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Memory And Mourning In The Public Square: Maria Elena Walsh's 'Eva' And The Politics Of Loss

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Abstract: 1976 in Argentina's history was a tumultuous year, when the widow and third wife of Perón (Isabel Marines) was deposed from power by a military coup at the hands of General Rafael Videla, which was to usher in one of the bleakest chapters in Argentina's troubled history. In 1976 María Elena Walsh published her poem 'Eva', an elegy of Eva Perón, who had died in July of 1952 at the young age of thirty-three. This article examines the structural workings of the poem, and argues that 'Eva' is not simply a poem about mourning, but a deeply political text that denounces dictatorship, state control and war. A poem written by a woman about arguably the most famous of Argentine women, this article considers the power of discourse to challenge and call into question deeply embedded coercive violence, propped up by patriarchy and a complicit and compromised Church.

Keywords: Eva Perón; María Elena Walsh; Argentinian poetry; Mourning; Junta; 'Eva'

History, Stephen said, is a nightmare
from which I am trying to awake
(Ulysses, James Joyce).

INTRODUCTION

María Eva Duarte Perón (1919–1952) was considered by many in Argentina and across Latin America as a trailblazer for women's rights and empowerment. Despite her detractors from across the political spectrum, there is no question of the love and inspiration she elicited during her all-too-brief life, cruelly cut short by cancer at the age of thirty-three. The crowds of mourners that lined the streets of Buenos Aires following her death attests to the devotion and hagiography that was to follow. Some have questioned the extent to which the outpouring of mass communal grief was genuine and

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spontaneous, or a product of state coercion, which had declared ten days of national mourning. Emile Durkheim has argued that within collective mourning there is more going on than simply an accumulation of individual grief: '[o]ne initial fact is constant: mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions…there is no connection between the sentiments felt and the gestures made by the actors in the rite… Mourning is not a natural movement of private feelings wounded by a cruel loss; it is a duty imposed by the group. One weeps, not simply because he is sad, but because he is forced to weep' (Durkheim, 1915, p. 397).

In this article I will examine María Elena Walsh's poem 'Eva', published in her collection of poems *Cancionero contra el mal de ojo* (1976). Elegiac in tone and epic in terms of its length and stature, it consists of ninety-three lines over thirteen stanzas, and was written at a time of political turmoil and violence, sadly characteristic of Argentina's troubled history, and published on the eve of the so called 'Dirty War' perpetuated by the military junta under the command of General Jorge Rafael Videla.

The poem raises fundamental questions around state control, individual agency, voice and discourse as a means of disrupting. It invites us to consider political afterlives, memory, mourning, and the struggle for female emancipation in a nation buttressed by atavistic patriarchal structures, propped up by the scaffolding of a (mostly) conservative brand of Catholicism that had fossilized gender roles and acquiesced to brutal far-right military dictators, which the Church considered to be a bulwark against Communism. Furthermore, the poem fulfills a kind of double role, in that it was written by a woman poet about the most famous and iconic female figure in Latin America's history.

The confluence of these themes is matched by the collision of generic influences that operate throughout the poem. This article will examine the structural workings of the poem, foregrounding how memory and mourning can be used not only as liberatory vectors to inspire the dismantling of all forms of subjugation (of which female oppression is one of many), but how within the poem there is a powerful critique of military and state power, which may go some of the way in explaining why María Elena Walsh was to be

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censored in later years. Maurice Blanchot reminds us of the important role of writing to conserve: 'In appearance, writing is there only to conserve. Writing marks or leaves marks. What is entrusted remains. With it history starts in the institutional form of the Book and time as inscription in the heaven of stars begins with earthly traces, monuments, works. Writing is remembrance' (Blanchot, 1992, p. 31). 'Eva' not only acts a memorial for Argentina's most famous first lady, but as an act of political defiance against the structural forces of violence and war.

CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE POLITICS OF COLLECTIVE MOURNING

Maurice Halbwachs argues that 'We perceive memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced, through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 47). This is true not just on a personal level, but on a social one too. The communal outpouring of grief captured in Walsh's poem attests directly to how individual and collective memory shape (and are shaped by) contemporaneous networks of authority. Halbwachs rightly reminds us of the prime importance of the sociopolitical context in terms of influencing how memory is recreated: '[…] even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 47). This is deeply relevant to our reading of 'Eva', given the time when Walsh published this poem. When Halbwachs states 'I believe that the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 51), he could be describing the structural workings of 'Eva', where a palimpsest of memories is embedded within an epistemic ecosystem that is deeply ideological and political.

Pierre Nora argues that 'Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events' (Nora, 1989, p.22). Walsh's poem 'Eva' recreates the historical collective outpouring of grief within the specific topography of Buenos Aires. In this sense, it follows what Nora is arguing in terms of the interplay between memory and history linked

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to specific events and places. The site(s) and event(s) that are immortalized in Walsh's poem enable the poet to not simply enshrine Eva Perón and the streets of Buenos Aires in the poetic imagination, but to also provide an ideological critique of war, torture and the brutal abuse of power.

'Eva' was written at a liminal time in Argentina's fraught history. Published in 1976, the poem is more than a memorialization of Eva Peron's death in July of 1952, but a site of generic struggle between personal, political, and collective memorial discourse. These genre-words collide against the pervading political narratives of the time when it was published, that sought to silence all dissent. To complicate matters further, some stanzas of the poem were read out on state media (interestingly, all from Section One of the poem, which focusses more on the public outpouring of grief rather than the more defiant Section Two).

Following Juan Perón's death on July 1st in 1974, his erstwhile vice president and third wife (Isabel Marines de Perón), took over the reins of power for two years, exhibiting a markedly right-wing and ultra neoliberal version of Peronism that drew heavily on neo-fascism. Her hold on power was to come to an abrupt end in 1976, when on the 24th of March, General Videla staged a coup, setting up a military junta which ushered in one of the most brutal chapters in Argentina's history.

Let us now consider the poem itself, which is reproduced in full below.

Eva

Calle Florida, túnel de flores podridas.
Y el poberio se quedó sin madre
llorando entre faroles sin crespones.
Llorando en cueros, para siempre, solos.

Sombríos machos de corbata negra
sufrían rencorosos por decreto
y el órgano por Radio del Estado
hizo durar a Dios un mes o dos.

Buenos Aires de niebla y de silencio.

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El Barrio Norte tras las celosías
encargaba a París rayos de sol.
La cola interminable para verla
y los que maldecían por si acaso
no vayan esos cabecitas negras
a bienaventurar a una cualquiera.

Flores podridas para Cleopatra.
Y los grasitas con el corazón rajado,
rajado en serio. Huérfanos. Silencio.
Calles de invierno donde nadie pregona
El Líder, Democracia, La Razón.
Y Antonio Tormo calla 'Amémonos'.

Un vendaval de luto obligatorio.
Escarapelas con coágulos negros.
El siglo nunca vio muerte más muerte.
Pobrecitos rubíes, esmeraldas,
visiones ofrendados por el pueblo,
sandalias de oro, sedas virreinales,
vacías, arrumbadas en la noche.
Y el odio entre paréntesis, rumiando
venganza en sótanos y con picana.

Y el amor y el dolor que eran de veras
Gimiendo en el cordón de la vereda.
Lágrimas enjugadas con harapos,
Madrecita de los Desamparados.
Silencio, que hasta el tango se murió.
Orden de arriba y lágrimas de abajo.
En plena juventud. No somos nada.
No somos nada más que un gran castigo.
Se pintó la república de negro
mientras te maquillaban y enlodaban.
En los altares populares, santa.
Hiena de hielo para los gorilas
pero eso sí, solísima en la muerte.
Y el pueblo que lloraba para siempre
sin prever tu atroz peregrinaje.
Con mis ojos la vi, no me vendieron
esta leyenda, ni me la robaron.

