the last military dictatorship, and participation in the women's movement after the return of democracy in 1983.

It is interesting that many women's struggles centered on bodily issues: the bodies tortured and "disappeared" by the dictatorship, food security and adequate health care, reproductive and sexual freedom, and the right to lead lives without physical violence, to name a few examples. Yet it is not only the substance of women's demands (e.g., access to abortion and contraception) but also activist practices themselves that can disrupt normative notions of feminine embodiment (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003).

## WOMEN'S BODIES, GENDER NORMS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In Argentina, prevailing norms of femininity construct the female body as a "body for others" (Di Liscia and Di Liscia 1997), particularly for children and for men. Gender expectations promote maternal embodiment and require women to display a heterosexual "feminine" bodily appearance and demeanor. These gendered constructions have racial, class, sexual, and age implications, marking differences and hierarchies in relation to men and creating and reproducing inequities and exclusions among women. Although women in Argentina do not fit a single mold, the hegemonic character of femininity norms means that these norms are sustained partly with the "collaboration" of many women, and that women are generally held accountable to them. These norms, in turn, shape many activists' *poner el cuerpo*, their action frames, and public perceptions of women's political participation.

The concept of maternal embodiment evokes a generous, all-giving female body that dedicates corporeal resources to her offspring during pregnancy and beyond (Ramos 2000; Burín 1987). The maternal body means not only the pregnant or nursing female body but also one that represents the traits of nurturance and sacrifice for others. The association of women with self-giving attributes is commonly seen as rooted in women's biology and reproductive capacities. Yet social arrangements, including the gendered division of housework and care work (which disproportionately fall on women), produce and perpetuate the sacrificial character of maternal embodiment. Women are expected to dedicate their bodily energy and resources to family, and by extension to community, even if that means sacrificing their own bodily needs or health (Di Liscia and Di Liscia 1997). Structural adjustment has also relied heavily on women's corporeal resources. Neoliberal policies rested on assumptions that the economic squeeze and social needs that they created (e.g., when the state withdrew social services) would be taken care of by the people—for example, through women's embodied labor.

Powerful institutions, such as the state, the Catholic Church, and the education system, have glorified the self-giving aspects of maternal embodiment. The church exalts the Virgin Mary and her maternal role as a model that women should follow. State policies encouraged by the Catholic Church, such as those criminalizing abortion or preventing adequate access to contraception, also enforce maternal embodiment, even if they go against women's desires or needs (Checa and Rosenberg 1996; Ramos et al. 2001; FDR 1997). The education system, with a high concentration of women teachers at the primary and secondary education level, relies on the view of teachers as "second mothers" who should give themselves to children (Bolcatto 2000) and even accept low

wages and substandard working conditions without protest. Controversial political figures, such as Eva Perón (1919–1952), also spread the ideology of sacrificial motherhood. Despite not having children and being a powerful woman herself, Evita wielded her influence partly through a sacrificial discourse that projected her as the “mother of the poor” and pointed to President Juan D. Perón, her husband, as the driving force of her actions (Fraser and Navarro 1981).

The social promotion of maternal sacrifice and nurturance is not unique to Argentina, and it has been observed in many other Latin American countries, affecting the lives, activism, and political leadership of women in the region (e.g., Chaney 1979; Auyero 1999). In some cases, women’s social positions as mothers sparked and sustained their activism. In Argentina, activist groups such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo drew on the image of motherhood to lend legitimacy to their struggle to bring back their children “disappeared” by the last military dictatorship. The military tried to discredit these women as bad mothers, crazy women who had failed in their fundamental mothering roles by raising “subversives.” Yet speaking on behalf of their children is generally viewed as an appropriate feminine behavior, a perspective that helped the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to maneuver politically at a dangerous time.

Feijoó and Nari suggest that through their activism, the mothers incorporated “a feminine perspective in the world of patriarchal and masculine politics” (1994, 113). Furthermore, their activism was a deeply embodied practice that infused motherhood with a political meaning.

Mothers fought with their own bodies, which they offered as evidence of the existence of the children the regime had “disappeared.” They had birthed those children, and now, in their absence, they had to speak for them and birth them again as words and as ideas [ . . . ] the Mothers have used strategies that actually bring their children’s corporeality back. In different demonstrations, the women have used paper silhouettes, masks, paper hands, and human shapes drawn on the pavement to help the public perceive the children’s absence physically. (Bergman and Szurmuk 2001, 390)

Another aspect of normative femininity in Argentina, and in Buenos Aires in particular, entails the cultivation of a bodily appearance in line with Western standards. Western femininity norms emphasize, exaggerate, and create differences between men’s and women’s bodies, encouraging women to be delicate, soft, fragile, agreeable, and sexually attractive to men (Connell 1987; Bartky 1998; Rich 1980; Smith 1990). Dominant beauty standards in Argentina exalt thin, young, white, manicured, and sculpted female bodies (Itkin 1996; Hasanbegovic 1998). These cultural norms permeate and get reproduced through key institutions, including

the media and the family, and even through economic imperatives promoting industries such as fashion, tourism, or other jobs that require women's *buena presencia* (good appearance) as a condition for work.

Activist women have sometimes played on these norms to achieve political goals. For example, the display of female beauty and sexuality has been instrumental in an ongoing environmental conflict involving the construction of pulp mills along the Uruguay River. The project threatens to cause major pollution in the surrounding area, in both Uruguay and Argentina. On May 12, 2006, Evangelina Carrozo, Greenpeace activist and Queen of Carnival in the nearby city of Gualeguaychú, sneaked into the Fourth Summit of European, Latin American, and Caribbean heads of state in Vienna with a sign reading "No pulp mill pollution" (*No a las papeleras contaminantes*) (Curia 2006). What brought media and political attention to this protest was not only the security breach but also Carrozo's appearance in her carnival outfit—a tiny bikini that revealed her sleek figure, exposing her buttocks almost completely.

Issues of feminine bodily appearance have historically been connected to activist politics and repression. Diana Taylor (1997) shows that displaying a "proper," gender-specific appearance was important during the last military dictatorship to deflect suspicions of having communist, leftist, or other kinds of "subversive" inclinations. Being a "good woman"—as opposed to the "bad women" embodied by *guerrilleras* or those deemed as such in the military's discourse—was manifested partly through a proper feminine look. Alejandra Oberti (2005) underscores the conflicted embodiments of women in guerrilla organizations as they strove to embody traits associated with masculinity as a condition for successful militancy (e.g., holding guns, subscribing to a military logic), manipulated hyperfemininity for seduction or politically strategic purposes (e.g., wearing miniskirts and makeup to disguise their identities), and struggled to fulfill motherhood demands while also being militants.

