

Influence, Identity and Autonomy: The Transformation of Womanhood and the Workforce under  
Eva Perón

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## Introduction

The year 2022 marks the seventieth anniversary of Eva Duarte de Perón's death. Remembered for her lavish dress, her unapologetic and unprecedented political stances, and her devotion to both her husband President General Juan Domingo Perón and her people, Eva Perón remains one of the most-studied and most-beloved figures of twentieth-century Argentina. Upon her death on July 26, 1952, the Vatican received more than forty thousand requests for her canonization and, in October of 2019, *La Confederación General del Trabajo* (the General Confederation of Labour) sent a request to begin the process of her beatification.<sup>1</sup> In the timeline of women's rights, Argentine women have since overcome hurdles and faced opposition. These include, but are certainly not limited to, two female heads of state, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* movement, the 1987 right to divorce, the anti-femicide #NiUnaMenos movement and, just over a year ago, the right to safe abortion.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to analyze the precedent for such progress by reviewing the life and actions of one of the most influential advocates for women's rights in Argentine history: Eva Perón. Grounding itself in policy, this research uses news articles, magazines, transcripts of Evita's official radio speeches, and interviews with Peronist women to unravel how, exactly, public perception moulded her career and, in turn, how her two passion projects, the *Fundación Eva Perón* and the *Partido Peronista Femenino*, directly impacted womanhood and the workforce.

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<sup>1</sup>"Por qué el Vaticano no puede beatificar a Evita," *Todas Noticias*, October 31, 2019.

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed overview of the making of women's rights in twentieth-century Argentina, see: "Populismo y derechos humanos en el devenir masivo de los feminismos argentinos," *La Aljaba, Segunda Epoca. Revista de Estudios de La Mujer* 23, no.1 (2019): 33-57.

Eva's autobiography, *La razón de mi vida*,<sup>3</sup> presents the "double personality" she assumed to correspond with that of her husband. On the one hand, she was Eva Perón, "wife of the President of the Republic," on the other she was "'Evita,' wife of the Leader of a people who have placed all their faith in him."<sup>4</sup> She demonstrates a significant level of self-awareness as she discusses her role and duties and the thought she puts behind each persona, writing that: "There is no need for us to speak of Eva Perón. What she does appears too lavishly in the newspapers and reviews everywhere."<sup>5</sup> Then, in describing her journey towards acquiring a specific brand of feminism and its politics, she quotes an explanation from Juan Perón, given after she pondered the specific feminism of women who believed it a "misfortune" to be a woman. Perón's words are worth quoting here because they show that, just as she matched her husband's need for separate personas to better mould herself to the needs of the people, so, too, was she affected by her idolization of his beliefs and actions:

They want to be men. It is as though to save the workers I had tried to make oligarchs of them. I would have remained without workers. And I do not think I should have managed to improve the oligarchy at all. Don't you see that this class of 'feminists' detest womanhood?... How little will the world gain if the women want to save the world by imitating men... Perhaps woman can save us, on condition that she does not imitate us.<sup>6</sup>

*La razón de mi vida* features heavily in this paper for a couple of reasons. The first is that it is attributed to Eva Perón's name and, whether she truly wrote it or whether it was a product of her alleged ghostwriter, reporter Manuel Enrique Penella de Silva, it provides one of the closest insights to the rationale behind her decisions. Even if it is read as a fabricated piece of

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<sup>3</sup>Translated into English by Ethel Cherry as *My Mission in Life*.

<sup>4</sup>Eva Perón, *My Mission in Life*, trans. Ethel Cherry (New York: Vantage Press, 1953), Facsimile (Michigan: University Microfilms, 1971), 60-1.

<sup>5</sup>Perón, *My Mission in Life*, 61.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 186.

propaganda, it is useful at least as far as it demonstrates how she meant the public to perceive her intentions. When cleric Hernán Benítez, who claimed to be close with both Eva and Penella de Silva, announced that the latter had, in fact, written the text, he described the piece and its alleged author as “[a] simple, straightforward writer with a very feminine style, I say this without criticism. The book came out very well written, but it had many inventions...[he] wrote it thinking of getting along with Perón.”<sup>7</sup> The second reason Eva’s autobiography so heavily features is because it was a piece of required reading in Argentine schools, introduced as a textbook. Parents criticized the text’s propagandist tendencies as existing only to “glorify” Perón and his influence, which shows once again just how integral Evita herself was to the perpetuation of Peronist doctrine and the integration of Peronism within daily life.<sup>8</sup>

Names, how an individual chooses to identify, and how others identify the individual are each powerful ideas that provide insight into a character. This paper uses the names Eva, Evita and Eva Perón throughout, seemingly interchangeably. That is not quite the case, as there is at least some level of differentiating between each distinct persona. Without casting excessive judgement on her genuineness, Evita is namely used in situations where she puts on a charitable, for-the-people act. The name Evita refers to her wholesomeness, relatability, humbleness, and her commitment to her people. Eva Perón represents her political power, strategic thinking, First Ladyship and role as a “public figure.” Using her maiden name would force an unclaimed identity upon her; using her married name would cause far too much confusion given the fame

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<sup>7</sup>Un escritor simple, sencillo y con un estilo muy de mujer, lo digo sin ánimo de crítica. El libro salió muy bien escrito, pero tenía muchos inventos... lo escribí pensando en quedar bien con Perón.” Norberto Galasso, *Yo fui el confesor de Eva Perón: Conversaciones con el Padre Hernán Benítez* (Buenos Aires: Homo Sapiens Ediciones, 1999), 54.

All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>8</sup>John T. Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” *Civilisations* 23, no.24 (1973-4), 206.

and relevance of her husband. Eva is therefore used as a neutral description, without any inherent assumptions about which role she is playing at which time. Each of these three distinct identities, assumed through the use of individual personas whose differences lay in dress, language and action, served its own purpose. Eva, Eva Perón and Evita all became integral to the identity of the regime and the furtherance of Peronism.