Días de julio del 52
¿Qué importa dónde estaba yo?

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II

No descanses en paz, alza los brazos
no para el día del renunciamiento
sino para juntarte a las mujeres
con tu bandera redentora
lavada en pólvora, resucitando.

No sé quién fuiste, pero te jugaste.
Torciste el Riachuelo a Plaza Mayo,
metiste a las mujeres en la historia
de prepo, arrebatando los micrófonos,
repartiendo venganzas y limosnas.
Bruta como un diamante en un chiquero
¿quién va a tirarte la última piedra?

Quizás un día nos juntemos
para invocar tu insólito coraje.
Todas, las contreras, las idólatras,
las madres incesantes, las rameras,
las que te amaron, las que te maldijeron,
las que obedientes tiran hijos
a la basura de la guerra, todas
las que ahora en el mundo fraternizan
sublevándose contra la aniquilación.

Cuando los buitres te dejen tranquila
y huyas de las estampas y el ultraje
empezaremos a saber quién fuiste.
Con látigo y sumisa, pasiva y compasiva,
única reina que tuvimos, loca
que arrebató el poder a los soldados.

Cuando juntas las reas y las monjas
y las violadas en los teleteatros
y las que callan pero no consienten
arrebatemos la liberación
para no naufragar en espejitos
ni bañarnos para los ejecutivos.
Cuando hagamos escándalo y justicia
el tiempo habrá pasado en limpio
tu prepotencia y tu martirio, hermana.

Tener agallas, como vos tuviste,
fanática, leal, desenfrenada
en el candor de la beneficencia,

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> pero la única que se dio el lujo
> de coronarse por los sumergidos.
> Agallas para hacer de nuevo el mundo.
> Tener agallas para gritar basta
> aunque nos amordacen con cañones.
> (Walsh, 1976, pp. 48–49).

The opening lines of the poem evoke a scene of collective and public mourning, as Calle Florida is described as a tunnel of decaying flowers, which not only suggests the huge outpouring of communal grief, but the tragedy of beauty cut short. Eva, like Christ, died at the age of thirty-three, which would have added resonance to an already messianic figure in Argentine politics and the media. Pierre Nora argues that '[t]he fear that everything is on the verge of disappearing, coupled with anxiety about the precise significance of the present and uncertainty about the future, invests even the humblest testimony, the most modest vestige, with the dignity of being potentially memorable' (Nora, 1996, p. 8). Eva Perón was to become central to the collective identity of a nation, which chimes with what Novick avers: 'We choose to center certain memories because they seem to us to express what are central to our collective identity. Those memories, once brought to the fore, reinforce that form of identity' (Novick, 1999, p. 5).

Line two of the poem references the 'descamisados' (el poberío) who have now lost their mother, as images of black mourning shrouds amidst the street lamps mingle with a deluge of tears. From the very opening stanza, there is no doubt about the elegiac nature of the poem. William Watkin argues that elegy performs an important function in terms of dealing with issues of 'presence and absence', and how this shapes human subjectivity:

> It is not just that elegy is one of the oldest of our poetic genres revealing an ancient relationship between literature and loss, although this is an important and often forgotten point. Rather, it is that the problems of elegy remain those of language itself and its impact on the subject and the community. Elegy consists of making physical, material works of art out of the very event that destroys our own physicality, in other

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> words, death. It also provides a self-consciousness about the inter-relationship between presence and absence in our lives, and the means by which paradoxes and aporias inherent in this inter-relationship shape our subjectivity (Watkin, 2004, p. 6).

The materiality of the written word not only outlives the physical body, but shapes the afterlife of the individual being immortalized. In a post-theistic world, where the crutch of metaphysics has died a post-Nietzschean death, it is primarily in the text that memories can live on, re-territorialized in the minds of all who read them, subjected to the ebb and flow of language as mediated through the *Zeitgeist* of any given time.