Claudia Hasanbegovic (1998) recounts how the dictatorship's torturers tried to impose their standards on the women they held in illegal detention centers, many of them activists. The military expected these women to use makeup, to wear dresses and skirts instead of jeans, to exhibit a docile demeanor, and generally to comply with normative femininity. Such compliance was supposed to indicate which of the abducted women were "recoverable"; that is, which ones showed repentance for their previous lifestyle and were therefore eligible to live (Hasanbegovic 1998; Actis et al. 2001).

Contemporary activist embodiments do not occur in a sociohistorical vacuum. They build on a rich legacy of collective actions, which they continually draw on, contest, and reconfigure. Performative methods, such as the *escraches* (public shamings) used by human rights groups to expose state terrorists, are currently used by feminist groups to

denounce rapists.<sup>9</sup> We can also see this kind of “borrowing” in the conversion of slogans from the 1970s, such as *Si Evita viviera sería Montonera* (if Evita lived she would be a *Montonera*) into similar phrases inscribed on the vests of unemployed workers, reading *Si Evita viviera sería Piquetera* (If Evita lived, she would be a *Piquetera*).<sup>10</sup> In that way, the bodies of *piqueteros/as* become sites where a history of political contestation—from Evita to the 1970s to the present—is recovered and performed. Claiming Evita, in the body, as one of the *piqueteras*’ own draws attention to the plight and resistance of the poor, suggests an allegiance with combative Peronist currents, and evokes the style of feminine politics that Evita embodied.

Many of the women who survived the political repression of the 1970s carry on old and new struggles, bringing their experiences and lessons into current activism and also affecting the latest generations of activist women. A feminist activist who participated in a workshop on the gendered effects of the 2001 economic collapse titled “Women and the Crisis: Marks on the Body” wove her critique of contemporary politics with her memories of the dictatorship. For her, political participation, confronting fear, and naming the bodily scars of the dictatorship—and now the scars of the economic crisis—are essential aspects of an ongoing “exercise of resistance,” a legacy she has strived to pass on to younger people (see Sutton 2004).

Some women bear the marks of political violence on their bodies and psyches because they survived illegal detention and torture—including sexualized forms, such as rape and electric discharge on genitals—and coped with the disappearance of relatives and comrades. A number of activists in this period were members of feminist associations, were doubly militant (in leftist, mixed-gender organizations and in feminist groups), or became committed to feminism during exile (Gramático 2005). They bring their experience to the contemporary women’s movement, not only as they shape political debates on contraception, abortion, violence, economics, and other timely topics, but as they promote radical social changes with their bodily presence in street protests.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose activism started in the late 1970s and continues today (Borland 2006), have also crafted an enduring legacy of activism for women in Argentina. They affected activist frames as they politicized motherhood, made organized claims to the state, confronted police and military repression, shaped human rights agendas, and denounced the thread running through the political and economic system imposed by the military dictatorship and the neoliberal policies implemented by later constitutional governments, especially during the 1990s.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have offered practical aid and solidarity to worker-run factories, organized popular education work-

shops, engaged in hunger strikes to support political prisoners, and often appeared in key demonstrations. They embody an activist practice that legitimates motherhood as a viable source of political involvement. This approach animates other women's political participation in contemporary Argentina as they struggle for the economic survival of their families and protest neoliberal economic policies that keep their children sick and hungry. Many women whose activism is not driven by maternal politics or who have criticized such frames—for example, feminists—can still relate to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and engage with their legacy as champions of human rights causes.

Women's activist embodiments in Argentina have been particularly visible in the recent period because of the proliferation of social movements that the crisis prompted. Yet *poner el cuerpo*, embodying resistance, is precisely what many women have done throughout Argentine history to fight various forms of injustice.

## BODIES AND POLITICAL PROTEST

Although activists are often compelled to *poner el cuerpo* in political actions, the role of the body has been insufficiently examined in social movement theorizing. Even if not explicitly theorized, however, the body is—as in any other realm of social life (Le Breton 2002; Shilling 2003; Wacquant 2004)—an implicit presence in accounts of political protest. Relatively recent studies of social movement activism make a point of theorizing the role of the body (see De Lucca 1999; Laware 2004; Parkins 2000; Peterson 2001; Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003). In her discussion of militant bodies in Europe, Abby Peterson eloquently describes how the body is deeply enmeshed in political resistance.

In the struggle against existing structures of power, the body is the most primary interface of powers of resistance. However, the body is more than an interface of the power of resistance, the militant body is a power of resistance [. . .] Feelings, emotions, lived and living experiences of oppression and resistance, even bodily secretions such as adrenaline and sweat, are brought directly to bear upon a political struggle. Theirs is the “hot” struggle of passions, far removed from the tepid bodies and deliberating “Cartesian heads” of institutional politics. (Peterson 2001, 69)

Drawing on previous theorizing about the relationship between bodies and political resistance (particularly on Peterson's work) and applying it to concrete examples of women's activism in Argentina, the following paragraphs outline four ways in which bodies are embedded in and significant to political protest.

The first and perhaps most obvious dimension of much activism is that political protest happens through the body (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003). As with all human behaviors, activists use and deploy their bodies in specific ways to achieve their political goals. Activist practices enlist bodily capabilities and endurance, sometimes even in dangerous actions that "play upon the vulnerability of the body as a tactic for political communication," such as locking the body to a tree or a building (Peterson 2001, 74). In Argentina, women have engaged in activist practices both along with men and in women-only actions and demonstrations. These embodied practices include carrying signs or flags for long hours; moving fast during graffiti painting or *pegatinas* (pasting flyers or posters on street walls); playing music, dancing, and chanting; holding sticks for self-defense; forming bodily chains to block roads; confronting the physical violence of police; hunger striking; and banging pots and pans to protest a whole array of social problems. Different social movement cultures, specific movement demands, and activists' differential locations in the social structure shape these embodied actions.

Second, activists often use their bodies as political "arguments" (De Lucca 1999) or "text" (Peterson 2001), as symbols that convey political meanings. Calling attention to their own bodies, activists construct "compelling images that attract media attention" (De Lucca 1999, 10), as well as the attention of other protesters and onlookers at the scene. Women in Argentina have engaged, as men have, in a variety of political actions in which the body is a useful "argumentative resource" (De Lucca 1999). For example, they clothe or unclothe the body in particular ways. Activists' T-shirts inscribed with two interlaced women's symbols publicly reveal what Rich (1980) calls "lesbian existence." A lesbian activist interviewed for this research marched bare-breasted during the annual sexual diversity pride march to reclaim her bodily freedom and visibility as a lesbian.

