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On Hearing the Daughters' Call: Feminicide, Freedom, and Maternal Collective Action in Northern Mexico*

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ABSTRACT: This article offers an interpretation of anti-feminicide maternal activism as political in northern Mexico by analyzing it alongside Hannah Arendt's concepts of freedom, natality, and the child in *The Human Condition*. While feminist theorists often debate whether maternalism strengthens or undermines women's political participation, the author offers an unconventional interpretation of Arendt's categories to illustrate that the meaning and practice of maternalism radically changes through the public performance of motherhood. While Arendt does not seem the best candidate to navigate this debate, her concepts of freedom and the child provide a productive perspective to rethink the relationship between maternalism and citizenship. In making this claim, this article challenges feminist political theories that depict motherhood as the chief source of women's subordination. In the case of northern Mexico, anti-feminicide maternal activism illustrates how *the political* is also a *personal* endeavor, thereby complementing the famous feminist motto.

KEYWORDS: feminicide, maternal activism, protests, freedom, natality, the child, citizenship

The child, this in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world.
—Hannah Arendt

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Feminicide—defined as "a new analytic and political category for the murder, with state impunity, of women and girls because they are female"[1]—in northern Mexico provides a compelling case study to revisit feminist debates concerning the mobilization of maternalism against public and private manifestations of extreme violence in the Americas.[2] Whereas scholars have written extensively about maternal activism in Latin America,[3] they have paid less attention to this topic in northern Mexico despite a strong presence of anti-feminicide protests spearheaded by the victims' mothers.[4] In those instances when feminicide scholars examine the ongoing protests, some of them manifest skepticism about their political significance and emancipatory character, arguing that political action undertaken in a maternal mode tends to reinforce the binary patriarchal configuration of space that relegates women to the private sphere.[5]

For example, in the heyday of the anti-feminicide protests, Melissa W. Wright inquired into the "difficult paradoxes" that anti-feminicide activists at once confront and reproduce as they resist the discursive logic that constructs female workers as disposable beings. Anti-feminicide protesters, she writes, cannot escape the discursive context that accuses women who venture out of the domestic sphere of prostituting themselves.[6] For this reason, women's networks such as Mujeres de Negro (Women in Black), a solidarity group that came together in 2002, protest collectively as mothers to refute accusations that they are "unfit" citizens based on their transgression of the private sphere. Following theorists Joan Scott and Michel Foucault, for whom the power of discourse is inescapable, Wright argues that "Mujeres de Negro illustrate how feminist politics has only paradoxes to offer."[7] Her point is that Mujeres's efforts to create new spaces for women to voice their grievances publicly through a collective performance of mourning simultaneously "reinforce many of the traditional prohibitions against women's access to politics and the public sphere."[8]

Arendt's concept of freedom in *The Human Condition*—rooted in the fact of natality, or birth—and her discussion of the child—which she describes as "representative of the world"—offer the possibility of thinking the relationship between maternalism and citizenship anew. These concepts direct attention to the activists' practices of freedom originating in maternal resistance against feminicide. Arendt's theory of politics as "potentially activist,"[9] suggests that women's capacity to act, take the initiative, begin, or set something into motion contribute to the materialization of freedom.[10] Anti-feminicide activists enact freedom, in Arendt's sense of the term, by inaugurating a permanent protest campaign seeking to shift the institutional gaze that constructs poor women in northern Mexico as expendable. In doing so, they problematize the

patriarchal representation of extreme gender violence as a "normal" occurrence in global cities.

This alternative interpretation establishes the relevance of Arendt's categories to maternal activism's literature, which has gone mostly unnoticed. In particular, Arendt's conception of freedom offers a productive route to consider the mothers' refusal of disposability as a preordained way of life, their collective enactment of a second (political) birth, and their struggles to affirm their daughters' natality. While *The Human Condition* places neither mothers nor maternal activism at the center of its theoretical reflections, its analytical import lies in enabling an interpretation of maternal activism beyond the lens of paradox. The book also allows us to recenter maternal activism's transformational and empowering capacities, particularly when governing actors expect marginalized women to accept a life conditioned by relentless violence silently. Such an interpretation is possible when we explore the relationship between natality, plurality, and the child. Through close examination of anti-feminicide maternal activism in northern Mexico, I will also problematize and expand Arendt's categories. As Arendt scholars know, Arendt's theory of freedom seldom considered marginalized subjectivities, including mothers, in its analysis. Thus, while I maintain that *The Human Condition* offers a productive route to consider maternal activism beyond the more familiar frames of identity politics, patriarchal citizenship, or democracy's paradoxes, the present analysis also begins to correct Arendt's neglect of the mother figure in her writings.

By offering this interpretation, I do not deny that agents acting in the name of patriarchy often appropriate and manipulate the trope of motherhood to defend a conception of the family that perpetuates male domination over women. Yet, my goal is to illustrate that much more is at stake in this debate, particularly regarding how anti-feminicide activists redefine maternalism and wrest it from its patriarchal grip. One of my contentions is that, under certain circumstances, maternal activism has the potential to destabilize patriarchal structures by shifting our emphasis from authority—"often of the father, but not always"[11]—to relationality between mother and child. As George Ciccariello-Maher suggests in a different context, "limiting our history to the crimes of the powerful would be to remain mesmerized by their own governing myths."[12] Relatedly, limiting our analysis to the totalitarian tactics deployed against anti-feminicide activists would entail reinforcing those dominating voices that seek to impose their side of the story and trivializing maternal contributions to reshaping the terms of political participation available to Global Southern women. In taking this path, I am aware that I use Arendtian categories to do what she did not do, namely, to insert the mother figure into her discussion

of freedom, thereby endowing her with political meaning as she resists forms of violence reminiscent of totalitarian tactics. Even so, I concur with Bonnie Honig's argument that Arendt's categories possess an internal logic that we can use to resist her own demarcations and to expand its original theorization.[13]

I develop my argument in four parts. Part one provides the context for the emergence of several maternal organizations in northern Mexico. Part two introduces Arendt's concept of freedom and the child in *The Human Condition,* paying particular attention to the centrality that Arendt ascribes to birth. Part three introduces the Elshtain-Dietz debate over the relationship between maternalism and citizenship to illustrate how maternal activism is still contested within feminist political theory despite being inspiring for many women worldwide. Part four discusses maternal activism in northern Mexico as an expression of freedom. This section also illustrates how anti-feminicide activists use maternal and citizenship claims complementarily. I conclude with a short reflection on how maternal activism both problematizes and corrects Arendt's neglect of the maternal figure in her formulation of freedom.

Protesting Feminicide: The *¡Ni Una Más!* Campaign

Ciudad Juárez is a metropolitan Mexican city bordering El Paso, Texas. Located in the northern state of Chihuahua, Juárez sits 231 miles away from the capital city.[14] The city is famous for its low-cost, high-quality manufacturing plants called *maquiladoras*, an industry that has historically attracted thousands of migrant men and women from other parts of Mexico. Despite the flourishing *maquiladora* industry, wealth remains concentrated in few hands as economic policy and poorly funded social programs do little to improve the living conditions of workers. In addition, the recurring killings of women documented since 1993[15] and the presence of two dominant drug cartels give the city an (in)famous reputation. To be sure, media and journalistic outlets often depict Juárez as the most violent city in the world and as a *femi[ni]cide machine,* "an apparatus that didn't just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls, but that developed the institutions that guarantee impunity for those crimes."[16] Scholars and local activists believe that feminicide crimes originally began in Ciudad Juárez; however, this phenomenon was later observed in Chihuahua City and in many other states, including Veracruz, Morelos, and El Estado de México. Anti-feminicide activism emerged in this context. It took many forms, including the creation of NGOs, local grassroots organizations, and mothers' groups, which began to form in the late 1990s.[17]

Feminicides had specific characteristics. According to some reports, "a significant proportion of the murders—about one third—fitted a common

pattern."[18] Young, working-class women disappeared on their way to work or school and were never seen again or were found dead, their bodies "severely tortured, sexually violated, and mutilated by their aggressors."[19] Perpetrators made no attempt to conceal the crimes, as female corpses turned up in the desert, abandoned lots, and even residential areas where passers-by found them.[20] While not all the victims fit the same profile, a considerable number were of working-class backgrounds and resided in the city's outskirts. The majority of victims bore the mark of racialization understood, according to Rita Laura Segato, as a sign of inferiority attributed to territories and peoples historically conquered through violence.[21] In Latin America, Segato states, race does not designate membership in a specific ethnic group. Instead, race evokes a *paisaje*, or landscape, "a bodily mark of the position that Latin American territories occupied in the history of colonial domination. This bodily mark—or sign—suggests to the 'trained' eye an indigenous or African origin."[22] Understood in this way, race amounts to a "certificate" of origin inscribed on peoples' bodies; it designates those women and men who bear the mark of conquest, defeat, and colonization, making them more susceptible to violence, imprisonment, or massacres.[23]

Women began forming organizations to denounce the authorities' failure to determine what happened to the victims and to investigate who perpetrated the crimes. In the absence of an institutional response, independent activists, artists, and different solidarity networks in the region joined the victims' mothers to protest the impunity surrounding feminicides. Protestors complained that local politicians downplayed, and even denied, the crimes, refusing to adopt the term feminicide in their press conferences. They appeared on radio stations and local TV shows where the mothers explained how rather than offering support and assistance, politicians repeatedly mistreated the families who organized for justice, spreading countless accusations against the victims instead of perpetrators.