Watkins goes on to argue that 'Elegy is a process poem or performance piece and it is performed for a purpose' (Watkins, 2004, p. 53). This, may seem self-evident, given that collective and historical memory are always shaped and cut through by ideology, as Fredric Jameson has argued throughout his critical opus. The 'performance' the 'process poem' the 'purpose': elegy by its very own definition, creates, recreates and resurrects the deceased for a purpose, which is usually deeply ideological and political. As Watkins argues '[t]he traditional role of elegy is to set in a structure of presence—poem, monument, epitaph, name—a radical and irreversible absence: the lost beloved' (Watkins, 2004, p. 54).

In stanza one, the sense of abandonment is heightened by comparing the crowds of mourners to children who have lost their mother. At the beginning of stanza two there is an underlying sense of state coercion: the 'sombríos machos de corbata negra' are described as suffering by government decree. Walsh knows exactly what she is doing here, in what is a deliberate critique of overarching state power and its effects on its citizens. Not only does the state exert power, but biopower, shaping the individual and collective mood. The choice of the word 'machos' as a collective noun often associated with the herd, conjures not only the blind unquestioning obedience that is intrinsic to herd instinct, but is a reminder of the stark gender divides in Argentine society, entrenched through a mixture of Catholicism and traditional gender roles. State radio is depicted as propping up the epistemic control of the Catholic Church ('por la Radio del Estado/ hizo

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durar a Dios un mes o dos'), whereby even the divine is figuratively kept alive through the power of radio broadcast.

Throughout 'Eva' there is mention of specific street names, barrios and squares (Calle Florida, El Barrio Norte, La Plaza de Mayo). In stanza three, Buenos Aires is depicted with recourse to Romantic imagery of a city covered in mist and silence. The description could be one of Paris by Baudelaire, or of Madrid by Gustavo Adolfo Béquer. The poem homes-in on the salubrious Bario Norte, famed for resembling parts of Paris (many of the buildings were modelled on the French capital). But the neighbourhood is shuttered off from the light ('tras las celosías'), in keeping with the funereal tone of communal lament. Even the light has faded, so much so that 'El Barrio Norte tras las celosías/ encargaba a París rayos de sol'. Further on within the same stanza, reference is made to the long queues who are processing, and there is mention of the 'cabecitas negras', a term that became widespread in 1940s Argentina to describe the internal Argentine migrants, many of whom were of mestizo origin, who migrated from the arid north to provide cheap labour in the industries and factories along the River Plate. For these itinerant labourers, Eva Perón was to become their greatest champion and inspiration. She was their mouthpiece and voice, not just within her brief lifespan but also in her afterlife. Argentine politicians of all backgrounds and ideologies have claimed and re-appropriated aspects of Peronism, and used the popularity and iconography of Eva Perón as political capital.

Collective and personal memories are always linked to place, as Barbara A. Misztal has argued, and these physical spaces can become sites that are layered in symbolism and meaning:

> A group's memory is linked to places, ruins, landscapes, monuments and urban architecture, which—as they are overlain with symbolic associations to past events—play an important role in helping to preserve group memory. Such sites, and also locations where a significant event is regularly celebrated and replayed, remain 'concrete and distinct' regardless of whether they are mythological or historical. (Misztal, 2003, p.16).