Activists' costumes or flamboyant outfits can be a way to mock and denounce dominant institutions. The purple and glittery "nun" clothing of the lesbian feminist group *Caramelitas en Calzas* satirizes the Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> The white headscarves of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo evoke children's diapers and affirm the political aspects of motherhood. The blue aprons of women occupying Brukman, a factory recovered by workers during the crisis, show their laborer status. *Piqueteras'* colorful vests make visible their organizational affiliation and the massiveness of their movement. Feminists' purple clothing, migrant women's typical national attire, and activists' shirts with political slogans are all marks of identity, and show how the body is not only inscribed by culture but is also a resource for political resistance.

Third, the material characteristics, needs, vulnerabilities, and resiliency of activist bodies cannot be separated from activist practices.<sup>12</sup> During

protest events, activist bodies may need food or water; may get wet, too cold, or too warm; may need to go to the bathroom; and may experience physical pain inflicted by state repression. Activist women's bodies may, at various times, also be pregnant, nursing, or menstruating. Sometimes bodily needs are incorporated into political protest (e.g., women nursing babies during demonstrations) or become the protest itself, such as in *ollas populares*, communal meals prepared during protests to satisfy protesters' physical needs and to expose poor people's hunger.

The bodily risks inherent in political protest, compounded with social perceptions about women's special fragility and vulnerability (as opposed to men's perceived strength and resiliency), have been used to exclude or subordinate women's social movement participation. Women have sometimes played on this "fragility" in order to make their tactics more effective. Yet many women have historically also demonstrated embodied courage and resiliency in multiple political actions.

Numbers of bodies are the fourth way that bodies are important to political protest. It makes a difference whether two hundred or two hundred thousand people protest in the streets. "Massed bodies" (Peterson 2001) constitute tangible sources of power during protests. The social climate in Argentina during 2002–2003 was characterized by mass protests, the presence of thousands of bodies marching in the streets, blocking roads, banging pots and pans, and persistently demanding social change—actions in which women actively participated. The persuasiveness of massive bodily presence in a march, a *piquete*, or a *cacerolazo* makes it harder for the state to downplay the existence of social problems. Indeed, the "crowd control" equipment carried by police officers shows the government's considerable efforts to contain or suppress the power of massed bodies.

Activists' bodies convey political ideas, demand changes, and exert pressure. At the same time, activists project images about and experience their own bodily powers and capacities. In the context of sexist political cultures, women's activist practices may foster different perceptions of what constitutes an activist body and a member of the body politic. Such actions can also help create alternative notions of embodied womanhood (Laware 2004; Parkins 2000; Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003).

### **DIMENSIONS OF *PONER EL CUERPO* FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES**

In talking about their experiences, hopes, and dreams, a number of women in this study, particularly activists, used the expression *poner el cuerpo* to describe ways in which they cope with, resist, or struggle to transform oppressive social relations. This expression also appeared in some newspaper articles, feminist listservs, and social movement events.

While *poner el cuerpo* is not an expression or practice only women engage in (both men and women *ponen el cuerpo* in *piquetes*, hunger strikes, and other activist tactics), the focus here is on women for empirical and theoretical reasons. The data for this study emerged from a study centered on women, and women's bodies have been socially imbued with meanings, such as passivity and submissiveness, that are antithetical to political protest, to a political *poner el cuerpo*. The interest therefore was in how these notions permeate and are disrupted by women's words and actions. Future research could fruitfully compare the connotations of *poner el cuerpo* for men, women, and people who do not conform to gender binaries.

Evoking the body in relation to political resistance is important in a country still suffering from the open wounds of a time when politics were violently fought on the body, a time during which a military regime tortured and "disappeared" thousands of dissident bodies (Calveiro 2004). This study explores the connotations of *poner el cuerpo* for women during another difficult period of Argentine history, one marked by economic crisis, unprecedented levels of poverty, and social unrest. In talking about *poner el cuerpo* in this context, women unraveled multiple dimensions.

### **Embodied Collective Protest and Daily Activist Work**

The collectivity and solidarity embedded in an activist understanding of *poner el cuerpo* involves two different but interrelated aspects: bodily presence in protests, such as marches, *escraches*, *cacerolazos*, and *piquetes*; and the less spectacular but equally important daily (embodied) work of activism; that is, attending meetings, organizing events, writing pamphlets, fundraising, leafleting, providing services, and building community resources (see Bidaseca 2006). Women engage in both types of activism, even though these dimensions are not uniform but inflected by gender, class, and other axes of difference.

With respect to class, for example, women's participation in communal kitchens has been crucial to poor and working-class movements (e.g., *piquetero/as*), while it has not been central to the organizing of middle-class feminists, whose families' nutritional needs were met. Regarding gender, studies have documented how, in some *piquetero/a* organizations, women have been more likely than men to be in charge of the area of health, sewing shops, or food preparation, and they have sometimes had trouble participating in movement meetings because of additional responsibilities at home (Bidaseca 2006; Cross and Partenio 2005). Furthermore, while this movement has women leaders, especially at the barrio level, the top authorities tend to be men (Andújar 2005; Rauber 2002).

Both political protest and daily activist work demand intense bodily commitment, something activists recognize when they talk of activism as *poner el cuerpo*. Violeta, a lesbian and long-term women's movement activist, explains: "To me, for example, *poner el cuerpo* means activism, with everything that this involves: energy, time, dedication, loss of other spaces [ . . . ] and *poner el cuerpo* with a sign in marches; it was a process for me to be able to do it."<sup>13</sup> Guadalupe, a young lesbian activist, echoes that view: "*Poner el cuerpo* means just that, like to put, besides time [ . . . ] the bodily experience of that, of going out to the streets, or going to a march, or putting in the work, those things." Paula, a 30-year-old factory worker and labor activist, draws linkages between women's hard, embodied work in multiple arenas, including the domestic and social movement spheres: "We [women] are so important, such fighters; we put the *lomo* [back] in everything."<sup>14</sup>

These narratives also suggest that *poner el cuerpo* connotes togetherness, engaging other bodies in the project of creating social change, of building power together from the bottom up. From this perspective, *poner el cuerpo* as a practice of resistance is not a lonely or individual task but a collective, embodied process that sprouts solidarity and valuable knowledge. As Luz, a young and dedicated activist, proposes, "we go together, we do it together, and we learn." When activists call on others to *poner el cuerpo*, they are asking people to take a stand, to act in solidarity, to make an embodied commitment—and in doing so they point out the importance of physical presence, of bodily participation in social change. This is how Luz describes it, on the basis of her experience as an activist in an organization of mostly working-class and poor women (many of them *piqueteras*) and in a mixed-gender leftist political organization.