Voces Sin Eco (Voices Without Echo) became one of the earliest maternal groups to organize against feminicide. The group's members consisted of directly implicated families. Paula Flores and Guillermina González, the mother and sister of Sagrario González, a *maquiladora* worker murdered in 1998,[24] created Voces along with eight other families. Members of this organization stepped into the public domain to demand professional investigations related to the murder cases and to increase the crimes' visibility, given the scant media coverage that local newspapers assigned to extreme gender violence. In this regard, Ester Chávez Cano, a human rights defender, used to complain that stories related to gender-based violence appeared "buried inside local news-

papers, almost like footnotes."[25] The lack of media attention mirrored the institutional toleration granted to gender-based violence. As a result, Voces staged public candlelight vigils to mourn the victims. The group's members organized coordinated searches throughout the desert and collected evidence, including clothes and other personal items, linked to the crimes.[26]

While Voces disbanded in 2001, other organizations emerged and continued the protests, including Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa and Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas. Additional organizations, such as Mujeres por Mexico and Mujeres de Negro, drew on larger solidarity networks of women not directly related to the murdered and forced disappearance victims. These groups amplified the anti-feminicide protests, thereby enacting a bottom-up model of citizenship. Despite not being directly related to murdered and disappeared women, participants in Mujeres por Mexico and Mujeres de Negro also embraced the victims as "daughters."[27] Groups that included this broader alliance emerged through the *¡Ni Una Más!* (Not One More Death) campaign, which was launched after eight bodies of young women turned up in an empty lot known as The Cotton Field. This shocking discovery prompted mass protests in Juárez and Chihuahua City, where women marched dressed in black tunics and pink hats[28] to demand the end of feminicides as well as impunity that state authorities granted to perpetrators.[29]

Women's outrage, motivated by the suggestion that the lives of young, working-class women did not deserve attention, surprised local politicians who rushed to suggest that the number of murdered women was not as high as some organizations maintained. They also claimed that the murder rate in Juárez and Chihuahua was comparable to other cities with similar cultural, economic, and political characteristics.[30] Furthermore, state officials suggested that perpetrators killed their victims because the latter exhibited "transgressive sexual behavior."[31] For example, former Chihuahua State prosecutor, Arturo González Rascón, declared "it's hard to go out on the street when it's raining and not get wet."[32] This statement implied that feminicides occurred because the victims took part in illicit acts and were responsible for their violent deaths.

Yet, local public officials were no longer the only voices on the subject. Mothers' organizations demanded justice for the victims and public accountability from corrupt officials who covered up the crimes. Anti-feminicide activists refused to treat women's deaths as a normal aspect of city life. They criticized the local and state government for attacking the victims' families instead of offering them their support and services. Assisted by local human rights organizations, the victims' mothers disputed the claim that feminicide

victims were to blame for the horror that they suffered and declared, instead, that failing political institutions, government corruption, and organized crime were responsible. Such responses revealed that the convergence of all these elements produced totalitarian settings seeking to habituate the city's residents to live in fear and minimize public dissent.[33]

Melissa W. Wright was one of the first scholars to examine the anti-feminicide protests comprising the ¡*Ni Una Más!* campaign. Wright's analysis stressed how protesters "directed international attention on the impunity of the criminals, on the political disregard for the crimes, and on the suffering of the victims and their families."[34] Wright emphasized that activists both confronted and reproduced a paradox.[35] In her words:

> In taking their protests to the public sphere and exercising their democratic rights as Mexican citizens, the Mujeres de Negro are publicly declaring the right of women to exist in the public sphere both as citizens and as people who deserve to be free from violence and fear. Yet, as they take to the streets, they are vulnerable to attacks that they are "public women" in a discursive context where that label continues to be used effectively to dismiss and devalue women for "prostituting" themselves by venturing beyond the domestic sphere, that traditional domain of female purity. . . Mujeres de Negro face the paradox that by exercising their democratic voices through public protest, they are dismissed, by their detractors, as "unfit" citizens, based on their contamination as "public women," whose causes are equally contaminated by their public presence.[36]

Wright's framework of paradox drew attention to Mujeres de Negro's public performance of mourning performed through funerary rites, mass protests, silent vigils, which resulted in confrontations with public officials. She also maintained that protesters carried out these public performances while embracing traditional family roles of wives, mothers, grandmothers, or daughters to avoid attacks from politicians who portray women who venture beyond the domestic sphere as morally contaminated. Wright does not deny that maternal activism wages a powerful challenge to the existing authorities. Yet, she argues that protestors also reaffirm the rigid boundary between the public and private sphere as they confront accusations that they are not fit for the public sphere because they are private women. Put differently, for Wright, Mujeres de Negro unwillingly reinforce the patriarchal idea of femininity by adopting a strategy of reinventing themselves as public-private women. As she notes, Mujeres "recreate the dichotomy that distinguishes the 'public' woman from

the 'private' one. . . . By basing their own authenticity as activists upon this difference, they reproduce the very prohibitions that so often limit women's access to the public sphere."[37]

Since feminicide does not have a single cause, I agree with Wright that the strategy to fight it must also come from multiple fronts. I also agree with her that Mexican political culture does not tolerate, let alone embrace, public dissent from women, especially when they are poor and marginalized.[38] At the same time, I do not believe that anti-feminicide maternal activism invariably reproduces the "patriarchal conception of the domestic domain as the proper place for women."[39] Even if women's antagonists hope to reinscribe and limit the significance of their actions, activists can disrupt such limitation as they reproduce traditional roles. This is not necessarily a paradoxical move. As I will show below, Wright's framework of paradox unwillingly relies on a conception of feminism that sees motherhood as the paradigmatic source of women's subordination.[40] From this perspective, it appears counterproductive to embrace the mother identity to contest violence because conservative leaders often mobilize motherhood to reinforce their control over women. Yet, this perspective fails to consider those situations in which mothers must enter into and engage in the public sphere to carry out their responsibilities as mothers.

Furthermore, the emphasis on paradox, which stresses and centers the existing sexism that constrains women's political participation, tends to obscure how the meaning of motherhood changes when women mobilize it against those institutions and actors that demand their submission. Despite the authorities' immense power, women can and have successfully challenged hegemonic terms. In this sense, maternal activism advances a *bottom-up* conception of citizenship based on women's readiness to act on behalf of their daughters who suffered unspeakable violence. Drawing upon Arendt's concept of freedom, I now turn to recasting maternal activism by shifting our attention away from women's performative paradoxes to the epistemological shifts that their public protests inaugurate.

At first glance, Arendt's relevance for the analysis of maternal activism does not seem obvious, given her admitted reluctance to use women's experiences as a departure for political reflection. But while women and mothers are conspicuously absent in much of her thought, the same does not apply to the notion of *birth*, which Arendt connects to freedom understood as the faculty to begin something new. In her thought, birth is a precondition of freedom. With this point in mind, let us turn to her discussion of freedom to elucidate how this theory shows that the activists use maternalism and citizenship claims complementarily.