In the same manner, her husband, too, takes on different roles. While there is no intended distinction between the use of Juan Perón and Perón in this paper, the former simply introducing the latter in a new section, there are a few intentional uses of the simple “Juan.” In a more intimate approach, Juan denotes the man over the politician; when his relation to Eva is more important than the position he represents. “Juan’s politics” is thus intended to display the relevance of the fact that the politics were *Juan’s* more than whichever politics they referenced. Of course, such an unintuitive manner of description raises the natural question of who this woman was: was she Evita, the saintly and benevolent “woman of the people” who believed in a balance between femininity and domesticity? Was she the intense and charismatic Eva Perón, always appearing at Juan’s side, embracing traditionally masculine characteristics, addressing crowds of *descamisados* (shirtless ones), Perón’s supporters, and meeting with foreign diplomats? Was she María Eva Duarte de Perón, never quite forgetting her humble origins as she nurtured her passion for social justice? The truth is that who Eva was is far less relevant in a discussion of how her policies directly impacted the average Argentine woman than is the woman she portrayed herself to be.

Recent scholarship has committed itself to uncovering Evita and the mythology surrounding her. While academics have focused mainly on her image, her appearance and her

place within the society around her, this paper focuses on Eva's intended *portrayal* of such approaches. This paper is neither a quest to investigate the "real" Eva Perón nor to provide a biographical account of her achievements. Instead, with an emphasis on her foundation, her allegedly "apolitical" Peronist party and the contrast between themes like femininity, motherhood and domesticity, each section sets out to determine how her distinct personas affected her actions, the broader Argentine society and, subsequently, the lives of working women.

## The Many Personas of Eva Perón

María Eva Duarte was born in 1919 to seamstress Juana Ibarguren and wealthy but already-married father Juan Duarte in Los Toldos, Argentina. There, after the death of her father at age six and the social ostracism that followed her illegitimate birth, she was raised in poverty until she finished her primary education. At the age of fifteen, Eva left home to pursue a career in acting. Upon arriving in Buenos Aires, she experienced firsthand the wealth inequalities that divided the city and, years later, reported spending those first few winters cold and hungry.<sup>9</sup> Her experience was no different from the thousands of rural Argentines relocating to Buenos Aires in the 1930s, following the global depression that “crippled” the agricultural field. Early twentieth-century Argentina had seen mass immigration in numbers second only to the United States, and most immigrants were unskilled labour workers in search of employment, though a number were among the privileged and wealthy upper-class.<sup>10</sup> In *La razón de mi vida*, Evita remembers the first time she realized that her family and small town were not unique in their poverty:

I imagined, for instance, that great cities were wonderful places where there were only riches...[then] I visited the city for the first time. When I got there I found it was not what I had imagined. On arrival I saw its poverty-stricken districts, and by the varying appearances of the streets and houses I knew that there were poor and rich in the city also... That very day I discovered that the poor were indubitably more numerous than the rich, and not only among my people but everywhere.<sup>11</sup>

Demand for labour declined as the population grew; between immigration and rural-urban migration, the labour force was over-saturated with unskilled workers. Buenos Aires, in particular, saw great infrastructural and industrial expansion as working class visibility increased

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<sup>9</sup>Marysa Navarro, “The Case of Eva Perón”, *Signs* 3, no.1 (Autumn, 1977), 230.

<sup>10</sup>Blanca Sánchez-Alonso, “Making Sense of Immigration Policy: Argentina, 1870-1930”, *Economic History Review* 66, no.2 (2013), 601.

<sup>11</sup>Perón, *My Mission in Life*, 13.



in the city.<sup>12</sup> Despite the economic growth in the last years of the 1920s, the Great Depression affected Argentina in 1932, and immigration restrictions prevented immigrants from arrival without a pre-established labour contract or proof of finances.<sup>13</sup> Eva's struggles aligned with the rest of Argentina, and she was later able to use this shared experience to connect with the most underrepresented in society, where social welfare campaigns led to the nickname "Santa Evita."<sup>14</sup>

Though she found little success on the stage, by 1939 she headed her own radio soap-opera company under her stage name "Evita." The use of the name Evita at both the height of her radio career and when interacting with the public as First Lady is relevant because it demonstrates a link between the types of characters she portrayed. She recorded that each of her names felt like "roles," and each time one was used, she assumed its persona; the difference was that she felt Eva Perón to be a role *played* while Evita became a role *lived*.<sup>15</sup> Historian Marysa Navarro, who has written extensively on Eva Perón, claims that the "evitista" mythology began shortly after Evita's earliest relationship with Juan Domingo Perón, in January of 1944.<sup>16</sup> This evitista mythology occurs when two seemingly "diametrically opposed versions" of the same person, María Eva Duarte de Perón, exist concurrently.<sup>17</sup> While the term itself was not seriously studied as a phenomenon until her death in 1952, contemporary literature published works with polarized titles such as *Evita: Alma inspiradora de la justicia social en América (Evita: An Inspiration for Social Justice in America)* or *La mística social de Eva Perón (The Social*

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<sup>12</sup>Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina*, trans. Keith Zahniser. (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 2003), 4.

<sup>13</sup>Sánchez-Alonso, "Making Sense of Immigration Policy," 606, 623.

<sup>14</sup>Marysa Navarro, "Wonder Woman Was Argentine and Her Real Name Was Evita," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 24, no.48 (1999), 135.

<sup>15</sup>Perón, *My Mission in Life*,

<sup>16</sup>Marysa Navarro, "Evita, historia y mitología," *Caravelle*, no.98 (2012), 121.

<sup>17</sup>Navarro, "Evita, historia y mitología," 115.

*Mystique of Eva Perón*); the use of either name signalled which of Eva's personas they were praising or criticizing.