Look, I think that the balance of the 19th and 20th of December [2001 popular uprisings] is this: that we went out to *poner el cuerpo*. When we say that in Argentina there was a jump in people's participation [ . . . ] it is because many more people started to *poner el cuerpo*. They started to *poner el cuerpo*, they started to participate. I believe that our politicians never *pusieron el cuerpo*, never. [ . . . ] I believe that the new political leadership should be like this: it should come up very much from the bottom, having broken their backs working, and should continue breaking their backs with the work. I think that's the turning point. And I very much value that.

Here, *poner el cuerpo* has the double meaning of participation in mass mobilization and the more hidden daily work of activism. The vivid image of backbreaking work again highlights the intense embodied labor involved in collective efforts to change society. According to this view, social transformation is an embodied collective project.

## Coherence Between Words and Actions

Luz explains her own style of embodiment using the expression *poner el cuerpo*. She advances a mode of being in the world in which embodied resistance is part and parcel of what it means to be a woman. Luz talks about *poner el cuerpo* to indicate that words and ideas are necessary but insufficient in social change struggles. She requires coherence between words and actions.

I'm the type to *poner el cuerpo*, very much to *poner el cuerpo*. What it is said with the *pico* [beak, mouth] should be supported with the *lomo* [back], and I am more about doing than saying. I'm more about *poner el cuerpo*, you see? I always say, there are those who say, "This should be done," "This should be done, blah, blah, blah" and [then] me and people like me—you could say, from the other group—who don't say "This should be done"; we go, and we do it, you see? [laughs]

Besides stressing the contrast between mere saying and embodied doing, the reference to the *lomo* in the above passage underscores the notion of hard, embodied labor. Resistance is not only about great ideas or visions, but also about everyday hard work that requires an investment of bodily resources. There is a gendered component implicit in these views: because of their positions of power in organizations and institutions (as bosses, administrators, and heads of households), men have been traditionally more likely to be able to say "this should be done," while women have been likely to do the daily embodied work in organizations and families. Much of this work, moreover, has traditionally been invisible (Bidaseca 2006).<sup>15</sup> Luz hints at this gendered (and class) contrast by saying that politicians—mostly economically privileged men—never had to *poner el cuerpo*.

Laudano (2002) argues that usually *la palabra* (the spoken word), which she associates with power, is less available to women than actions that more clearly involve *poner el cuerpo* (e.g., roadblocks), and that is why it may be more possible for some women, specifically *piqueteras*, to participate in a roadblock than to speak with authority in movement meetings. While there is certainly power in speech, and while women should not be denied the possibility to discuss and frame decisions in movements, women's participation in actions like blocking roads and occupying public spaces with their bodies is no small feat. These kinds of actions contest gender ideologies that associate women with passivity, submission, and fragility, and have the potential to function as passports to greater authority in movements. Just as women claim their right to decide on reproductive matters because pregnancy happens in their bodies, women who put their bodies on the line in

movement actions should be able to claim greater authority in social movement organizations partly on the basis of that bodily commitment.

The power of speech and the power generated in more obviously embodied actions need not be mutually exclusive. For example, Luz builds an alternative leadership style that embraces the unity of embodied thinking, saying, and doing, and that challenges sexist assumptions that condemn women to be "bodies" devoid of thought, decision, or will. Through her activist practices, Luz advances a mode of embodiment as a committed, intelligent, and active woman: "It is as much about being thoughtful, and creative [ . . . ] as being able to do things, right?" Luz values women's embodied activism as a thoughtful praxis and not as the result of the designs of others. In explaining the meaning of *poner el cuerpo*, she argues against boundaries between those who think or say and those who do.

I'm not going to say to someone: "Look, you should do this." In any case: "*Che* [hey], let's go together and do such and such a thing" or "*Che*, it would be great if we could do a workshop [with other women]." We go together, and we do it together, and we learn. And when I do give a task to someone else, when I delegate, I even accompany with my body, right? I'm very much about *poner el cuerpo*, I'm very much about *poner el cuerpo*. And I really value that form of leadership.

Luz's repeated use of the phrase *poner el cuerpo* is a reminder that activist praxis entails people's physical capacities, energy, and participation. Yet the way Luz conceptualizes *poner el cuerpo* suggests an embodied commitment that is thoroughly intertwined with a thought and speaking process. In this sense, *poner el cuerpo* is not like offering raw matter, akin to an object; it is a kind of commitment that engages all aspects of self.

### **Embodied Sacrifice**

*Poner el cuerpo* has a sacrificial dimension that involves offering bodily resources to serve a specific purpose or cause. In terms of political resistance, this embodied offering may be grounded in need, deep commitment, or a sense of justice.

In December 2004, nine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo went on a hunger strike to demand the release of political prisoners and the decriminalization of activists targeted during the socioeconomic crisis. One of the mothers, Hebe de Bonafini, referred to the hunger strike as a "really significant effort" that "involves *poner el cuerpo*." She highlighted the sacrifice by pointing out that they "are women between 75 and 93 years old" and that the body is "the only thing we have to *poner*."

[ . . . ] As long as we breathe we are going to continue to *poner el cuerpo*" (Bonafini 2004). Here, the body appears as the most basic and ordinary thing one can offer (particularly if one does not come from a privileged class), but at the same time, this bodily offer constitutes a supreme act because the body is the essential stuff of existence. While this kind of bodily giving is inscribed in the gendered symbols that the mothers have evoked throughout their activism (i.e. motherly sacrifice), what Bonafini emphasized in her speech was not only the sacrifice but the determination and political agency.

A woman who survived the dictatorship's concentration camps also talked about her *poner el cuerpo*, this time in reference to the act of giving testimonies in postdictatorship trials against the military: "*Ponemos el cuerpo* each time we relive that history, and we testify, and it hurts, but it is also good for us" (quoted in Actis et al. 2001, 284). *Poner el cuerpo*, in this passage, points to the physical act of being there, speaking up, and withstanding the painful embodied emotions associated with memories of torture and terror. There is pain and sacrifice associated with giving testimony, but this woman recognizes that *poner el cuerpo* in that way is both necessary and worthwhile.