The Conception of Freedom in Arendt's Political Thought

Arendt developed her theory of political freedom against the backdrop of a persistent preoccupation with totalitarian terror. Haunted by the prospect that the instruments of violence perfected under totalitarian rule could lead the world as we know it toward total catastrophe and death,[41] she conceived of human existence as defined by the faculty of beginnings,[42] which, politically speaking, is identical to freedom.[43] Arendt discusses freedom in many of her texts but especially in *The Human Condition* and in *Between Past and Future*. In them, she describes freedom as a worldly experience. "With the creation of human life," she writes, "the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which . . . is only another way of saying that freedom was created when man was created but not before."[44]

In her writings, Arendt illuminates several characteristics of freedom that are relevant to this discussion of maternal activism. First, freedom is a human faculty that mirrors the principle of natality—"the fundamental condition of a singular existence, and of new beginnings."[45] Arendt further elaborates, "God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom."[46] Notably, the faculty of beginning becomes reaffirmed in each birth, which means that every birth possesses the *capacity* to start or initiate new things. She writes: "man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence. . . . In the birth of each man this initial beginning is reaffirmed."[47] While Arendt mainly constructs acting beings as men, we can de-couple birth and men to more accurately reflect the fact that every birth affirms the principle of beginning.

Second, freedom is only possible because of human plurality, "the basic condition of both action and speech, [which] has the twofold character of equality and distinction."[48] As a condition of human life, equality enables mutual understanding through communication, whereas distinction refers to how unique individuals disclose who they are to others through speech and action. Crucially, for Arendt, human beings insert themselves into the world through speech and action, "and this insertion is like a second birth."[49] Word and deed are so central for Arendt that she even maintains that a life is dead to the world without these faculties.

Third, freedom is a worldly experience rather than an inner disposition. In other words, freedom is real to the extent that it is connected to the world and is experienced with others, not only with the self. In other words, for Arendt, the faculty of freedom exists for the sake of the world, not for the sake of individual self-preservation. In her conception of it, *the world* is a human-made artifact and a space for human interaction.[50] The world denotes a web of relations

developed and maintained between those who share the world in common. She explains: "to live together in the world means . . . that a world of things is between those who have it in common as a table is located between those who sit around it. The world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."[51] For Arendt, the world is not identical to the earth. Instead, the world is a human-made artifact where politics can originate and whose existence depends on human hands. She emphasizes a mediated togetherness as a fundamental characteristic of living in the world. This togetherness reaffirms plurality's relevance as a reminder that human existence is constituted by and depends on others. Therefore, as a worldly experience, freedom materializes in the world that we share with others. In a recent commentary on Arendt's conception of world, author Lena Zuckerwise reminds us that "the world is not a given; to expect that it will simply endure on its own is misleading and dangerous."[52] In other words, for Arendt, the permanence of the world demands concerted responsibility both to create and preserve it.

While birth and natality are central to Arendt's conception of freedom, she does not present this theory to *solve* the evils created through totalitarian terror. Rather, it is best to characterize her insistence on freedom and natality as a warning that a terrifying aim of totalitarianism is to deprive men and women deemed the "scum of the earth"[53] from the faculty of beginning—the capacity to act against concerted efforts to eliminate them. As noted above, totalitarian settings use terror to habituate the masses to tolerate arbitrariness. Totalitarian terror also aims to curtail the possibility that individuals start collective resistance. For her, totalitarian terror obliterates men's faculties of speech and action as it purports to reduce them to a worldless remnant class devoid of any initiative. While some would debate whether northern Mexico resembles a totalitarian state in the strict sense of the term, we can infer from our previous discussion of feminicide that the current socioeconomic and political arrangements are claustrophobic with totalitarian aims. They are so by seeking to eradicate poor and racialized women and men's capacity to rebel, organize, protest, and transform those arrangements. The repeated efforts to undermine the possibility of resistance and collapse of the world as a home for them is precisely what the term "feminicide machine" conveys. The term also suggests northern Mexico's orientation toward mortality, which poor racialized women are supposed to know and accept. In this shattered world reshaped through extreme violence, governing authorities blame poor and racialized mothers for inducing their children's alleged criminality, depicting them as absent mothers. Meanwhile, from these authorities' point of view, structural inequality, the existing economic model, and patriarchy remain uninterrogated and ab-

solved. These authorities also fail to interrogate how political decision-making and policies contribute to destroying private space, forcing women to transgress the limits that patriarchal institutions imposed upon them to perform their roles as mothers publicly.

In this context, maternal action constituted an expression of freedom in the sense that women from various backgrounds came together in their equality and distinctness to speak and act against the authorities' normalization of extreme gender violence in Juárez and Chihuahua City. These women took to the streets as mothers and organized marches, mass demonstrations, and caravans through the *¡Ni Una Más!* campaign, forcing the theme of feminicide onto the government's agenda. These protests brought into being a political space where women appeared before the entire nation to show the lives of poor women in northern Mexico were at risk. In doing so, maternal activists located the roots of this violence in the country's political institutions, inhuman economic arrangements, and patriarchal order. In Arendt's lexicon, their collective action, which opened a political space where women were seen and heard by others, constitutes a second political birth through which the activists resist the city's orientations toward mortality. Through their protests, activists rejected the instrumentalization of poor women's bodies, their reproductive capacities, and potential futures, portraying them instead as beings who also deserve a world in which they could be at home. Maternal activists also showed that a meaningful existence depends not only on how well women fulfill their roles as mothers but also on caring, life-sustaining, and, above all, responsible political and economic arrangements.

If anti-feminicide maternal activism resembles an expression of Arendtian freedom by referencing the activists' enactment of a second political birth, the activists' performance of motherhood and their symbolic act of naming feminicide victims as *daughters* return us to Arendt's conception of natality and (first) birth. To grasp the political significance of this move, we need to revisit Arendt's account of the child. In Arendt's vocabulary, the child represents the miracle of *natality*, that is, a condition of being born into the world. As Kevin Ryan emphasizes, "[a] crucial . . . feature of natality is that it traces the source of political action to birth,"[54] more specifically to the child's biological birth. Arendt explains it as follows: "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting."[55]

Some could argue, correctly, that the faculty of beginnings pertains to the child and not to the mother since the mother does not figure in Arendt's theory of natality. How then is this capacity related to the mother and maternal

activism? As the discussion above suggests, maternal activists enact political action as they take to the streets hoping to interrupt the city's socioeconomic and political orientation toward female death. Therefore, the mother is a beginner in that, through word and deed, she introduces, with others, a new understanding of an old phenomenon calling for judgement and responsibility. The other possibility exists in Arendt's discussion of the child as love's product. Arendt connects the child to her conception of world. The child, she writes, "is the in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common."[56] For her, romantic love is worldless because the passionate fusion of two destroys the in-between space necessary for people to relate to and to separate from one another.[57] Put differently, love is unworldly because it triggers the lovers' withdrawal from the world—the space in which human beings experience political freedom. Because of its unworldly nature, Arendt depicts romantic love as the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces. The incompatibility of love and politics is such for Arendt that she suggests that the inherent worldlessness of love "can only falsify it or pervert it when used for political purposes."[58] Yet, the wordlessness that Arendt ascribes to romantic love is restored through the child. As she explains:

> As long as its spell lasts, the only in-between which can insert itself between two lovers is the child, love's own product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers are now related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world. Through the child, it is as though the lovers *return* to the world from which their love had expelled them.[59]

If love is that force that sends the passionate lovers away from the world, freedom, and politics, the child recovers them for freedom, politics, and the world by restoring the in-between space that the lovers lost. Here, Arendt speaks of romantic love and the passionate lovers to discuss freedom as an interruption, or, more precisely, as a reintroduction of political time. In her storyline, the child represents the world in its ability to join and separate the lovers in a similar way to how the world of things links and separates those who inhabit it. Through the child, the lovers regain the worldliness that is the foundation of political freedom because the child interrupts their withdrawal from the world, prompting their action. Stated differently, natality points at the lovers/child relationship as one that necessarily demands action for the child's sake. In the passage I quoted above, Arendt does not argue this explicitly, but we can infer this by attending to Arendt's assertion that the child is representative of the

world and by relating this statement to Arendt's conception of world. Like the world, the child does not survive on its own, not even when the child reaches maturity, as my discussion of feminicide has shown. Like the world, the child calls for concerted efforts for its preservation. Reinterpreted in this way, natality also comprises (parental/maternal) action for the sake of the child, just like Arendt's conception of world requires human action for its preservation.