Evita's affair with then-Colonel Juan Perón began in 1944. Upper-class gossip gave her the nickname of the "colonel's mistress."<sup>18</sup> Just two months following their first meeting at a benefit, the pair moved in together, an act that was particularly unacceptable for a political figure and his romantic partner. In June of 1944, only half a year into their acquaintance, Evita began a daily radio program where she defended Perón's principles and commended the work he had done as Secretary of Labour.<sup>19</sup> She almost immediately included herself in his political life, attending meetings as a silent observer before taking initiative to begin sharing his ideas with her radio audience. Evita was, from then on, a propagandist for Perón, demonstrating unconditional and unprecedented support for his politics. By 1947 she was owner of *Democracia* and *El Laborista*, two newspapers joined by the same parent company, Editorial Democracia, that spread Peronist doctrine and brought favourable news of Juan Perón and Evita into popular press.<sup>20</sup> A 1948 *Time* article noted she was on her way to "becoming First Lady of Argentine Press," as Eva Perón acquired ownership of her third newspaper, *Noticias-Gráficas*.<sup>21</sup> From this, the question arises as to just how much of Eva's positive image among Argentines was due to Juan and Eva's collective power in press: did they hold enough to silence criticism?

In 1948, Congress passed a law defining libel as "anything which offends the dignity of any public official, whether the article refers directly to the person, or by allusion to him or the

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<sup>18</sup>Navarro, "The Case of Eva Perón," 229.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 231.

<sup>20</sup>James Cane, *The Fourth Enemy: Journalism and Power in the Making of Peronist Argentina, 1930-1955*, (Pennsylvania: University Press, 2011) 184.

<sup>21</sup>"Argentina: Evita & the Press." *Time* (October 11, 1948).

governmental organization of which he forms a part” which, as a *Time* article observed, meant that “Perón and La Señora could expect a good press.”<sup>22</sup> According to a 1950 *Guardian* article, a recently constituted Commission for Investigating Anti-Argentine Activities published a list of forty-five shut-down newspapers. The president sued *La Prensa* and *La Nación*, until then two of the most popular newspapers in the country, under the new libel laws for “carrying in their columns reports of an attack on the President’s integrity by an Opposition deputy.”<sup>23</sup> These laws not only meant that newspapers could no longer voice concerns or employ writers critical of Evita, Perón, or other high-ranking government officers, but their vague category of the “public official” and their “governmental organization” made it difficult for journalists to know exactly what they could or could not say. Especially during the “Peronization” of party, state, media and public institutions, meaning the integration of Peronism into all sectors of everyday life, the “freedom of the press” that Perón proclaimed to be a democratic right diminished.<sup>24</sup>

Under the same enactment, however, Congress raised the wages of newspaper employees by forty to fifty percent.<sup>25</sup> While this may have served to impede smaller, more local newspapers from hiring enough employees to continue their coverage, it also meant that workers of Peronist-approved and Peronist-sponsored papers were far less likely to complain about the new restrictions, as they, too, directly benefited. State photography became an untrustworthy official source, where images were reused with captions altered to suit the needs of the latest news piece. Images were recycled into the regime’s “main propaganda platforms,” including state-sponsored

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>“Perón and the Press.” *Guardian*, January 9, 1950.

<sup>24</sup>Cane, *The Fourth Enemy*, 228.

<sup>25</sup>“Argentina: Evita & the Press,” *Time* (October 11, 1948).

magazines and newspapers.<sup>26</sup> One of the motivators of suffrage had been the theme of “spiritual unity,” or that women could use their newfound political liberties, like the vote, to spread Peronism within their families. The working class became a key political substitute for the old oligarchic model, and so working-class women were central in fostering and nurturing populist ideals.<sup>27</sup>

Argentine populism was born from a unique blend of industrialization, urbanization, commoditization, an export-based economy, and “oligarchic domination.” Social conditions left the marginalized, the poor and lower-middle-class, the military, migrants, and the workers in a state of discontent. Under the first Peronist government, later collectively remembered as the “golden years of Peronism,” rent control and increased wages allowed for such a consumption-based improvement in working-class life that between 1945 and 1948 alone, food intake doubled, children’s clothing sales increased by one-hundred-and-twenty-five percent and shoes by two-hundred percent.<sup>28</sup> Peronists exalted their success by claiming that only under Peronism could such positive change occur for the “long-excluded” members of society; it was only under Peronism that women and workers could properly exercise the “liberal political rights of citizenship.” Economic, political and ideological conflicts, too, could lean on each other to resolve the “fundamental problems” of society only under Peronism, with its new “eclectic” vision of Argentina’s potential.<sup>29</sup> Perón and Eva, with their control of the press, popularized the labelling of the oligarchy as anti-Peronist and thus anti-Argentine. In her October 17, 1951

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<sup>26</sup>Iliana Cepero, “Photographic Propaganda under Peronism, 1946-55: Selections from the Archivo General de la Nación Argentina,” *History of Photography* 40, no.2 (2016), 194.

<sup>27</sup>Susana Rosano, *rostros y máscaras de Eva Perón: Imaginario populista y representación*. (Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2006), 15.

<sup>28</sup>Natalia Milanesio, “‘The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy’: Housewives’ Responsible Consumption in Peronist Argentina,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18, no.3 (Fall 2006), 91.