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Eva Perón was a historical figure who took on mythical status not only during her lifetime but beyond. Following her death, her image was ubiquitous, both across the media and in the streets of Buenos Aires. Her radio broadcasts and solidarity with the working class had cemented her image as a champion for the underclass. This is reflected in n stanza four, where the 'grasitas' (another term for the 'descamisados') are described as being overwhelmed with grief ('el corazón rajado'). The repetition of the word 'rajado' adds weight to the wound, which is then followed by two words, each of which is followed with a full stop ('Huérfanos. Silencio.'), to ensure that the reader pauses to reflect on the profound and tragic loss of a young life cut short in its prime. The streets of Buenos Aires have now turned to winter, a symbol of the cold of death, and the stanza ends with the line 'y Antonio Tormo calla "Amémonos"': the most famous tango singer and his top hit 'Amémonos' can no longer be heard. Fellow Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato, who will have probably witnessed first-hand the mourning in the streets of the capital in July of 1952, knew something about 'desconsuelo', and links the emergence of the tango to the coming and going of people through the port of Buenos Aires:

> Camino por la Costanera Sur contemplando el portentoso río que, en el crepúsculo del siglo pasado, cruzaron miles de españoles, italianos, judíos, polacos, albaneses, rusos, alemanes, corridos por el hambre y la miseria. Los grandes visionarios que entonces gobernaban el país, ofrecieron esa metáfora de la nada que es nuestra pampa a 'todos los hombres de buena voluntad', necesitados de un hogar, de un suelo en que arraigarse, dado que es imposible vivir sin patria, o Matria, como prefería decir Unamuno, ya que es la madre el verdadero fundamento de la existencia. Pero en su mayoría, esos hombres encontraron otro tipo de pobreza, causado por la soledad y la nostalgia, porque mientras el barco se alejaba del puerto, con el rostro surcado por lágrimas, veían cómo sus madres, hijos, hemanos, se desvanecían hacia la muerte, ya que nunca los volverían a ver. De ese irremediable desconsuelo nación la más extraña cancion que ha existido, el tango. (Sábato, 1999, p.25)

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The poetry of Sábato's words perhaps occludes the fact that the tango had originated as a song of working-class struggle. Many of the words in the early songs gave voice to the crushing poverty of those living in the grips of rabid neoliberalism. The pervasive melancholy deeply embedded in the tango which Sábato alludes to, was not only to do with the coming and going of people through the great port of Buenos Aires, but was an expression of deep sadness and longing by those trapped in cycles of poverty and violence out of which they could not break out. The tango was of course coopted by the middle class and commodified, as always happens with cultural capital, but when Walsh writes in stanza six 'hasta el tango se murió', and some lines earlier alludes to Antonio Tormo's popular song no longer being heard, the poet is not just saying that music fell silent with the passing of Eva Perón. She is saying that the music that originated in the working-class context of Argentina's dispossessed and disenfranchised, has now been silenced.

Stanza five opens with the arresting image of the 'vendaval de luto obligatorio': the mourning has now figuratively transformed into a storm, that suggests something that takes on a force of its own, and which blocks out the light under its ashen skies. The crowds of Buenos Aires in stanza five are depicted wearing black cockades, whilst the words 'luto obligatorio' resonate on at least two levels. On the one hand, they simply attest to the communal nature of the mourning, but it could also be read on a more sinister level, linking it with the control that echoes from the phrase from stanza two 'rencorosos por decreto'. Mistral reminds us of the ways in which memory can be coopted in terms of reinforcing or creating a specific tradition: 'Memory, when employed as a reservoir of officially sanctioned heroes and myths, can be seen as a broad and always (to some degree) invented tradition that explains and justifies the ends and means of organized social action and provides people with beliefs and opinions' (Mistral, 2003, p.15). She goes on to argue that 'The popular memory perspective assumes that our recollection of the past is instrumental, influenced by present interests, and that the politics of memory is conflictual' (Mistral, 2003, p. 61).