While conventionally understood as the means through which families perpetuate themselves, the child, in this reinterpretation of Arendt's concepts, also embodies the faculty of natality. We can begin to see how the relationship between the child, natality, and freedom is not random for Arendt. Indeed, this relationship allows us to suggest that the substance of political action *also* comprises care, protection, and respect in addition to political responsibility and all those activities that guarantee the child's preservation. Freedom as the capacity to begin something new does not exclusively designates activities such as care, protection, or nurture on behalf of the child; however, these activities cannot be excluded from the realm of freedom, and politics, based on the interpretation that I just offered. Just like participation in renewing the common world depends on and demands the faculty of beginning, the child demands the parent's/mother's action, especially in contexts where the existing socioeconomic and political structures pursue totalitarian aims.

Based on this reading, it is possible to illuminate aspects of maternal activism that the framework of paradox obscures. First, anti-feminicide maternal activists do not exclusively invoke the category of the citizen to demand concrete government solutions to end feminicides and forced disappearances, but neither do they avoid framing their demands in political terms. Indeed, the activists' claim is that the state should uphold their daughters' rights. Further, protesters insist that the state must provide justice for all victims regardless of race, class, and sexual orientation. By protesting extreme gender violence in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua city as mothers, activists reverse accusation that they are absent mothers. Indeed, a recurring charge raised by the mothers is that the state, not them, is completely absent and detached from the citizens' reality. The public performance of motherhood demonstrates how the mothers are disproportionally burdened by being forced to care for their daughters beyond the private sphere as the protective apparatus of the state collapses when top leaders and politicians opt instead to protect their own interests and those of global capital, allowing corporate managers to treat poor young women as prey.

By coming together in the public sphere to demand ¡*Ni Una Mas!* (not one more woman is killed), maternal activists introduce an epistemological shift that links feminicide to the impunity surrounding the existing colonial and

patriarchal institutions. This shift condemns the government's lack of involvement in the protection, care, and respect of the victims by illustrating how feminicides are symptomatic of a political and economic order that instrumentalizes entire communities. This epistemological shift also releases the victims from the responsibility that the authorities assigned them in their own deaths and directs instead the public's attention to systemic failures. Maternal action, in Arendt's lexicon, becomes an affirmation of the victims' natality. With this interpretation in mind, it is possible to rethink maternal activism in northern Mexico. To do so, we need to revisit and challenge how the mother-child relationship and citizenship have been discussed in feminist political theory.

The Problem with Maternal Thinking in Feminist Theory

Feminist debates concerning the relationship between maternalism and citizenship have grown in proportion with the creation of maternal organizations seeking to respond to the protracted history of warfare in Latin America. Within political theory, the debate between Jean B. Elshtain and Mary Dietz has laid the groundwork for how many feminist political theorists have approached maternalism. Succinctly stated, this debate revolves around the central question of whether maternalism strengthens or undermines women's political participation within the polity. The answer often implies that maternalism and citizenship are incompatible or paradoxical. I should state that the Elshtain-Dietz debate over maternalism and citizenship does not concern itself with anti-feminicide maternal action in northern Mexico. Even so, it is important to address it not only because it offers some of the best arguments for and against maternalism but also because Wright's analysis of the Mujeres de Negro of northern Mexico grapples with some of the core premises found in this debate.

Elshtain's passionate defense of maternal values entered the terrain of mourning, a task which, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan explains, the sexual division of labor typically assigns to women.[60] Elshtain's interest in maternal mourning coincided with her broader maternalist approach to politics.[61] This approach posited a conception of "social feminism" that found in "women's traditional values of care—for and in the family—a source of resistance to the illegitimate demands of the state."[62] Elshtain believed in a form of politics that did not depend on a rigid dichotomy between public and private spheres. However, she was less confident that such a form of politics could materialize within liberal democracies. Her skepticism originated in the history of liberal democracy, which she understood as inseparable from war.[63] According to Elshtain, liberal democratic states reduced citizenship to blind nationalism

and promoted a political subjectivity based on individualism and self-interest.[64] As such, democratic citizenship remained incompatible with her maternalist-based endorsement of "social feminism" against the state.

Elshtain's skepticism about state power guided her interest in the family and women's traditional roles within it. One of her main intellectual preoccupations was introducing women's maternal values—nurturing, life-giving, or preserving—into the public realm.[65] Tellingly, Elshtain found in Sophocles' *Antigone* a remarkable figure of political resistance against the state premised upon domestic and social duties.[66] The other source of inspiration for Elshtain was the Argentinean movement of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. This human rights organization held weekly marches since 1979 in front of Casa Rosada[67] to demand the return of their daughters and sons arrested and subsequently "disappeared" during Argentina's Dirty War (1974–1983).[68] Elshtain saw in The Mothers a contemporary embodiment of Antigone.[69] In fact, she referred to them as "Antigone's daughters" because The Mothers risked everything they had, including their lives, to challenge the Military Junta as they demanded the return of the disappeared. Elshtain worried that scholars froze the Argentinean Mothers "in a posture of permanent grief" when The Mothers did much more than suffer.[70] In her view, the group was remarkable because it challenged the dictatorship of the Military Junta at a time when "political action was thought to be impossible."[71]

Elshtain believed that political theorists needed to recognize these forms of maternal activism as distinctively political and creative. One of Elshtain's concerns was that U.S. liberal egalitarian feminists failed to understand that The Mothers built a collective movement that "forged a group political identity based on their shared experience. Condemned to silence, they repudiated the sentence of the regime, took to the plaza, and voiced their grief and outrage. . . The Mothers took to the streets and created a space for anti-repressive politics."[72] If it is true that one can evaluate the political nature of action by reference to its efficacy, on that count Elshtain concluded that the Mothers' activism had played an indispensable role in bringing about the fall of the dictatorship in Argentina. She also insisted that their power grew out of family ties that they mobilized as useful resources for enacting a democratic politics. The Mothers questioned the Junta's authoritarian excesses as they denounced the disappearances of thousands of dissidents. The remarkable aspect of this approach, according to Elshtain, was that the group's challenge came from the ethical stance of caring maternity preoccupied with "moral protest and democracy."[73] But, as Honig notes, Elshtain reframed The Mothers as a movement whose ethics of lamentation became politically salient while depicting the movement as

uninterested in politics. In fact, from the standpoint of radical feminism, The Mothers seemed beyond or above politics.[74]

Elshtain's maternal-based social feminism found a fervent challenger in Mary G. Dietz. In *Citizenship with a Feminist Face*, Dietz argues against Elshtain's conception of social feminism based on the claim that her theoretical position "harbor[s] . . . serious problems for feminist political discourse and democratic political action."[75] Dietz made her critique of Elshtain on three grounds. First, according to Dietz, the theoretical positions of social feminism and "maternal thinking" distort the meaning of politics and political action by depicting women mainly as creatures of the family, conservatively understood, which she sees as preeminent over politics. Second, in Dietz's view, neither social feminism nor maternal thinking explains what constitutes a family or who belongs to one. Instead, Elshtain assumes that everyone, everywhere, belongs to a family unmarked by inequality, domestic violence, or unfair divisions of labor when in reality this is not empirically demonstrable. Third, by endorsing the primacy of the family over politics, Elshtain reinforces a rigid division between the public and private spheres, or so Dietz claims.[76]

Dietz also faults Elshtain for wanting to privatize feminism and politics by valorizing mothers as novel political actors. In Dietz's view, this goal fails to promote a genuinely democratic politics not only because it *prioritizes* women's identities as mothers over other ways of living while female, but also because Elshtain's conception of the family is too narrow and idealistic. Contrary to Elshtain, Dietz posits that political participation, unlike life in the family, allows citizens to relate to one another in conditions of equality. Citizenship allows individuals to determine decisions of common concern collectively. Moreover, citizenship and respect for the laws, Dietz adds, are two powerful weapons against corrupt governments. She argues that feminists must defend those activities since what matters for women is developing a political consciousness. If this political consciousness is to develop among women, it should be among feminists and in contradistinction to "maternal thinking." Maternal virtues, Dietz clarifies, are apolitical because "they are connected to and emerge out of an activity that is special, distinctive unlike . . . the activity of citizenship."[77] Thus, for Dietz, citizenship, instead of maternalism, gives women the power to determine their own direction. In short, women should look to exert their citizenship rights because whatever happens in the private realm is primarily determined by politics.