<sup>29</sup>Cane, *The Fourth Enemy*, 228.

speech, on the anniversary of the the 1945 descamisado mass-demonstration that liberated Perón from imprisonment by the military power, Evita addressed the descamisados and proclaimed: “I know that God is with us because he is with the humble and despises the arrogance of the oligarchy.”<sup>30</sup>

Juan Perón did not need the support of the individual worker to win his first presidential election in 1946. By seeking support from the leadership of established labour unions, the well-connected men who spoke for their respective workplaces, he was able to establish enough of a backing to secure funding, alliances, and the popular vote. His 1946 campaign highlighted the working class as “active and autonomous participants in a process of political reordering,” a reordering that was meant to promote progress alongside the already-changing Argentine society.<sup>31</sup> At first, Perón’s supporters belonged primarily to one of two major groups, the ideologically-blended *Unión Cívica Radical* and the *Partido Laborista* that labour union leaders founded directly following the protesting of October 17th, 1945, recognizing their victory over the traditional political elites as potential to consolidate further power.<sup>32</sup> Union leaders across Buenos Aires saw the utility of holding an autonomous political voice with the power to advocate for the needs of their growing labour movement. The Partido Laborista served this purpose, and consensus quickly designated Perón as its first leader in an attempt to “mediate” between equal desires for autonomy and to support his 1946 presidential candidacy.<sup>33</sup> Perón was nervous that he had little control over the party, having to both impress and trust its leaders in order to secure the workers’ support, and so in May of 1946, a month before assuming office, he

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<sup>30</sup>María Eva Perón, “Speech to the Descamisados,” *Radio speech* (October 17, 1951) Archives of Women's Political Communication, Iowa State University.

<sup>31</sup>Viviana Patroni, “A Discourse of Love and Hate: Eva Perón and the Labour Movement (1940s-1950s),” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 24, no.48 (1999), 156-7.

<sup>32</sup>Navarro, “The Case of Eva Perón,” 235-6.

<sup>33</sup>Patroni, “A Discourse of Love and Hate,” 159.

rebranded the party as the *Partido Único de la Revolución* (Only Party of the Revolution). By 1947 it was duly operating as the *Partido Peronista*, with tensions struck between Perón and the leaders he had dismissed and displaced from the original labour movement.<sup>34</sup>

Eva Perón assumed the role of both “madre” and “Spiritual Leader” of the nation, just as Peronist women assumed them in their own households.<sup>35</sup> Eva was a model of the new Argentine woman, who performed her “womanly” domestic duties while pursuing a career outside of the home. Peronist deputy Dominga Ortiz de Sosa Vivas, in her recording of the Chamber of Deputies’ sessions, stated:

We know that Eva Perón represents all women of our people and that the exact measure of her soul can only be compared with the immense multitude gathered from the souls of all women worthy of being called women and mothers of this earth, where God has wanted to perform the miracle of this century: Eva Perón!<sup>36</sup>

Peronist legislators reportedly claimed that even within Peronist spaces, women resisted their own political participation.<sup>37</sup> This almost objectification, or rather tokenization, of Eva as representative of “all women” because of her role as one of the only female politicians was one of the reasons she had so much success in her embodiment of Argentine values. Numerous roles were imposed upon the Argentine woman— the “productive” worker, submissive wife, loyal Peronist, mother, teacher, and caretaker, among others. Politics remained a male-dominated space.<sup>38</sup> While Eva Perón held more traditional views of womanhood, domesticity and familial duties, she herself did not partake in many of them: Eva never had children and was not

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Sara Perrig, “Las mujeres antiperonistas: los derechos políticos femeninos y las elecciones de 1951 en Argentina,” *Ciencia Política* 13, no.26 (2018), 85.

<sup>36</sup>“Nosotras sabemos que Eva Perón representa a todas las mujeres de nuestro pueblo y que la exacta medida de su alma solamente puede compararse con la inmensa multitud reunida de las almas de todas las mujeres dignas de llamarse mujeres y madres de esta tierra, donde Dios ha querido realizar el milagro de este siglo: ¡Eva Perón!” Dominga I. Ortiz de Sosa Vivas, “Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados-Año1952,” (Buenos Aires: Imprenta del Congreso de la Nación Argentina, 1953), 492.

<sup>37</sup>Perrig, “Las mujeres antiperonistas,” 86.

<sup>38</sup>Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” 203.

circumscribed to the family home. Many of the Argentines who condemned her based their disdain on an “imaginary” or traditional idea of femininity, with women as the centre and protector of the home.<sup>39</sup> This same stereotype worked in Eva’s favour as she constructed and adapted the official Peronist narrative to suit the needs of the broadest range of women. In each of her speeches, texts or public addresses, she at once portrays traditionally masculine attributes in politics, thought and stature, and yet simultaneously sets herself to the side of Perón. She assumes a supportive role and perpetuates conservative imagery of the patriarchal husband-wife dynamic.<sup>40</sup> Eva then appeased the sensibilities of both conservative religious women and the more liberal ideals of changing ideas of femininity, including holding space for women in masculine sectors like politics and the workforce.

Eva reportedly realized that her responsibility towards the descamisados was not just to “remedy a prevailing situation,” with the same make-shift, individualized acts of charity that previous social aid groups had done. Instead of the “demeaning relationships” and imbalance of power that occurred in charity functions performed by wealthy ladies or the Church, Eva believed in cleansing the system of such notions of “superiority” by renaming the process of giving and receiving assistance “social justice” over “charity.”<sup>41</sup> She instead sought to promote a total change of environment, a “revolution within the revolutionary process of Peronism.”<sup>42</sup> Latin American sociologist Javier Auyero described the legacy of this change of internal revolution as he analyzed a 1996 Peronist rally in the small municipality of Cospito, where one thousand

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<sup>39</sup>Rosano, *Rostros y máscaras de Eva Perón*, 18.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” 201.