In other cases, statements about the sacrifice entailed in *poner el cuerpo* have more negative connotations. Victoria, an impoverished middle-class interviewee, suggests that "there's a good and a bad *poner el cuerpo*." A good *poner el cuerpo* refers to participation in a project in a "more or less equitable way" with other people, when others also give their bodily resources. A bad *poner el cuerpo* refers to an unwarranted sacrifice, such as

*poner el cuerpo* performing excessive caring tasks for others. *Poner el cuerpo* is a high level of giving with many things, very deep . . . and, often, it is a way of losing oneself . . . like losing the boundary of being oneself . . . the body is what carries you, the only instrument to go through life. So to me, *poner el cuerpo* sounds like it can even be sacrificial.

Roberta, a young woman who organized with others to improve conditions at her workplace in the public university, exemplifies this notion of excessive sacrifice, of getting "too involved" without paying due attention to her embodied self. She explains that her tendency to *poner el cuerpo* without measuring costs, always putting other people's needs first, has produced the deterioration of her own body.

I see *poner el cuerpo* that way, that perhaps I don't take care of myself and I place too much importance on certain things, that perhaps it is OK that I do that, but one shouldn't neglect oneself . . . When one uses the phrase *poner el cuerpo*, I came to the conclu-

sion that I do it in truth. Above all other things, I give a lot of myself . . . I become involved . . . I see *poner el cuerpo* that way, I put a lot of myself into the things that I do . . . I put everything I can in all ways, just as much with my family, with my friends, with my boyfriend, and at work—and I leave myself on the side.

Roberta continues, saying she often used the phrase *poner el cuerpo* to describe that kind of deep commitment, but “didn’t understand it as really the physical body, but just as an expression. And perhaps once illnesses started to arise—they aren’t serious but they have to do with not taking care of myself—I realize that it really is *poner el cuerpo*.”

Women’s political activism in the context of gender inequality can take a particularly heavy toll on the body. Luz knows this from her own experience as a committed activist.

Society requires that we do four or five times more [than men] in order to recognize us, and so we do, right? I see myself and hear others saying, “I go to the *piquete*, but first I clean my house and leave everything tidy” [. . .] Now we are the Amazons, you know, the new Amazons of society, but at what cost? We have to work because our husbands are unemployed, go to the *piquete* because we are also unemployed, work in the communal kitchen, take care of the kids. Gee! We have erupted into political life but at too high a cost. And to some extent, we withstand that and burden our *lomos* [backs], right? [. . .] I believe that we demand from our bodies a lot more than men do.

The sacrifice dimension of *poner el cuerpo* emphasized here resonates with prevailing gender expectations, particularly in the domestic sphere. Women’s embodied sacrifice is further magnified by inequality in the public realm, implied in the idea that women have to do more than men to be recognized. Class also plays a role because, for example, the luxury of leaving the children with a paid babysitter or a domestic service worker is generally not available to *piqueteras* (while it is probably more possible for middle-class women), so they have to continue their embodied care work in the midst of protest.

Many women in Argentina are often in situations of *poner el cuerpo* in the sense of forced sacrifice, rather than as a “voluntary donation” (*donación voluntaria*) (Rosenberg 2002, 5). This is true when they cannot access contraceptives; when they are pushed to abortions in dangerous conditions; when they have little choice but heterosexuality; when they must prostitute their bodies to survive; when they are encouraged to starve themselves to comply with dominant beauty standards; and when they are wounded or killed by sexual or domestic violence. *Poner el cuerpo* in these cases risks women’s bodily integrity and reflects social constraints, restricted choices, or outright coercion. Other

ways to *poner el cuerpo* may be empowering for women, however; and these are tied to women's political resistance.

### **Embodied Risk, Courage, and Struggle**

In challenging the status quo, political participation exposes the body to potential jeopardy (De Lucca 1999, Peterson 2001). Guadalupe gives an example of how *poner el cuerpo* signals the possibility of being harmed, punished, or harassed in the process: "And *poner el cuerpo* means to go out to paint [graffiti] in the streets, with my *cuerpito* [little body] running with the police behind me, and with my *cuerpito*, explaining to the police that we are a group of lesbians that [laughs], I don't know, those things."

Here, several factors contribute to the risks latent in *poner el cuerpo*. Guadalupe's expression "with my *cuerpito*" underscores the body's vulnerability. Graffiti painting and lesbian identity indicates a transgression of societal norms, a taking of risks on two levels. The police represent the force of those who sustain the status quo and can harm the bodies of those who transgress.

Flor, a middle-class neighborhood assembly activist, also highlights the risks inherent in *poner el cuerpo*: "One thing is to go and ask for things at the CGP [neighborhood center run by the city government], two or three people, and another one is *poner el cuerpo* [by making a fuss at the police station]." The less threatening action of asking for things at the CGP contrasts with the more combative and therefore riskier *poner el cuerpo* entailed in confronting the police, an institution capable of inflicting physical harm.

Assuming risks and facing dangerous situations have been socially constructed as the province of men. However, activist women challenge those ideas through their concrete, embodied resistance and courage. Flor explains that *poner el cuerpo* means "to struggle, to struggle, and if there is a difficulty . . . confront it and see how to overcome it." From a political perspective, *poner el cuerpo* means embodied resistance, the opposite of remaining uninvolved, remaining indifferent, or running away. It is confronting what is problematic, difficult, or scary with the whole, embodied self.

### **CONFRONTING HEGEMONIC MODES OF FEMININE EMBODIMENT**

While dominant norms of femininity are still in place and permeate even women's practices of resistance, women's massive involvement in social movements also disrupts gendered expectations, including those that play most obviously on women's bodies. In the midst of crises, many

women have advanced alternative modes of feminine embodiment grounded in political struggle and resistance.

The statement of Nana, an activist involved in a popular uprising in the poverty-ridden province of Santiago del Estero in 1993 (Auyero 2003), suggests a complex relationship between the body, consciousness, and political struggle. Through her political participation, Nana underwent not only a change of consciousness but also a transformation of her bodily appearance and demeanor: "I don't wear makeup. I can let my gray hair grow. I don't wear miniskirts anymore. I became a commando woman, a battle woman. I took all this very seriously, ever since the 16th [of December 1993, date of the uprising]. . . . To me the 16th was the battle that I won" (Auyero 2003, 2). As Nana's statement implies, *poner el cuerpo* in political activism can influence the way women see themselves, their assessment of their bodily capacities, and the body image they project to the world.