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Within stanza five is the line: 'El siglo nunca vio muerte más muerte', which could serve as a microcosm not only of the poem itself, but a synecdoche for the turbulent political history of Argentina. It seems like an almost natural progression when at the end of stanza five there is a sinister reference to violence, hatred, vengeance and torture: 'y el odio entre paréntesis, rumiando / venganza en sótanos y con picana'. The image is stark and disturbing: the instrument of torture (picana) used to discharge electrical shocks on its victims, was a terrifying ordeal that thousands of Argentinians were to suffer in the basements and torture chambers of the military junta. Walsh unleashes a powerful critique of military power, which, not least as a woman poet, shows great strength of character and boldness, given the fate that was to follow many of the 'desaparecidos' who were seen as enemies of the state. Throughout the poem, Walsh weaves in social denunciation within the broader context of public mourning. Mourning for Walsh thus takes on an extra dimension: not only is it about marking the passing of Argentina's most beloved first lady, but at the same time there is a lament for a society that is dysfunctional to its core and cut through with violence. Militaristic and hubristic abuses of power are prophetically decried from the voice of a poetic 'I' that dares to critique and denounce. Halbwachs reminds us that '[w]ords and language presuppose not just one person, but a group of associated persons' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 170). The poetic 'I' in the poem 'Eva', not only stands up for all the disenfranchised and abused women down through Argentinian history, but for all the oppressed and tortured individuals crushed under the weight of military oppression. The poetic 'I' becomes a collective 'we', mirroring the way in which Evita transcended the status of personal selfhood to embody the struggles of a whole section of society, men and women alike. Mistral argues that 'Seeing collective memory as the creative imaging of the past in the service of the present and an imagined future, studying the fluidity of images, the commodification of memory and the acceptance of the debatability of the past have introduced a new dynamic to the interaction between memory and historiography in the representation of the past' (Mistral, 2003, p. 103).

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The weight of collective grief continues into stanza six, where tears are wiped away with rags ‘lágrimas enjuagadas con harapos’, presumably to convey the depth of sorrow amongst the dispossessed and economically disenfranchised, who saw Eva as their saviour: ‘Madrecita de los desamparados. / Silencio, que hasta el tango se murrió’. The imagery blends religious fervour (the reference to Eva as a kind of saintly figure who was a mother to those who felt abandoned) with popular culture. The tango has died. ‘No somos más que un gran castigo/ se pintó la Republica de negro’: collective grief is magnified to cosmic levels, as if it is a punishment from God, and the whole country is depicted in mourning clothes. In the next line, once again she is depicted as a saint on the altars of public grief, but also a formidable force against those who were opposed to Peronism, known at the time as ‘los gorillas’. The magnitude of grief is given physical weight through repetition and accumulation of poetic words: ‘y el pueblo que lloraba para siempre/ sin prever tu atroz peregrinaje’. Pilgrimage is a religious word, and the poet uses it quite deliberately here to cement the saintly traits of Eva Perón, in hagiographic language. The stanza ends with an assertion on the part of the poetic ‘I’ that Eva Perón was a legend whom she saw with her own eyes, elevating personal testimony as guarantor of lived experience. But she is a legend who will live on (‘ni me la robaron’), kept alive in the stories, pictures, memories and news reels. Like Christ who died at the same age as Eva, she too was to have an afterlife that would continue to affect those who mourned her loss.

Stanza seven consists of just two lines, setting it apart from the rest of the poem, drawing attention to the individual caught up in something much bigger than herself: ‘Días de julio del 52/ ¿Qué importa donde estaba yo?’. The course of history flows on, with the individual caught up in its ebb and flow, selfhood dissipating into something much bigger, into the collective, the crowds lining the streets when the skies are heavy and the music has stopped. But at the same time, the poetic ‘I’ is reconstituted as part of something much bigger, the part subsumed into the whole. Julia Kristeva expresses this dynamic when she writes ‘The pronoun I is not seeking itself, it loses itself in a series of