Dietz's most potent charge against Elshtain's endorsement of "maternal thinking" is her claim that maternity is not a precondition for, and might be mostly irrelevant to, citizenship. She argues that good mothers can also

be good citizens, but the relationship is not one of direct causality. In other words, good mothers do not automatically make good citizens or have unique resources that might anchor their political engagement. The relationship between mother and child cannot substitute a political relationship because the child is subordinated to the mother and depends on her. Moreover, the mother-child relationship is singular rather than plural because the mother experiences a child as an extension of herself. In contrast, the experience of citizenship is collective, inclusive, and generalized, whereas the mother-child relationship is personal, intimate, and unequal. In sum, Dietz concludes, maternal thinking cannot democratize political power since "women who do not venture beyond the family or participate in practices beyond mothering cannot attain an adequate understanding of the way politics determine their own lives. Nor can they—as mothers or creatures of the family—help transform a politics that stands in conflict with maternal values."[78] Were they to contribute to the achievement of such results, it would be as citizens instead of as mothers.

Dietz's critique offers many insights that I cannot thoroughly discuss here. Suffice it to say that I agree with her claim that families are heterogeneous, which serves as an indication that a unidimensional conception of the family cannot be a good model for politics. I also agree with Dietz that gender-based violence frequently occurs within the family, which confirms her point that not all families are nurturing, life-giving, or preserving. At the same time, Dietz's argument manifests some of the same problems that she attributes to Elshtain. In other words, Dietz posits maternal values and the maternal relationship as fixed, unchanging, and undemocratic. Motherhood, for her, is necessarily and always traditional, conservative, and subordinated, whereas citizenship is collective, inclusive, and democratizing[79] presumably even under authoritarian conditions like those in Argentina or northern Mexico. For Dietz, the position that mothers have hitherto faced within the family makes them unfit for citizenship *qua* mothers. Thus, maternalism and democratic politics are fundamentally incompatible. As she states, "we look in the wrong place, for a model of democratic citizenship if we look to the family . . . in the end, all that women as mothers can do is to chasten arrogant public power, they cannot democratize it."[80] In other words, mothers can only act as moral and moralistic agents but not as political ones. With this interpretation, Dietz leaves no room for maternal politics, even if the fulfillment of maternal duties brings women to the public sphere as mothers. She also bypasses the political innovations that may emerge as these mothers seek recourses when few mechanisms exist for them "to exercise their rights as citizens, especially if they are indigenous, peasant, and poor and therefore lack access and opportunities to intervene in the public

sphere."[81] But, we may ask, how can subaltern women exercise a right that is effectively refused to them and heavily policed by dominating actors?

As I hope to have shown in my discussion of Arendt's notion of freedom, the mother-child relationship is not alien to political life. Even if Arendt does not acknowledge that the mother-child relationship is central, we can establish this based on the above interpretation. Such analysis showed that the faculty of beginning is crucial to the preservation of the child. Admittedly, while not every mother becomes politically involved, some are moved to action on behalf of their children.[82] Moreover, in Arendt's rendering, the child is a unique and singular being that demands active support. Indeed, the child is typically subordinated to the mother, as Dietz argues; however, more than subordination, the child evokes vulnerability, which makes structures of support, including maternal care, necessary. Crucially, tending to vulnerability is not a responsibility restricted to the mother, as the discussion of feminicide in northern Mexico has shown. Support structures include genuinely democratic institutions, sustaining social interactions, and economic arrangements founded on the principle of cooperation and mutual benefit. While maternal care cannot substitute for these support structures, maternal struggles contribute significantly to their materialization.

Wright, whose research returns us to maternal discourses in northern Mexico, is more open to the possibility that maternal activism offers women political opportunities as well as limitations. For instance, she reports that Mujeres de Negro take to the streets neither as aggressive youth nor as politicians, but as private women even though some participants in fact work by day as professional politicians. As she explains, women's "legitimacy as public agents derives from their self-portrayal as women bound by the private domain."[83] Wright concedes that this strategy allows activists to "define the victims as fundamentally 'family girls,' or 'daughters' ('hijas'),"[84] challenging the claim that they met and merited their fate because they were socially and morally contaminated. But even though Wright recognizes that Mujeres articulate a powerful challenge to the governing elites, she shares some of Dietz's preoccupations. Specifically, she believes that invoking an identity that sustains the dichotomy between the public/private woman reinforces the hierarchies that deny women hospitable belonging and participation in the public sphere. Put differently, by seeking to represent the victims as "responsible" and "decent" daughters, maternal activists fail to force the authorities to reckon with women's public existence.[85] Thus, the victim-daughter discourse, Wright notes, also troublingly reproduces the myth that the family is, always and only, a safe haven, even though we know that gender violence takes place mainly at home.

Certainly, these concerns are important. Decades of feminist scholarship have revealed deep inequalities within many families; therefore, any attempt publicly to deploy maternalism becomes suspicious. However, critics overlook the fact that the meaning of maternalism changed through public protests. It is important to move beyond feminist frameworks that abstractly equate maternalism with women's subordination, especially because for many poor and racialized women, motherhood and the potential future of their children who will face a hostile world beyond the home have been the space from which democratic reforms have been, and still are, pursued. Additionally, work that dismisses maternalism's political potential fails to entertain those instances when no family ties exist between activists who embrace feminicide victims as "their daughters." In the case of Juárez, anti-feminicide maternal activism constitutes a powerful challenge to the status quo, including corrupt state institutions, patriarchal social and sexual relations, and economies of disposability as self-portrayed mothers mobilized in opposition to the commodification of poor women's bodies.

Arendt's reflections on freedom illustrate that it is possible to discuss a seemingly familiar term beyond its traditional associations. Even her discussion of freedom is indebted to the language of religion and its metaphors. For example, she uses the word "miracle" to describe freedom as "a character of human existence in the world."[86] But while Arendt contends that freedom is comparable to the religious metaphor of miracle, she also insists that we, human beings, not God, perform miracles. In a similar vein, I insist that we examine maternal activism outside of its automatic association with women's roles within traditional families. If we do this, we can clearly see the political work done through the public performance of motherhood in northern Mexico. Anti-feminicide activists' deployment of motherhood reveals a maternal *excess* that travels beyond the private realm due to the state's *de facto* abandonment. With this idea in mind, we can now return to maternal activism in northern Mexico.

Mujeres de Negro, Maternal Organizations, and Arendtian Freedom

Arendt's analysis of politics as agonistic and performative,[87] and her focus on freedom, help us to reevaluate maternal activism in northern Mexico. Women's organizations have long profited from the symbolism of the mother, a role that, as Diana Taylor puts it, "offer[s] women a certain legitimacy and authority in a society that values mothers almost to the exclusion of all other women."[88] Yet, as we saw, some feminists reject maternal action because political elites, and

even some of their unwitting challengers, often mobilize maternalism to reinforce patriarchal legal, political, and social privileges. But, as we have already begun to explore, the claim that maternalism reflects women's subordination may be based on abstractions that call for a revision based on empirical examples that recenter women's activism and their own reflections. We can begin by recognizing that, for the women who participate in it, maternal activism can be collective, inclusive, and empowering in ways that the patriarchal experience of citizenship is not. Two main features of maternal activism demonstrate this point. First, as already suggested in a more cursory way, maternal activism invokes both a biological and political relation maintained with the missing/murdered daughters. Second, maternal activism is pluralistic, rather than singular or self-referential, since the mother's identity does not exist in isolation.

Maternal activism in northern Mexico is inclusive. Mujeres came into being when women from diverse backgrounds joined the victims' mothers to demand institutional programs to prevent feminicide. In doing so, activists stepped outside their traditional roles as members of groups historically insulated from one another. They brought into the open the victims' stories otherwise negated by the government's attempt to reduce feminicide victims to mere statistics.[89] These actions illustrate how Mujeres's identity is not traditional or static—an imposition attributed to these women by others. Rather, anti-feminicide activists determine how they will wield the designation "mother," thereby troubling and rendering its conventional meaning dynamic. It is true that the mothers and sisters of the victims often led the protests; however, when they did so, mothers did not suffer quietly, as private mourners. They instead spoke of a widely shared condition, which required a political diagnosis and response. Women who wished to could and did participate as members of this network by declaring and demonstrating transformative solidarity.[90]

Even when women protested as mothers, maternal activism had a plural and collective dimension because maternalism is never purely and ideally only that. Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the Platonic concept of the Idea can illustrate this point. As they explain: "the Platonic concept of the Idea, *first* . . . it is that which objectively possesses a pure quality, or which is not something other than what it is . . . there is an Idea of mother if there is a mother who is not something other than a mother (who would not have been a daughter)."[91] In northern Mexico, maternal activism breaks from the Platonic Idea not only because the mothers exist in a world that they share with others, but also because their public display of maternalism blends with rights claims and the prerogatives of citizenship.