<sup>42</sup>“...una revolución dentro del proceso revolucionario del peronismo.” Alberto Franco, *La mística social de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires: Subsecretaría de Informaciones, 1953), chapter V.

people reportedly gathered to hear their mayor speak on modernized Peronism and its “response to economic grievances.” He quotes the emcee of the rally as opening the panel with: “Eva Perón... as soon as you took power, you were food, shoes, roofs, for dignified life, sewing machines.”<sup>43</sup> Eva Perón personified social welfare, and this speech demonstrates the continuity within Argentine experiences, with similar wording within the Subsecretaría de Informaciones’ 1953 publication: “Social assistance and social justice were identified. And thus they were identified forever as the names of those who represented those conquests: Juan Perón and Eva Perón.”<sup>44</sup>

Peronism and ambiguity are necessarily closely associated, in order to attract the level of popular support needed to keep the balance of power. In the months preceding her 1952 death, the National Congress named Evita the “Spiritual Leader of the Nation,” which art historian Iliana Cepero interpreted as a “symbolic designation that advanced Peronism’s efforts to transform itself into a political religion.”<sup>45</sup> Relating to the Catholic roots of Evita’s brand of feminism, between her devotion to the poor, her lack of children, and her early death, she became widely associated with virgin Catholic saints. The public came to know her as “Mother of the descamisados” and even her iconic salute, which Cepero labelled both critically intentional and “performative,” carried Catholic symbology of Christ’s own sacrifice and devotion to the people.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, despite this apparent spiritual connection between Evita and the nation, an American *National Intelligence Estimate* on the “Probable Developments in Argentina” from

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<sup>43</sup>Javier Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 193.

<sup>44</sup>“La asistencia social y la justicia social se identificaban. Y así se identificaron para siempre como lo estaban de hecho los nombres de quienes representaban esas conquistas: Juan Perón y Eva Perón.” Franco, *La mística social de Eva Perón*, chapter v.

<sup>45</sup>Cepero, “Photographic Propaganda under Peronism, 1946-55,” 210.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.



1954 records that the Roman Catholic Church adopted a “friendlier attitude toward Perón” following Eva’s death: despite “friction” in Church-State relations that occurred as Perón took control of once-Catholic-dominated economic sectors like charity and trade unions, the Church allegedly only then began to lend its “support to Peron’s appeals for cooperation of all parties in solving Argentina’s current problems.”<sup>47</sup> This take was not representative of contemporary Argentine reports, wherein relations with the Church reportedly “declined following 1952, and were openly hostile following Perón’s [October] 17, 1954 speech in which he accused specific priests and bishops as meddlers in the movement.”<sup>48</sup> This contradiction between foreign and national intelligence demonstrates public uncertainty of Peronism’s alliance with Catholic ideals.

A submitted comment in the Peronist newspaper *Democracia* about Evita’s autobiography proclaimed that the only voice that had an equal resonance to Evita’s was “the voice of Jesus.”<sup>49</sup> There was clear religious symbolism that both strengthened Peronist standing in the broader political context, and allowed the Church a level of power as it was granted visibility in the political sector. Yet, in 1955, the Vatican excommunicated “those responsible for anti-Church activity in Argentina (presumably including Perón),” which alludes to Peronist-Catholic symbolism as a mutually beneficial display rather than any concrete unity between the party and the Church.<sup>50</sup>

“Evita” had been transformed from a catchy stage name to a tool that helped her appear humble and connect with the general public. Going beyond the scope of the duties expected of a

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<sup>47</sup>“National Intelligence Estimate: Probable Developments in Argentina,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, The American Republics, Volume IV* (Washington: March 9, 1954), 13.

<sup>48</sup>Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” 201N.

<sup>49</sup>Navarro, “Evita, historia y mitología,” 111.

<sup>50</sup>Deiner, “Eva Perón and the Roots of Political Instability in Argentina,” 201N.

First Lady, traditionally intended only to host the occasional fundraiser and remain firmly in the background, Eva Perón met with foreign diplomats and chaired meetings. Evita embodied a form of state propaganda that made her inseparable from “the cause.”<sup>51</sup> The “charismatic *abanderada de los descamisados*” (standard-bearer of the descamisados), through her work in the field, meeting with and giving aid to her people, she became the direct *physical* contact between the masses and the regime. Her two main organizations, the *Fundación Eva Perón* and the *Partido Peronista Femenino*, and her roles within them, benefitted the disadvantaged but also acted as intentional Peronist imagery. It is here that she gained the majority of her personal political power—the politicization of the working woman. The former *Fundación*, as a mediator of social assistance, both fulfilled the regime’s welfare duties as an “independent” establishment and was publicized as Evita’s passion project—her reason for being.

In 1949, parliament member Virgilio Filippo nominated Evita alongside Juan Perón for the Nobel Peace Prize, suggesting a prize divided between them both.<sup>52</sup> This demonstrates that, while she had certainly gained recognition for her individual actions, it was always correlated to her place at her husband’s side. Still, her contributions to the regime solidified its place within society. Feminist critics disregarded much of her community work, especially following women’s enfranchisement in 1947, as targeted opportunism. These critics labelled it a “cynical attempt” to improve Evita’s popularity while “co-opting” the feminist message and tarnishing it with “totalitarian” politics.<sup>53</sup> Her death at the young age of thirty-three only added to the image of her saintliness. On November 11, 1951, Eva cast her vote from her hospital bed as part of the

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<sup>51</sup>Navarro, “The Case of Eva Perón,” 229.

<sup>52</sup>Nomination for Nobel Peace Prize. Nomination Archive, 14-1.

<sup>53</sup>Gregory Hammond, *Women's Suffrage Movement and Feminism in Argentina from Roca to Perón* (University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 2.

first Presidential election in which Argentine women could vote. The images taken of Eva voting showed her sick and with her “face pinched and her nose thin,” which demonstrated her devotion to the cause as she used the last of her energy to support the descamisados.<sup>54</sup>

Evita rid the nation of unfavourable opposing narratives through control of the media and by promoting contrasting definitions of Peronism: both as keeping with tradition and trends, and as radical and revolutionary politics. She redefined what it meant to be a woman in politics, defying social conventions of courtship, First Ladyship, and how a woman should serve her husband. At the same time, she demonstrated the power that women could bring into Peronism by finding strength in their feminine roles. Domesticity and political involvement no longer needed to be separate; no longer formed part of separate spheres of living. As Evita connected with “her people,” she ensured that Peronism as a populist movement was branded “for the people,” and could be included in every aspect of any woman’s life.<sup>55</sup> She challenged traditional notions of femininity in the workforce, praising female factory workers who could take on external employment while also fulfilling their household duties. She attacked systemic barriers to alter the status of performative oligarchic-branded charity, dominated by elite women without firsthand experience of the struggles they were alleviating. Evita promoted contrasting ideas of feminism— from a new and powerful way for women to be involved and strengthen Peronism to a more traditional, Catholic, and conservative understanding of improving women’s conditions within the home. Everything she did, she attributed to Perón, his politics and his government; everything she accomplished, she did in his name and in the honour of Peronism:

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<sup>54</sup>“The Argentine President’s Wife Voting: Eva Peron Casts Vote in Her Hospital Room,” *New York Times*, (November 12, 1951) Special to the New York Times: 13.