While both men and women have fought to change social conditions, women's political actions have often been overlooked or made invisible. For example, the use of generic (masculine) nouns to refer to the struggles of *los maestros* (male teachers), *los piqueteros* (men members of the *piquetero/a* movement), or *los trabajadores* (men workers) in the Brukman factory neglects the reality that women are the majority or a significant portion of these activists. Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, makes a similar point in reference to the disappeared, many of whom were activist women.

Each time I attend an event, I close it asking to remember the 30,000 women and men [disappeared], and I say women and men. I've already gotten people's ears used to it, so that they are clear that it is not "*los desaparecidos*" [disappeared men, used as a universal category], but "*los desaparecidos*" [disappeared men] and "*las desaparecidas*" [disappeared women]; I don't leave it to the imagination, I leave it in their ears. (Quoted in Chejter 2002b, 151)

Some of the literature on women's movements in Latin America shows that ideological divisions between public and private spheres and the association of women with the private one—the realm of the maternal body, of (hetero)sexuality—have made it difficult to recognize women's political participation.<sup>16</sup> Women traditionally were not supposed to participate in politics (García 1999). To this day, women's activism may be seen as suspect, on the basis of ideas about the proper space for women's sexualized bodies. For example, Lucía, a *piquetera*, explained that her sometimes violent husband tried to prevent her political participation with the accusation that she goes "to marches to *putear*" (to be a *puta*, a prostitute; to be unfaithful). This perception conflates the female body's incursion in political life with sexual

deviance. The “activist body” is not on the list of appropriate feminine traits, perhaps because an activist body contradicts the docile feminine body idealized in Argentina.

Sometimes, idealized traits can be turned around and used strategically. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo drew on their feminine, maternal bodies—bodies perceived as nonthreatening—to make claims to the state in ways that were not available to other activists, especially during a time in which political activities were banned and therefore dangerous (Arditti 1999; Fisher 1993). Their bodies contradicted previous cultural ideas about how activists looked (mostly young and male), especially because the state propaganda depicted activists as dangerous criminals (Basabe 2003; Feitlowitz 1998; Laudano 1998; Taylor 1997). This image of criminality did not match the sight of maternal bodies peacefully demonstrating in the plaza. Yet the military’s disparaging labels, such as *las locas* (the crazy women), still highlight the perception that the maternal body does not belong in the public sphere.

Many other women in Argentina have engaged in multiple practices of embodied political resistance. They contradict gendered stereotypes by actively participating in mass mobilizations, taking on roles that require bodily strength and courage, and adopting rebellious demeanors in their protests, chants, and slogans. As Nora Cortiñas reminds us, a sizable number of the people disappeared by the dictatorship were women. Many of them were activists involved in social change projects, some of them in armed organizations. Survivors’ testimonies highlight the bodily risks entailed in political activism during the dictatorship and the sexualized torture endured by the disappeared women. They also show how some of the contradictions activist women encountered were grounded in sexist constructions of the female body, both by the military and in leftist groups (Actis et al. 2001; Ciollaro 1999; Diana 1996; García 1999; Oberti 2005).

In contemporary Argentina, many women continue to be involved in political practices that require them to *poner el cuerpo*. *Piqueteras* resist with their bodies when, alongside men, they block roads demanding economic justice. Through their bodily presence in street demonstrations, feminists and other activist women tirelessly remind the population that gender inequality is still a problem in Argentina. Women in neighborhood or community organizations—where they often play key roles—engage in a subtler form of *poner el cuerpo* when they approach government authorities to demand food, medical supplies, contraceptives, and community spaces. Women’s active participation in neighborhood *asambleas* probably has something to do with specific forms of *poner el cuerpo*, such as banging pots and pans (*cacerolas*)—objects associated with women’s domestic practices. Women workers from the Brukman factory physically withstood police repression and engaged in

hunger strikes to recover their factory. Women from all walks of life also engage in *poner el cuerpo* when they perform the daily (embodied) work that keeps their social movements alive.

Women's bodily presence in street demonstrations during strategic protests and other political events makes it more difficult to deny that politics is indeed a woman's place. For instance, during a 2002 march commemorating the popular uprising of December 2001, women marched side by side with men and engaged in various kinds of embodied "performances" (Taylor 2003) that both drew on and disrupted normative femininity. Some women were in charge of security in *piquetera/o* organizations, challenging perceptions of men as physically better suited to handle potentially dangerous situations. Other poor and working-class women marched with small children in their arms or in strollers, or nursed their babies. While these actions may be seen as reinforcing appropriate maternal embodiment, at the same time they blur public-private divides and diversify images of activist bodies.

Women marched in women-only groups and in the front lines of mixed-gender groups, carrying organization flags and showing their status as leaders. A woman apparently belonging to an *asamblea popular* stood on a platform, with an Argentine flag in the background, and performed sexy moves with her pelvis. Although bringing her sexuality to a political protest may be seen only to reinforce oversexualized images of women, the combination of her plain clothing, her average body (i.e. not that of a supermodel, beauty queen, or showgirl), and the sight of such bodily performance in an obviously political arena were potentially disruptive. Finally, two women from a leftist organization, with microphones, led not particularly "feminine" songs (laced with profanities) from the top of a truck and rallied the crowd. Clearly, they were acting as enraged leaders, not being passive bodies.

These are just a few examples of women's diverse embodied practices in many protests that occurred in Argentina during the crisis. Yet this participation is often obscured, for instance, when the media portray members of the *piquetera/o* movement as dangerous men, when they contact male leaders as social movement spokespeople, or when they fail to cover major women's protests appropriately.

The role of women in political actions is complex, and cannot be neatly delineated as resisting or complying with prevailing gender norms. On one hand, physically occupying public spaces and speaking up are acts of transgression by women in a society that still relegates them to second-class citizenship and still enforces stereotypes about the purpose of women's bodies (e.g., reproduction, sexual attractiveness). On the other hand, different activist women engage in different kinds of actions even in the same organization. Indeed, multiple versions of femininity may coexist in the same woman's body. For instance, Rita, a committed

and outspoken activist in Buenos Aires, was saving money to enlarge her breasts through cosmetic surgery. Rita belongs to a mixed-gender leftist organization that puts forth an incisive critique of neoliberalism and imperialism, and she is willing to put her body on the line during political protests. Rita can hardly be categorized as submissive. Her cosmetic surgery plans, however, are consistent with a culture that emphasizes large breasts as important to sexual attractiveness and "real" womanhood.