Because mothers share the world with others, their identities form in relation to them. As Arendt explains: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world. . . . This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is . . . is implicit in everything somebody says and does."[92] Her point is that one's identity is forged in and revealed through action. Yet, this revelatory quality only "comes to the fore when people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness."[93] These words suggest that identities are relational; namely, they are formed in and with reference to others. Thus, since mothers exist in a world that they share with others, their identities are frequently re-produced through those relations. To that end, Arendt's principle of plurality suggests that it is impossible for mothers, biological and otherwise, to possess a pure or singular quality as mothers since they constantly interact with others, including, but not exclusively, their kin. When self-portrayed mothers come together to protest feminicide, they are simultaneously performing as political beings even if they protest as mothers, for they are never only that singular, pure identity.[94]

Moreover, when symbolic mothers join with actual mothers in public protest, they also suggest that mothering is not an individual task, but a collective enterprise that is continuously changing. Maternal organizations redefine the meaning of motherhood because all women, even when they were not the victims' biological mothers, reclaimed them as daughters. Such reclamation implies that mothering is simultaneously a potentially shared endeavor in addition to a biological one. Some feminists may contend that this claim is conservative since it recenters women's reproductive roles and portrays the victims primarily as creatures of the family and household.[95] My reply is that the gesture is more political and progressive than conservative. It is so because the act of claiming the victims as daughters produces a symbolic bond through which non-biological mothers embrace a duty to procure the daughters' well-being. In other words, while not directly related to the daughters, symbolic mothers assume the daughters' injuries as their own, making feminicide a personal wound. This gesture also reasserts women's power to define what can and should define kinship and familial obligations. In doing so, anti-feminicide activists transformed a seemingly private loss into a personal struggle of global proportions to "let the people of the world know about the killings."[96]

Collective action also transformed women's political subjectivities. Paula Flores explained this as follows, "We lost our fear of authorities. . . . We used to sit for three hours before they would talk to us. Now we walk into the investigators' office as if it were our home."[97] As Flores's words reveal, anti-fe-

minicide activists simultaneously reclaim Juárez as their "home" in what was traditionally felt as foreign political institutions.[98] The mothers' reclamation of public space to defend women's right to life contrasts with the image of Juárez as a feminicide machine dedicated to manufacturing female death. By acting together, women come to understand that they have the power to invoke common solutions. Before their public protests, marches, and performances in black tunics and pink hats, the authorities depicted poor and racialized women as "'silent' citizens expected to remain passive about larger political issues."[99] Public officials solicited their participation in national matters, but it was neither desired nor encouraged. Nevertheless, as Arendt reminds us, action can be life and world-changing. By confronting a political system that denied feminicide, maternal organizations exchanged traditional norms, silence, and seclusion for active participation and public involvement.

Activists brought their equal and distinctive perspectives to their engagements, appearing and speaking on radio shows and televised news programs. In doing so, they narrated how police officers destroyed, covered up, and mishandled important information to delay any negative publicity for the city and to avoid endangering the *maquiladora* industry. The organizations also challenged the authorities' denial of feminicides. As activist Hilda de la Vega explained, "the government wants to deny this, it wants to close its eyes to the facts, but. . . we found that two more women were murdered in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua and another two in Chihuahua. We haven't been able to stop the killings, but we keep raising our voices [to denounce them]."[100] While government officials maintained that the killings were "normal" incidents characteristic of any big city to minimize the problem, participants in maternal organizations denounced feminicide worldwide to shame the authorities. They made the scope of the tragedy visible through black crosses painted on pink backgrounds, street protests, funerary processions, and the public display of the victims' photographs.

Like the lovers in Arendt's story whose love separates them from the world, biological and symbolic mothers belonged to worlds that separated them from one another. However, like the child whose presence returns the lovers to the world, the missing and murdered daughters in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City re-connected both biological and symbolic mothers, prompting them to find common solutions in public to feminicide. Feminicide moved, and in some cases forced, women to come together and look for common solutions to the problem. For these protesters, anti-feminicide maternal action is not an abstract activity but a profoundly personal as well as collective one. This personal engagement was motivated by a painful disregard for feminicide victims

and their relatives. In a contemporary iteration of the famous feminist motto, anti-feminicide activists illustrate that *the political is personal*. That is, political involvement also results from intimate experiences of exclusion that form the basis for democratic demands. We can infer from this personal involvement that anti-feminicide activists blend the language of citizenship with maternal politics as protestors insist on their daughters' right to justice. The daughters, or more precisely, their disappearance and murder, prompted the mothers' response through the ¡*Ni Una Más!* campaign. Tragic as it was, feminicide called for a response beyond mere individualized maternal mourning and grief. Maternal responses opened up a political space to demand more responsible institutions, prevention programs, investment in gender education, and anti-feminicide legislation.

Here, the parallels between Arendt's discussion of the child and maternal activism become clearer. The injury performed on the daughters' bodies and the government's disregard of that injury called for a response that emphasized the state's obligation to provide care, protection, support, and respect for the victims and their families. The struggle for these demands shows that maternal activism, as a practice, exceeds the individual mother, for care is also a political, social, and economic duty, hence the simultaneous performance of maternalism and citizenship. In northern Mexico, when the daughters went missing or turned up dead, the mothers formed alliances with other women and men to condemn the horrifying violence. We can infer from their actions and words that daughters do not just make mothers of the women who birthed them. They also make of those women political actors in Arendt's sense of the term. By reclaiming the lost women as daughters, maternal activists insist that everybody must act publicly on behalf of the victims. Such a gesture suggests that the forms of care offered by political institutions must extend to all citizens, rather than a selected few.

Reading maternal activism alongside Arendt's concept of freedom, natality, and the child helps us understand that the public performance of motherhood allows women, even if they are not the victims' biological mothers, to assert their duty to demand justice for the victims. This commitment occurred because the daughter's disappearance/murder interrupted women's detachment from one another and brought them together as empowered political actors. In doing so, maternal activists reverse the authorities' accusation of maternal absence by staging a maternal excess that puts in evidence the state's abandonment of victims. Protesters' performance of motherhood is from the outset a political act that carries with it the attempt to force open spaces hitherto closed to poor and racialized women. As Wright would concede, this politi-

cal act allowed self-portrayed mothers to reclaim the victims as daughters and, more notably, as human beings deserving of justice. Lastly, reading maternal organizations in light of Arendt's conceptions of freedom and the child helps us cast mothers in a new light by showing that caring, supporting, and procuring the daughters' preservation is also a political act, particularly in contexts where the socioeconomic and political arrangements pursue totalitarian aims. Were mothers to hand over speech and action to politicians, feminists, or human rights activists, they could never think of themselves as capable of exercising political freedom, nor could they aspire to exercise an alternative type of citizenship or be part of a democratic society.

Re-inserting the Mother

I used Arendt's theoretical reflections on freedom, natality, and the child in *The Human Condition* to reevaluate anti-feminicide maternal activism in northern Mexico by directing our attention to the mothers' efforts to inaugurate an unprecedented movement to denaturalize extreme gender violence and defend their daughter's natality. I drew connections between Arendt's notion of freedom, understood as the faculty to begin something new, and birth, which provides the ontological support for Arendt's concept of freedom. Likewise, I established the resemblance between Arendt's discussion of the child and of the world, which Arendt links together in the same discussion. My analysis of anti-feminicide maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua thereby advances a different perspective to those of feminist scholars that see in maternalism a confirmation of the patriarchal relegation of women to the private sphere and perpetuation of women's subordination.