<sup>55</sup>Walter Little, “La organización obrera y el estado peronista, 1943-1955,” *Desarrollo Económico* 19, no.75 (1979), 335.

I did not have then, nor do I have right now, more than one ambition, only one, great personal ambition: That my people may say, when this wonderful chapter of history is written and surely dedicated to Perón, that at the side of Perón, there was a woman who was dedicated to bringing to the President, the hopes of the people. Hopes that which later, Perón would convert into beautiful realities. And this woman, the people lovingly called Evita—nothing more than this, Evita.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>María Eva Perón, “Renunciation of the Vice Presidency of Argentina,” *Radio speech* (August 31, 1951) Archives of Women's Political Communication, Iowa State University.

## The Eva Perón Foundation

*La Fundación Ayuda Social 'María Eva Duarte de Perón'* is above all an agency of selfless action, with a noble and comprehensive approach to those who suffer, regardless of creed or borders, that shows itself through concrete deeds of human solidarity and timely relief wherever it is needed.<sup>57</sup>

- Secretary of the Information of the Presidency of the Nation, 1950.

On June 19th, 1948, Evita established *La Fundación Ayuda Social 'María Eva Duarte de Perón,'* (the María Eva Duarte de Perón Social Aid Foundation), more commonly referred to as *La Fundación Eva Perón* or simply *La Fundación*. Foreign media portrayed it as a controversial means of bribing the nation's vote through deliverance of social aid, while Peronist media portrayed it as the necessary progression of social assistance for a modern nation. Juan Perón reportedly knew that charity could not last in his Argentina; instead, it needed to be phased out as Peronism eliminated the very concept of "want."<sup>58</sup> Peronists generally recognized charitable work from Argentina's past as "meritorious," but outdated and neither "adequate nor ideologically correct" for the modern era.<sup>59</sup> During the phasing-out, social assistance was prioritized as a state responsibility: "social welfare has to be integral to be effective."<sup>60</sup> The *Fundación*, however, was not a state-run organization. It was self-funded, independently staffed, and the state had neither input nor oversight on its operations. Perón's comments of "state responsibility," however, aligned with public perception of the organization. Pre-Peronist social

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<sup>57</sup>"La Fundación Ayuda Social 'María Eva Duarte de Perón' es sobre todo un organismo de acción desinteresada y de noble y comprensiva aproximación a los que sufren, sin distinción de credos ni de fronteras, y que se manifiesta por hechos concretos de solidaridad humana y de oportuno socorro allí donde haga falta." *Argentina en marcha*, edited by la Secretaría de Informaciones de la Presidencia de la Nación (Buenos Aires: 1950).

<sup>58</sup>Peter Ross, "Policy Formation and Implementation of Social Welfare in Peronist Argentina, 1943-1955," PhD dissertation (University of New South Wales, 1988) 243.

<sup>59</sup>Ross, "Policy Formation and Implementation of Social Welfare in Peronist Argentina, 1943-1955," 230.

<sup>60</sup>Juan Perón, quoted in Ross, "Policy Formation and Implementation of Social Welfare in Peronist Argentina, 1943-1955," 243.

services were largely church-run or individual charity by elite women. The Fundación, headed by the First Lady, promoted Peronism and lived in public memory as governmental.<sup>61</sup>

The Fundación provided Argentines with “direct social assistance” through material benefits handed to them personally by Evita or her representatives. It is an example of clientelism, in which upper-class elites trade products, goods and services in exchange for support, typically political in nature.<sup>62</sup> While the government challenged the “machinelike character” of political enticement and its uncontested social authorities, they still maintained a fundamentally hierarchal method of the distribution of goods.<sup>63</sup> Peronism thus both condemned the “old” clientelist methods and perpetuated them. Historian Peter Ross, in his work on Peronist policy, dubbed this “the fraud of the *Fundación Eva Perón*.”<sup>64</sup> The Fundación controversially handled significant finances without external control or review and was structurally lacking; it was completely under Eva’s control and she regularly made decisions without consulting anyone.<sup>65</sup> Its private character and Evita’s ultimate authority allowed the Fundación a level of independence in hiring staff, deciding wages, allocating funding and signing off on any decisions that arose. Pre-Perón society deemed that women should only hold a job when they *had* to, either as widows to support themselves or because their husband was ill or injured. Even then, the two “proper” sectors outside of the home for a woman were either in education or charity.<sup>66</sup>

*La Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital*,<sup>67</sup> which was at the time Argentina’s largest charity organization, operated in Buenos Aires and regularly appointed the nation’s First Lady as

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<sup>61</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 138.

<sup>62</sup>Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics*, 202.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 189.

<sup>64</sup>Ross, “Policy Formation and Implementation of Social Welfare in Peronist Argentina, 1943-1955,” 225.