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references to logical or political events that, within the framework of either the past or the present, determine a similar mobility of a subject propelled into the whirlwind of its own fragmentation and renewal' (Kristeva, 1980, p. 179). The poetic 'I' that recalls the streets of Buenos Aires in July of 1952, experiences some degree of renewal precisely by being part of something that transcends the fragmented boundaries of individual selfhood. With this short stanza Part I of the poem comes to an end, and the tone shifts from mourning and lament to defiance, as seen with the very first line of Part II: 'No descanses en paz/ alza los brazos', and a few lines further on 'para juntarte a las mujeres/ con tu bandera redentora'. Eva's status as a symbol of struggle and liberation for women, not just in Argentina but across Latin America and beyond, is cemented in these lines and wrapped in redemptive, messianic language. In a nation steeped in a largely conservative brand of Catholicism, the genre-word (to borrow on Mikhail Bakhtin) of deeply embedded religious discourse is dialogically embedded within a tone of liberatory defiance. The messianic parallels that are established between the figure of Christ and Eva Perón, operate on several levels: the liberatory nature of Eva militates against the conservatism of atavistic patriarchal forms of Catholic belief, which in Argentina is not only associated with the brutal colonization of Spanish rule, but with a church that (except for a few liberationist priests) propped up and gave cover to some of the most brutal dictatorships in Argentina's trouble history. Just as Christ stood up against those who would abuse power, and identified himself with those who were cast out on the margins, Eva's humble beginnings and care for the downtrodden resonates deeply with the poem and in the wider collective imagination.

State control so often coalesces with state religion, under the double bind of patriarchal control (when Walsh published this poem in 1976, both church and state were in the hegemonic grip, not just of clearly demarcated gender roles, but of political power). That Perón's widow held power for a brief interlude after the General's death in 1974, does not alter the underlying structural networks of authority that were holding Argentine

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society in its retrogressive grip. General Videla's coup on the 24 March 1976 and ensuing brutal regime is surely a bleak reminder of this.

The generic battleground and crossover within the dialogic textual material of Walsh's poem, is a reminder that, to some extent, all cultural material is located in a liminal space, on the boundaries, where it intersects and is forged. In an early essay of Bakhtin, he reminds us of this:

> The cultural domain has no inner territory. It is located entirely on boundaries, boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features. The systematic unity of culture passes into the atoms of cultural life: like the sun, it is reflected in every drop of life. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Separated from abstraction from these boundaries it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant; it degenerates and dies (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 274).

Walsh's poem was published on the threshold of changing fortunes in Argentina's history. At the same time, it intersects with personal and collective memory, popular culture, special syntax and the structural workings of elegy as a poetic form.

Stanza nine foregrounds important topographical sites in Buenos Aires, the barrio of Riachuelo, which as its name suggests, leads out to the Río de la Plata; the Plaza de Mayo, a physical space that has always been associated with Argentina's political life, be it when it gained its independence from Spain, and throughout history as a place of commemoration and protest. Pro and anti-Perón demonstrations converged there, and in the years following Videla's military reign of terror, it was to become synonymous with the 'Madres de la Plaza de Mayo', and their campaign for their disappeared sons during and after the Videla dictatorship.

The language adopted by the poetic 'I' is direct. Situating Eva in the topographical epicenter of Argentine political struggle, lines one and two of stanza nine forcefully convey a sense of Eva Perón, almost single-handedly, putting women at the centre: 'Torciste el Riachuelo a Plaza de Mayo,/ metiste a las mujeres en la historia'. The