To understand whether women's embodied practices have a transgressive effect or not, it is important to examine the social context of activism. Women activists may draw on aspects of normative femininity that are important parts of their identity (e.g., maternal embodiment); but in certain political circumstances, such images may contest dominant ideas. In a context in which *piqueteros* are depicted in the media as dangerous men with hoods and sticks, the sight of *piqueteras* marching with babies in strollers helps to create a more complex image of both the movement and motherhood. Conversely, *piqueteras* who stand on the front lines of the *piquete* or who take security roles can also disrupt popular notions that reserve a place of vulnerability for women's bodies and a place of strength and protector status to men's bodies.

Women's political participation can also help to change activist women's perceptions of their own embodied power (Parkins 2000). For instance, 62-year-old Violeta spoke of overcoming fear and deploying an increasingly assertive body through her repeated participation in protests, including actions to block busy streets.

One of my *compañeras* [fellow activists] told me afterward that seeing me the way I am, petite, so calm [holding up] my sign, with the cars driving by, and I kept walking. . . . She says, "it would have been worth it to videotape," and it was very funny. And . . . I grabbed one of the girls' signs, and I told her, "lend this to me to block [the avenue]," and I went to the front.

Violeta's assertive body, despite her nonthreatening appearance, was effective, and it pleased her fellow protesters and perhaps surprised bystanders. Her satisfaction suggests the empowering potential of embodied activism to her, as a woman and as a valuable member of her movement.

Similarly, Susana, a middle-aged worker with a calm demeanor, told the story of her newly discovered power while working in one of the factories that workers occupied and then recovered during the economic collapse. She explained how, through her embodied struggle to keep the factory operating, she learned things about herself she previously had not suspected. She narrated her close encounter with the police during an eviction attempt. When asked whether she physically confronted the police, she responded:

Yes, not really, I kept getting closer, no? I was right up against . . . . They [protesters] were pushing me, pushing me, and I was standing face to face with the police.

*And?*

So then I said, "Look, get out of here or they are going to kill you." So then, I got one to leave, then another one, because in truth I . . .

*You mean, the police?*

[Laughs] Right. I was stuck up against this door [pointing to where the police stood].

*And were you ever like that, face to face with the police?*

No, no, no.

*And, what . . . ?*

In the moment of fervor, you don't notice, and later . . . . So that's why I told you that if years ago someone had said that I would do something like that, I would have said no. Imagine! But it is our source of work that we are defending. If we go away from here, we would go home to "cry misery," so we didn't want that. That is the force that makes us [do it].

Susana's story starts with some hesitation, mentioning that she was being "pushed" and that she was "stuck." Yet as the story unfolds, she articulates and appropriates her embodied agency (even if backed up by other protesters) by explaining the reasons she engaged in embodied practices of resistance. Her account also underscores a sense of surprise about what she had done, suggesting that women's embodied resistance in causes they care about may open unimagined possibilities about their bodily capacities.

In her account of nineteenth-century suffragists' struggles in England, Parkins argues that the example of women's courageous and dissident practices "which presented the suffragette body as a speaking, acting, resisting body—allowed other women to reconceptualize their own feminine bodily comportment as the basis of agency not passivity" (Parkins 2000, 73). Although women's conditions in Argentina today are very different from those of nineteenth-century British women, it may be argued that despite important gains in women's rights, many gender inequalities in Argentina continue to be related to oppressive perceptions of women's bodies and the material enforcement of normative femininity. Women's activism may be empowering not only in the sense of achieving specific political demands (e.g., shelters for battered women, legalization of abortion, redistribution of wealth, greater representation in government), but also in the sense of being living, embodied proof that women can do much more than contemporary stereotypes and arrangements suggest.

Without a framework that inscribes women's current activism in a larger perspective and that resignifies the meaning of womanhood, however, women who are discovering their own power may have a

hard time identifying it as a woman's attribute. Women's activism and courage may be interpreted as "manly" instead. Diana, a seasoned activist in the feminist, human rights, and labor movements, made this point by unearthing the history of activist women who can serve as points of reference for the new activists.

Many *piqueteras* said, "we fight like men." I would then say, "You don't fight like men, you fight like the women from the tenements of 1907; you fight like the [women] anarchists at the end of the century, you fight like the nurses and telephone workers in 1952. There's a long string of your grandmothers who fought, and nobody remembered to tell the story.

The *piqueteras'* expression "we fight like men" is an empowered statement in the sense that it claims women's embodied ability to do things that were thought to be exclusively men's privilege. Diana's point, however, is that these women do not need to identify their behavior as masculine; they can claim resisting versions of feminine embodiment for women as a group and can gain strength and inspiration from the rich history of women's activism.

Women's massive presence in social movements can help recover that activist history. According to Diana, "the best thing about being a woman today is women's political participation as protagonists, which I'm sure revolutionizes more than the streets." Women's activist *poner el cuerpo* does not go unnoticed—from their actual presence in different public venues to the issues that society now has to address because of women's voices. In the interviews for this study, both activist and non-activist women expressed their awareness of, or put their hopes on, women's active roles in social change. They talked about women being "in struggle"; "marching forward"; having "a lot of *garra*" (strength); "leading the people"; "pushing, growing, and claiming their space"; and sustaining the movements that bring "hope, resistance, and protest."

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored the relationship between women's embodiment and political resistance in Argentina. The intensification of political protest and the "feminization of resistance" triggered by the economic crisis that erupted in 2001 offered an extraordinary opportunity to hear women's stories about the role of their bodies in political activism. Bodies need to be taken into account in order to understand political resistance. Activist bodies are the vehicles of political protest; they express needs rooted in the body's materiality; they can be deployed as symbols; and they convey power when joined with other bodies. By exploring the meanings of women's political *poner el cuerpo*

in Argentina, this study offers a glimpse of how women's bodies are involved both in broad social changes and in the creation of alternative notions of womanhood.

The references to *poner el cuerpo* by the women interviewed show their active awareness of how their bodies operate not only as the carriers of oppressive mandates, but also as a liberating force. Many women have undergone significant transformations in the context of social turmoil, but these shifts do not mean that contradictions instantly disappear. While crises may accelerate social change, many ingrained gendered practices still persist. Hegemonic and alternative modes of femininity may coexist in the same body; may be embraced or rejected by different women in the same movement; or may take on distinct meanings depending on the social milieu and organization.