<sup>65</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 137, 145.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>67</sup>The Charitable Society of the Capital.

honorary president and allowed her the honour of hosting fundraisers or banquets in their name. Contemporary speculation and modern critics alike claim that when the Sociedad withheld her “rightful” leadership position, Eva Perón began a quest for vengeance to overthrow its power and thus created the Fundación Eva Perón.<sup>68</sup> It hardly helped that Peronist press almost immediately discredited the Sociedad by denouncing its oligarchic character, exposing its poor working conditions and proclaiming “charity” to be outdated.<sup>69</sup> The oligarchy was, according to Perón, inherently “anti-Argentine” and thus the Sociedad must have been as well. There is little evidence to support the widely held theory that Eva’s resentment of the rejection from upper-class society was the primary inspiration for completely restructuring social aid in Argentina. Wanting to be accepted by the Sociedad that enthusiastically would have gone against the very thing Evita stood for: bridging the socio-economic gap and connecting Perón, Peronism and Peronists together. Eva directly addressed the rumours as false in *La razón de mi vida*. First, she undermined her absence from the Sociedad, since “the oligarchy has never been hostile to anyone who could be useful to it,” alluding to her belief that she, holding both money and political power, could have had the Sociedad’s presidency had she desired it. She then outlines the need for change due to the inherent incapacity of such a privileged group to perform adequate aid: “Work of social welfare built by the ‘ladies’ in the old Argentina were planned by persons who always ignored the needs of the poor.”<sup>70</sup> Charity, or rather the new brand of social justice, became a symbolic space for Evita and, by extension, the regime as it became the direct source of her connection with the common people.

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<sup>68</sup>Navarro, “The Case of Eva Perón,” 233.

<sup>69</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 145.

<sup>70</sup>Perón, *My Mission in Life*, 60, 151.

While it is true that her illegitimate birth, poverty-stricken upbringing, career in the arts and “whirlwind” love affair with General Perón had created an “unsurmountable barrier” between Evita and the upper echelons of society, this was likely not the only reason for the scorn.<sup>71</sup> Evita represented change. Entering upper-class society as an apparent social climber, participating in Juan’s politics and performing “wifely” duties as his mistress, moving in with a man before marriage, and challenging both precedent and status quo, her existence was a sign that Argentina was undergoing a social restructuring. On the same radio program through which she praised Perón and his work as Secretary of Labour, Evita spoke of working conditions and factory labour and the value that working women gave society.<sup>72</sup> Following the economic crisis in the late 1930s, female workers were integral to the recovery and industrialization of the 1940s. Earning significantly less than their male counterparts, factories hired women to cut down on costs and rebuild their financial stability. In 1947, sixty percent of women only worked within the home; by 1949, women made up forty-five percent of industrial workers in Buenos Aires.<sup>73</sup> Women performing factory labour threatened preconceived ideas of respectability and femininity. Evita sought to balance traditional feminine identities with the economic necessity that women grow into the external workforce. In these official, propagandist radio speeches, she sought to appeal not to the “intellectual woman” but to the “women of the popular classes who heard their own lives and struggles in her voice.”<sup>74</sup> It was a humble and authentic approach, as each Argentine woman heard the voice of the First Lady speaking directly to her, empathizing

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<sup>71</sup>Navarro, “The Case of Eva Perón,” 232.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 231.

<sup>73</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 167.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 117-18



with her concerns and discussing strategies to come together and support the president that was bettering each of their lives.

Few official records survived the military takeover of the Perón regime, and those that have are mainly located in private collections. The indirect citation and reference to material on the Fundación in secondary literature is heavily biased with either pro- or anti-Peronist narratives, making internal operations incredibly difficult to analyze, especially in terms of the myths surrounding the organization.<sup>75</sup> According to an article in a 1949 American “for everybody” magazine, *Liberty*, the “hushed-up truth about Eva Perón” was that she was worshipped by “millions of Argentin[e]s, who call her lady Madonna, and hated by business men and society women, who call her by other names.”<sup>76</sup> While anti-Peronist in its almost satirical attempt at description, this quoting is a clear example of the duality of public opinion: the optimistic lower classes that saw a new Argentina in Evita against the “disillusioned” conservatives that saw through Evita’s facade to the politician underneath. In the image *Liberty* provides, Evita is modelling high fashion, dressed head to toe in Christian Dior as “she tells ‘her people’ they, too will one day wear fine clothes if they back her.”<sup>77</sup> There is, of course, a level of irony in her promotion of a “one-of-us” image as she handed out charitable benefits to the poor while wearing an outfit worth thousands of dollars. At the same time, however, Evita stood as a rags-to-riches example of the potential held by the new Argentina they— Perón, women, workers, descamisados, and descamisadas alike— were actively building.

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>76</sup>Steven Casey Williams, “The Hushed-Up Truth about Eva Perón,” *Liberty* 26, no.6 (June 1, 1949), 18.

<sup>77</sup>Williams, “The Hushed-Up Truth about Eva Perón,” 18.

The Fundación Eva Perón's quantifiable impacts and outcomes are difficult to accurately measure, due to the post-Perón destruction of official sources, the lack of internal organization, and the emphasis in secondary literature on Evita herself over her social aid. As the state's means of providing welfare, it not only answered specific requests for individual aid but also altered the system as a whole. *Policlínicos* that provided medical assistance for infants, children, the injured and the ill operated in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santiago del Estero, Salta, Jujuy, Corrientes, Mendoza, San Juan, Córdoba, and Santa Fe.<sup>78</sup> With particular attention to the indoctrination of future Peronists, Eva founded the Ciudad Infantil (Children's City) in 1949, providing children with sports facilities, swimming pools, recreation rooms, study spaces, and medical services.