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deliberate and forceful imagery is continued in the next line, ‘arrebatando micrófonos’, snatching the tools to magnify her voice from the hands of power. And a few lines further on, the idealized prism through which her afterlife emerges, compares her to a diamond located within a pen for animals (‘un chiquero’). The starkness of the contrast is both deliberate and unambiguous, elevating Eva to mythical status, with hagiographic intensity. This is immediately followed by a reference to Christ’s words recorded in John 8:7 about throwing the first stone (‘If any one of you is without sin, let him cast the first stone at her’): ‘¿Quién va a tirarte la última piedra?’. Christ’s well known words, which find echoes in Walsh’s powerful lines, are not only a reminder that Christ was on the side of the prostitutes and outcasts, but that Eva Perón with her legacy of standing up for the oppressed and the marginalized, is walking in the very footsteps of the Son of God, which stands in stark contrast to the repressive and narrow reterritorialization of his teachings by a Catholic Church more interested in its own status and power, than the very people it was meant to serve and empower. It is no coincidence that only a few lines further on in the poem, we encounter some of the most powerful words and imagery of the whole poem, where women from every walk of life and political persuasion: mothers, prostitutes, rebels, those who had opposed her and those who supported her, are inspired and touched by her example. Eva Perón’s reach is thus universalized. She is not just the saviour of those who agreed with her politically, but a symbol (whether they know it or not) for all women striving through the cruel vicissitudes of history. The tone is one of compassion and inclusion, as is so often the case within the generic conventions of the eulogy, for there is sympathy even for those mothers who obediently surrendered their sons to war: ‘[todas] las [madres] que obedientes tiran hijos/ a la basura de la guerra’. The direct denunciation of war openly critiques the structural power of military might, galvanized in pseudo-religious Church protection. This is not just a poem of mourning, but one of protest. The last lines of stanza ten shift the focus from the mothers who could do nothing to save their sons, to those who are empowered to become agents of political and societal change: ‘las que ahora en el mundo fraternizan/ sublevándose contra la

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aniquilación'. 'Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 51).

In stanza eleven the poetic 'I' expresses that we will only really know who she truly was, once the vultures leave her, together with all those who despised her. She is eulogised for being strong and yet compassionate, who took power from the military ('arrebató poder a los soldados'). As Clifford Geertz argues, 'Ritual is not just a pattern of meaning; it is also a form of social interaction' (Geertz, 1973, p. 168). Stanza twelve sets Eva as someone who brings people together from all backgrounds: the 'reas' associated with Greek goddesses and divinity, to nuns, and all those women 'violadas en los teleteatros', 'y las que callan pero no consienten'. When all of these women come together 'arrebatemos la liberación'. The tone is belligerent, full of hope and agency that the structural violence of torture, rape and the submission of women can be overcome.

The final stanza reiterates Eva as the champion of 'los sumergidos', the dispossessed and disenfranchised, someone with the inner strength to 'hacer de nuevo el mundo', to continue the cry 'basta, aunque nos amordacen con cañones'.

CONCLUSION

Halbwachs argues that '[w]e can remember only on condition of retrieving the position of past events that interest us from the frameworks of collective memory' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 172). Throughout 'Eva', Walsh reminds us of the political nature of collective memory, and its role is disrupting official discourse. The crowds of mourners who lined the streets of Buenos Aires on that winter's day in July 1952, resonates with Henri Lefebvre who wrote that a city is a process: 'a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 83). 'Eva' comprises within its lines a set of relations that memorializes the most iconic woman in

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Argentina's history, and in the process, offers a critique of a society bent on political violence, coercion and state control. 'Eva' is a poem that draws on elegy, personal and collective memory, history and mourning in the public square to present us with a text that is not just elegiac in tone, but is deeply political, critiquing the violence of the military in a country where the gun so often trumped the ballot box. It is a poem of lament but also of defiance. Through the example of the woman who is immortalised in its lines, Walsh calls into question the abuse of state control, and denounces the absurdity of war and violence. Both the memory of Eva Perón and the streets and plazas of Buenos Aires, are brought to life and memorialised through a lens that blends nostalgia with hope for a better future. María Elena Walsh was a bold example of a woman who was not afraid to use her voice to denounce those who had abused power and unleashed unspeakable violence on their own people. And she does it through the medium of mourning and remembrance, thus linking her voice to the many thousands who grieved Eva Perón's passing, and longed for a day when all would enjoy the peace, dignity and freedom that had cruelly evaded so many throughout Argentina's history.

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