While I agree that feminist skepticism of maternal action is valid, especially in instances when maternal activists are mobilized in support of conservative agendas, I claim that skepticism over maternal activism based on the argument that it inevitably reinforces women's subordination overlooks how activists who mobilize the figure of the mother do so by invoking the language of citizenship *complementarily*. Furthermore, the public performance of motherhood expands the meaning of that role and its place in democracies in clear and deliberate opposition to growing economies of disposability. An important conclusion that emerges from my analysis is that women's (as well as men's, transgender, intersexed, and all those persons who do not conform to normative gender categories) demands for care, protection, support, and respect exceed the realm of the family, which cannot, in isolation, meet them. They are also applicable to workplaces, political institutions, civil society, international organizations, and so on. Like the mothers, these different realms should exist

to provide life-affirming and enabling structures for the peoples of the world, especially those who have been and remain racialized and excluded. Yet, as the discussion of feminicide in northern Mexico illustrates, the mothers often take on a disproportionate share in the fulfillment of such duties as well as blame when they inevitably cannot meet all of them absent societal and governmental support. Yet, one of the main insights that maternal action helps us understand is that such responsibility needs to be assumed in *all* realms of human activity.[101] In other words, life-sustaining and freedom-oriented institutions should be accessible to all, but especially those who are most vulnerable.

In "A Child Has Been Born to Us," Adriana Cavarero writes of Arendt's concept of *natality* that it is "the central category of politics" and "perhaps the most original category of thought that Arendt bestowed to the twentieth century."[102] Arendt's paradigmatic shift, notwithstanding, a peculiar curiosity for Cavarero is that "the mother, who must plausibly be among those who surround the newborn, does not gain any mention in the various textual passages in which Arendt discusses natality and its exemplarity."[103] Arendt does not place the mother at the center—or even the periphery—of her analysis, which helps to explain why scholars may have reservations at the prospect of finding in Arendt a thinker capable of illuminating the democratic potential of maternal activism. For Cavarero, such an omission renders Arendt's faculty of beginnings oddly *abstract* for a theorist who criticized the entirety of the Western tradition on the grounds that philosophers were so detached from the world of action. Cavarero's charge intensifies if we consider Arendt's difficult relationship with feminism and the fact that her agents of action are mostly men.[104]

At stake in my reinterpretation of maternal activism alongside Arendt's categories is Arendt's attention to natality, and more precisely the fact that her category of freedom, understood as the faculty of beginning, is attentive to the child as a being who provokes political action from the (parents) lovers. Yet, to render Arendt relevant for us also requires correcting her omissions and addressing her silences by making it explicit that the agent that most likely attends the child's call is the mother, grandmother, or the female activist as this essay has shown. Arendt's theorization of freedom is fundamentally relational in that she conceives men acting politically in their plurality, never in isolation. This relational quality of freedom, however, is not only present at the level of its execution but is also a fundamental part of why people act in the first place.

Relationality becomes evident in the protests against feminicide. The injuries inflicted on the daughters triggered the decisive response of the biological and symbolic mothers. On the stage of protest politics, it is as if present mothers and absent daughters appear side-by-side to demand the end of femini-

cide, putting life and death, natality and its opposite into visible relation. Thus, while Arendt helps us to rethink maternal activism, the analysis of maternal activism in northern Mexico helps us render Arendt's theory of natality more real and relevant to contemporary political predicaments, especially those faced by racialized women. If, as Joy James explains, Arendt writes "as [a] progeny theorist, with a famous, fecund father and anonymous, theory-infertile mother,"[105] we must rectify Arendt's unfortunate omissions to more accurately explore the promises of freedom. Arendt's omission of the mother figure in her framework of freedom might be one reason why political theory still struggles to find durable responses to totalitarianism's resiliency.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Rosa-Linda Fregoso, "Witnessing and the Poetics of Corporality," *Kalfou* 1 (2009): 8. I use the term "feminicide" throughout this article, which is an expansion of the concept of femicide—the murder of women *qua* women—coined by Diana Russell and Jill Radford. While the term "femicide" is more familiar to feminist scholars in the United States, I prefer "feminicide" since the latter represents a concerted effort by Latin American scholars and activists to name genocide against women when it occurs in the midst of social and institutional practices that foster extreme gender violence. See *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas,* edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3–8.
2. I use the formulation "maternal activism" to designate the protests, marches, and everyday responses to feminicide and extreme gender violence in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City. Human rights organizations, independent activists, artists, and the victims' relatives, mainly, the mothers, participate in these protests. Maternal activism also incorporates the performance of motherhood.
3. Argentina is perhaps the most famous example where Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo have inspired countless analyses that look at similar movements in Chile, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and many other countries around the

world. See Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation?: Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Summer 1985): 227–54; Nora A. Femenia, "Argentina's Mothers of Plaza De Mayo: The Mourning Process from Junta to Democracy," *Feminist Studies* 13 (1987): 9–18; Marguerite G. Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994); Jane S. Jaquette, *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); Lynn Stephen, *Women and Social Movements in Latin America: Power From Below* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997); Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979–1999* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

4. Welcomed exceptions are Cynthia L. Bejarano, "Las Super Madres de Latinoamerica," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23 (2002): 126–150; Rosa-Linda Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights," *Social Identities* 12 (March 2006): 109–138; Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico," Cr: *The New Centennial Review* 5 (Spring 2005): 255–292; Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008); Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); and Wright, "Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico," in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and la Frontera,* edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010): 211–242.

5. See in particular Adriana Martinez Fernandez, "La Batalla de las Cruces: An Analysis of Representational Paradoxes of Women Activists in Ciudad Juárez," *Ciberletras* 30 (July 2013). https://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v30/martinezfernandez.htm; Wright, *Disposable Women* and "Femicide"; Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!"

6. Wright, *Disposable Women*, 153.

7. Ibid., 169.

8. Ibid., 155.

9. Bonnie Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 215.

10. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177.

11. Robyn Marasco, "There's a Fascist in the Family: Critical Theory and Antiauthoritarianism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (2018): 791–813. Marasco raises the point that statistical data confirms how mothers, rather than fathers, are more likely to perpetrate violence against children. See fn. 6, p. 811. I make reference to Marasco's article to avoid universalizing the supportive, caring, or nurturing practices of mothers.

12. George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chavez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 14.
13. See Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), chapter 4. See also Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations*, chapter 6.
14. Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, *La Fábrica Del Crimen* (México, DF: Temas de Hoy, 2012), 28–31.
15. The murders observed after 1993 sparked great concern among women due to their frequency and also because the authorities granted almost total impunity to perpetrators. See Esther Chávez Cano, Gloria Ramírez, and Ignacio Hernández, *Construyendo Caminos y Esperanzas* (Ciudad Juárez, Chi: Casa Amiga Centro de Crisis, AC, 2010). All references to this book are my translation.
16. Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotexte, 2012), 7; Alejandro, Páez Varela and Marcela Turati, eds., *La Guerra por Juárez: El Sangriento Corazón de la Tragedia Nacional* (México, DF: Temas de Hoy, 2009); Sayak Valencia, "NAFTA, Capitalismo Gore and the Femicide Machine," *Scapegoat Journal* 6 (2014): 131–138, available online at: http://www.scapegoatjournal.org/docs/06/Scapegoat_06_TOC_Editorial.pdf.
17. Martha Estela Pérez García, "Las Organizaciones No Gubernamentales en Ciudad Juárez y su Lucha Contra la Violencia de Género," *Noesis Revista de ciencias Sociales y Humanidades* 15, no. 28 (2005): 147–167. The exact number of feminicides and forced disappearances is unknown, given that government agencies do not keep accurate data. Most organizations, however, counted close to 1,500 feminicides and disappearances between 1993 and 2013. See Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*. Anti-feminicide activism is diverse and has many manifestations, including, but not only, mothers' groups.
18. Jessica Livingston, "Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 25 (2004): 59.
19. Ibid.
20. Griselda Gutiérrez Castañeda, ed., *Violencia Sexista: Algunas Claves para la Comprensión del Feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez* (México, DF: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004); Livingston, "Murder in Juárez;" Teresa Rodríguez, Diana Montané, and Lisa Pulitzer, eds., *The Daughters of Juárez: A True Story of Serial Murder South of the Border* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2007).
21. Rita Laura Segato, "Los Causes Profundos de la Raza Latinoamericana: Una Relectura del Mestizaje." *Crítica y Emancipación* 3, no. 1 (2010): 27. All references to this text are my translation.
22. Ibid., 18.
23. Ibid.
24. Bejarano, "Super Madres," 135; Rodríguez et al., *Daughters of Juárez*, 89.
25. Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos*, 84.