Dominant ideologies and material social arrangements in Argentina impose a number of constraints on women's embodied actions and possibilities. Yet these limitations are neither absolute nor insurmountable. To the brand of *poner el cuerpo* that gender ideologies demand of women—for example, that they sacrifice their bodies in support of sexist norms or unfair economic arrangements—many women are responding with different kinds of *poner el cuerpo* that mean resistance and transformation. In a culture that requires women to offer their bodies as reproductive machines, sexual objects, or commodities, many women are showing their capacity to *poner el cuerpo* in empowering ways (see also ATEM 2005).

Women's embodied resistance has contributed not only to their own survival and sense of power but, as Matoso argues in reference to broader social projects and protests, also to rebuilding the social body: "The body of resistance constructs a social body with a new, mended, sewn-up skin. The popular assemblies, the concrete protests, the *cacerolazos*, [and] the solidarity networks repair the skin and in that way fortify and give time for the skin to regenerate" (Matoso 2003, 24). As life in Argentina deteriorated because of economic problems, women's bodies came to the fore as workers, mothers, volunteers, professionals, activists, and community organizers, and in many other capacities. They appeared not only in the form of suffering bodies, but also as bodies of resistance and renewal.

## NOTES

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1. In a Gramscian sense, hegemony refers to the imposition of oppressive social arrangements not only through raw force and coercion, but also through more subtle mechanisms that produce and organize consent, such as the spread of ideologies by institutions like churches, the media, the family, and schools (Boggs 1976; Turner 1990).

2. Feminist research and theorizing have paid special attention to the female body as a site of social control and violent practices (e.g., Bordo 1993; Conboy et al. 1997; Grosz 1994; Price and Shildrick 1999; Weitz 1998; Young 1990).

3. Twenty-two percent of the interviewees were 21 to 29 years old, 22 percent were 30 to 39 years old, 38 percent were 40 to 49 years old, and 18 percent were 50 to 62 years old. With respect to education, 20 percent of interviewees had at least some primary school education, 24 percent had attended or completed secondary school, and 56 percent had at least some postsecondary education, including short-term degrees and longer university careers and a few graduate studies. Regarding sexual orientation, 90 percent of the women in the sample identified themselves as heterosexual, 8 percent as lesbian, and 2 percent as bisexual. Interviewees engaged in a variety of occupations: 22 percent performed informal economic activities (e.g., prostitution, domestic service, handicraft production, food preparation, and retail sales), 20 percent were unemployed (e.g. homemaker, student, retired, or could not find a job), 16 percent were employed in the private sector (e.g. travel agent, supermarket cashier, factory worker for a multinational corporation), 12 percent had teaching jobs in the public or private sector, 10 percent were small business entrepreneurs (e.g. gym, minimart, beauty salon), 8 percent were professionals who worked independently (e.g. architect, psychologist), 6 percent were employed in the public sector, excluding teaching (e.g. police force, city government), 4 percent worked as coordinators of nonprofit organizations, and 2 percent worked in a factory "recovered" and run by workers. About half the women in the study had monthly per capita incomes of less than 550 pesos (US\$183), and the other half exceeded 625 pesos (US\$208). Among the second group, the highest income was 4,500 pesos (US\$1,500).

4. The term *asambleas populares* refers to gatherings of ordinary people who started to meet during the December 2001 economic collapse and political crisis. They held meetings in plazas, on street corners, and later in neighborhood centers and squatters' buildings. Neighbors gathered to analyze social and political developments and to respond with street protests and community alternatives. In mid-2002, 170 *asambleas* existed in the City of Buenos Aires and the surrounding metropolitan area (see Di Marco et al. 2003).

5. The list of words was generated from knowledge of feminist scholarship, sociology of the body, and Argentine culture. Interviewees could add words of their own, although they seldom did. The words were *exercise, pleasure, aging, disability, health, food, sex, art, menstruation, beauty, sports, harassment, childbirth, work, desire, menopause, youth, law, violence, religion, expression, psychoanalysis, skin color, movement, contraception, ethnicity, race, reproduction, motherhood, femininity, abortion, economic crisis, politics, appearance, class, recreation, sexuality, pregnancy, pain, change* (added), *guilt* (added).

6. The culture of psychoanalysis filtered into the narratives of a number of women in this study—women of different social classes. They resorted to psychoanalytical language to explain their experiences or said that psy therapies played a significant role in their lives. Psychoanalysis has been popularized in Argentina through several paths: the diffusion of psychoanalysts' advice and views in the mass media, the proliferation of group therapy and other psy-oriented services in public hospitals (making them more accessible to low-income people), the increasing numbers of psychologists (most of them women), and the spread of psy-related therapies that reach people who do not define themselves as sick (Balán 1991; Plotkin 2001). Argentina today is notorious for its high number of psy professionals, particularly in and around the City of Buenos Aires: "It is estimated that there are more than 50,000 of these professionals in Argentina, over a population of 37 million" (Di Marco et al. 2003, 101).

7. This is related to spending formative years in Argentina, living there for most of my life, absorbing significant cultural traits, and keeping strong ties with my family.

8. In the context of the economic crisis, workers around the country took over failed businesses and factories in an effort to restore production and maintain their source of work. These were known as *empresas recuperadas* (recovered businesses) and were collectively run by workers.

9. The strategy of *escraches* emerged with human rights groups formed by children of the disappeared to denounce the repressors' impunity. *Escraches* expose repressors through graffiti, speeches, chants, banners, throwing red paint "bombs," and theatrical performances staged close to the homes of these people (see Kaplan 2004).

10. The *Montoneros* formed the leftist and combative branch of Peronism during the 1970s.

11. *Caramelitas en Calzas* literally means Little Candies in Spandex, a play on the name of the pious order of nuns *Carmelitas Descalzas* (Barefoot Carmelites).

12. See Turner 2001 on the vulnerability of embodiment and Peterson 2001 on the vulnerability of militant bodies.

13. The translations of this and all other quotations originally in Spanish are the author's.

14. *Lomo* evokes an animal's back, perhaps that of a beast of burden.

15. See a similar dynamic in Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003.

16. In the last decade, many accounts of women's movement participation in Latin America were produced, drawing attention to women's political constraints and opportunities (e.g., Fisher 1993; Jaquette 1994; Küppers 1994; Radcliffe and Westwood 1993; Stephen 1997).

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