26. Alicia Schmidt-Camacho, "Body Counts on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Feminicidio, Reification, and the Theft of Mexicana Subjectivity," *Chicana/Latina Studies* 4 (2004): 43.
27. Martha Graciela Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias 1995–2006, 11 Años de Servicio* (Mujeres por Mexico en Chihuahua A.C., 2008), 54–56. All quotations from this book are my translation.
28. The incorporation of pink emblems has a long history within feminist protest worldwide. For example, after the 2017 presidential inauguration, a distinctive symbol of The Women's March, was the pink "pussy" hats. With this gesture, participants in The Women's March established a connection with the anti-feminicide struggle in Juárez.
29. According to Angélica Durán-Martínez, some people believe that former police officers seeking revenge for being fired perpetrated feminicides to make the new governor look bad. See *Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), chapter 6.
30. Rosa Linda Fregoso, *Mexicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 3.
31. Ibid., 4.
32. Amnesty International, "Intolerable Killings."
33. See the organizations memoirs in Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos* and Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*.
34. Wright, *Disposable Women*, 155.
35. Ibid., 153.
36. Ibid., 153–54.
37. Ibid., 158.
38. One must not forget that transnational owners of capital and powerful corporations in general also outlaw women's dissent in all forms and manifestations.
39. Wright, *Disposable Women*, 154–55.
40. On this point see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994); Maria del Carmen Feijoo and Marcela Maria Alejandra Nari, "Women and Democracy in Argentina," in Jacquette, ed., *Women's Movement*, 121.
41. Hannah Arendt, "A Special Supplement: Reflections on Violence," *The New York Review of Books* (February 27, 1969). Article available online at: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1969/02/27/a-special-supplement-reflections-on-violence/
42. Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (New York, NY: Saint Martin's Press, 1989).
43. Adriana Cavarero, "'A Child Has Been Born To Us:' Arendt on Birth," *Philosophia* 4, no. 1 (2014): 13.
44. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 177.
45. Cavarero, "A Child Has Been Born To Us," 14.

46. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 165.
47. Ibid.
48. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 175.
49. Ibid, 176.
50. Addressing the political role of non-human agency in the thought of Hanna Arendt is outside the scope of this paper. However, readers interested in this discussion can look at Finn Bowring, "Arendt After Marx: Rethinking the Dualism of Nature and World," *Rethinking Marxism* 26, no. 2 (April 2014): 278–290, available online through http://orca.cf.ac.uk/88529/2/Bowring%2520%28revised%29%5B1%5D.pdf; Paul Ott, "World and Earth: Hannah Arendt and the Human Relationship to Nature," *Ethics, Place, and Environment* 12 (2009): 1–16; Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017).
51. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.
52. Lena Zuckerwise, "Vita Mundi: Democratic Politics and the Concept of World," *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 3 (2016): 485.
53. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1973), 269.
54. Kevin Ryan, "Refiguring Childhood: Hannah Arendt, Natality and Prefigurative Biopolitics," *Childhood* 25, no. 3 (2018): 300.
55. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 8–9.
56. Ibid., 242.
57. For an interpretation close to mine, see Svetlana Boym, "From Love to Worldliness: Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger," *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 55 (2011): 106–28. My argument is different in that I see in the figure of the child a possibility to reconnect the lovers to the world, whereas for Boym, this possibility opens up through passionate thinking, difference, and public imagination; see page 106. See also Robyn Marasco, "'I would rather wait for you than believe that you are not coming at all': Revolutionary Love in a Post-revolutionary Time," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (June 2010): 648.
58. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.
59. Ibid., 242, emphasis added.
60. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "From Antagonism to Agonism: Shifting Paradigms of Women's Opposition to the State," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30 (2010): 164–178.
61. Martha Ackelsberg and Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Jean Elshtain on Families and Politics." *Politics and Gender* 11, no. 3 (2015): 570.
62. Ibid.
63. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Citizenship and Armed Civic Virtue: Some Critical Questions on the Commitment to Public life," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 69, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 1986): 99–110.

64. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Exporting Feminism," *Journal of International Affairs* 48 no. 2 (Winter 1995): 541–58.

65. Ackelsberg and Lyndon Shanley, "Jean Elshtain," 571–72.

66. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters: Reflections on Female Identity and the State," in Irene Diamond, ed., *Families, Politics and Public Policy* (New York: Longman, 1983).

67. La Plaza de Mayo is the name of the most important public square in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where the presidential building Casa Rosada (Pink House) is located. Plaza de Mayo is a key place of political activity. See Gregory Weeks, *Understanding Latin American Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

68. Natalia Brizuela and Leticia Sabsay, "Foreword," in *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience and Desire,* Maria Pia Lopez, trans. Frances Riddle (Medford, MA: Polity Press, Critical South book series, 2020).

69. Sophocles' play *Antigone* constitutes an iconic account of women's unique role in mourning. See Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, NY: Penguin Classics 1982).

70. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Mothers of the Disappeared: Passion and Protest in Maternal Action" in Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mohrer Kaplan, eds., *Representations of Motherhood* (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 84. While Elshtain offers a positive account of maternal activism, I do not endorse her social feminism model.

71. Ackelsberg and Shanley, "Jean Elshtain," *Politics and Gender* 11, no. 3 (2015): 573.

72. Elshtain, "The Mothers of the Disappeared," 86.

73. Ibid., 142.

74. Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38–9; see also Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13 (February 1985): 19–37.

75. Ibid., 20.

76. Ibid., 20–24.

77. Ibid., 31.

78. Ibid.

79. Dietz does not consider the struggles of those who fall outside the category of full citizenship or whose citizenship is curtailed through numerous mechanisms, including violence. The obvious example is the Civil Rights Movement, or the mass protests organized by undocumented workers in recent years. For an excellent exploration of the latter, see Cristina Beltrán, *The Trouble With Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

80. Dietz, "Citizenship," 32.

81. Raul Diego Rivera Hernandez, "Making Absence Visible: The Caravan of Central American Mothers in Search of Disappeared Migrants," *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 5 (2017): 113

82. Another powerful illustration of this point is the mothers of the murdered black women and men in the United States. These mothers gained worldwide notoriety thorough their participation in the Black Lives Matter movements and the public appearance in the 2016 democratic national convention.
83. Wright, *Disposable Women*, 156.
84. Ibid., 157–8.
85. Ibid., 166.
86. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 165.
87. Honig, *Political Theory; Feminist Interpretations*.
88. Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 195. See also Feijoo and Nari, "Women and Democracy," 113.
89. Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos*, 88.
90. Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54–61.
91. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 29–30.
92. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179.
93. Ibid., 180.
94. This point finds support in Arendt's discussion of economic man of whom she says: "the simple fact that Adam Smith needed an 'invisible hand' to guide economic dealings on the exchange market shows that . . . 'economic man,' when he makes his appearance on the market, is an acting being." Arendt, *Human Condition*, 185.
95. On this point, see Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive," 115.
96. Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54–6.
97. Paula Flores, as quoted in Verónica Espinosa, "Mujeres de Negro Contra la Violencia de Género," *La Neta Noticias*, November 20, 2009. http://laneta.apc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=695:mujeres-de-negro-contra-la-violencia-de-genero&catid=64:noticias&Itemid=55. My translation.
98. On 5 September 2020, a group of mothers resolved to occupy the Human Rights Commission's main offices. These women justified their occupation on the claim that the existing institutions do not perform the job for which they were created. In an interview with the local media, one of the leaders declared that she made these offices "literally" her home and that she was opening the facilities to unhoused orphan children whose mothers are among feminicide victims in the country. See *Aristegui Noticias*, Live Show, September 5, 2020.
99. Bejarano, "Super Madres," 131.
100. Hilda de la Vega, as quoted in Espinosa, "Mujeres de Negro."
101. My analysis concurs with Cavarero's claim that we should recenter the paradigm of the vulnerability of humankind and its concomitant universal ethic of care. I differ from Cavarero in the sense that for me, what is necessary is a comprehensive theorization of a politics of care. See Cavarero, "A Child Has Been Born To Us."
102. Cavarero, "A Child Has Been Born To Us," 15, 17.

103. Ibid., 18.

104. On Arendt's relation to feminism see Bonnie Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*.

105. Ibid., 267.