La Ciudad Estudiantil de la Capital (Student City of the Capital) and the Ciudad Universitaria de Córdoba (University City of Córdoba) provided students with numerous supports, including education, recreation, accommodation, and schools specifically for "ill" youth.<sup>79</sup> Evita founded refuges to house families displaced by disaster or eviction and women's centres to house and support single working women. At one of the latter "halfway houses," known by the name *Hogar de la Empleada* (Home for the Female Worker), women paid monthly fees for full board with one to three women per bedroom. Hosting from just under two-hundred to a full five-hundred residents, the house contained a sewing room, two libraries, and an infirmary and at meal times, all workers in Buenos Aires that wished to be fed could have a meal there.<sup>80</sup> In terms of housing, Eva founded the *Hogar de Ancianos* (Home of the Elderly) to

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<sup>78</sup>*Argentina en marcha*.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>Ross, "Policy Formation and Implementation of Social Welfare in Peronist Argentina, 1943-1955," 277.

support the elderly who could no longer work and *Hogar-Escuelas* (Home Schools), where children who lived too far from a public school could board and receive a public education. The state prioritized enrolment for the children of workers, and children from the ages of two through fourteen attended.<sup>81</sup>

Following the rise of inflation and the economic crisis the Peronist government inherited, the state-promoted *Mundo Peronista* magazine published articles promoting a lifestyle of communal “austerity” in the same space as they posted images of more “plentiful” years where Argentines enjoyed disposable income and recreational activities. The latter were placed side-by-side with pictures of Evita performing charity, physically handing objects to visibly working-class recipients or hosting ill people in her office, thus turning her welfare into one of their “weapons of political persuasion” as it was connected with prosperity. The Fundación ran *proveedurías*, grocery stores managed by unions that followed strict state pricing regulations and offered a more comprehensive shopping experience in an early version of a box store. These offered women a way to lower the time dedicated to errands, so that they could focus on their newfound roles in the workforce while maintaining standards of propriety in the home. By 1952, Buenos Aires hosted nearly two hundred of these grocery stores.<sup>82</sup>

Theoretically privately funded, the Fundación sustained itself on Eva’s personal resources, financial donations from labour unions, and private investors. Anti-Peronist scholarship claims that private donations from unions or corporations were largely coerced; the lack of proof, even following the military junta’s later attempts to uncover scandal to undermine Perón’s lasting influence, makes such claims unlikely.<sup>83</sup> Regardless, it was a remarkably

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 271.

<sup>82</sup>Milanesio, “The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy”, 98.

<sup>83</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 150.

inexpensive organization for the state because of its private nature, absorbing and centralizing charity and completing the majority of the state's welfare responsibilities without using up state resources. The only cash donation that Congress proposed, Perón himself vetoed in 1949. Though Congress made no direct contributions to the *Fundación*, to allow the organization its claims to independence, they provided significant indirect support. Congress implemented a three percent tax on horse races to be donated to the *Fundación*, along with the yield of fines on illegal gambling and any surpluses in the ministries' budgets.<sup>84</sup> Following Eva's death, the *New York Times* alleged that her will expressed a desire for her wealth to be used to "grant loans to persons wanting to build homes."<sup>85</sup> Perón decided shortly after her passing that the revenue from Eva's autobiography was to be redistributed into a supplementary and notably tax-free institution, the *Fundación Evita*, to help fund the work of the *Fundación Eva Perón*.<sup>86</sup> Perón announced this on October 17th, on the anniversary of the labour demonstration that had freed him from jail in 1945, which was a success the Peronist government later attributed to Eva's individual actions. The announcement demonstrates the date as symbolic of Evita's popular politics and of her unyielding devotion to "the cause," or Perón.

The *Fundación Eva Perón* and the *Partido Peronista Femenino* both represented Eva's personal interest in modernizing, politicizing and publicizing welfare. Iliana Cepero, in her work on photographic propaganda, outlined how each organization served as powerful "weapons of political persuasion." First, through their proximity and popular association with the state, they

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 144, 149

<sup>85</sup>"Eva Peron Fund Aided: Tax-Free Foundation Formed to Administer Fortune," *New York Times*, (June 27, 1954) Special to the *New York Times*: 13.

<sup>86</sup>"Eva Peron's Fortune to Go to Foundation," *New York Times*, (October 18, 1952) Special to the *New York Times*: 3

proved personal and governmental interest in the forgotten Argentine's individual experiences.<sup>87</sup> The Fundación, in particular, acted as a link between state and the "weakest and least structured elements of society." This included the poorest Argentines, only recently-enfranchised women, youth, and the un- and underemployed.<sup>88</sup> The myth of the Fundación and Evita as mediators between the state and the public spread into popular imagery, even to foreign press as demonstrated by the aforementioned 1949 *Liberty* magazine article, with their claim that Evita acted as "Lady Bountiful to the poor."<sup>89</sup> She not only dismissed this title, but actively sought to counter it with imagery of authentic generosity, stating that "not even when I am with the neediest can anyone say that I act as the Lady Bountiful who left her comforts for a moment so as to imagine that she is engaged on a mission of mercy."<sup>90</sup> Her sustained radio presence and her preaching of Peronist gospel only added to Evita's "saintly status," where she ignored bureaucratic precedent and procedures to exchange "favours" with the people, regularly invited the ailing and sick into her office, and was rumoured to have cured a young girl's syphilis with a kiss.<sup>91</sup>

The Fundación Eva Perón paradoxically represented the intersection of progress and conservatism; Peronist media took the best parts of both images and claimed it for themselves, using Evita's persona to create a myth of her "sanctity" and benevolence.<sup>92</sup> Her proximity to the president and the link between the discourse of plenty and her role as the First Lady that brought social justice to Argentina proved to the people that the state cared about their individual

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<sup>87</sup>Cepero, "Photographic Propaganda under Peronism, 1946-55," 210.

<sup>88</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 144.

<sup>89</sup>Williams, "The Hushed-Up Truth about Eva Perón," 18.

<sup>90</sup>Perón, *My Mission in Life*, 69.

<sup>91</sup>Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, *Evita: The Real Life of Eva Perón* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1996), 126-7

<sup>92</sup>Cepero, "Photographic Propaganda under Peronism, 1946-55," 210.

situations. It is through this direct contact that Evita began receiving individual petitions from towns, groups, and households, requesting assistance for specific items or services. According to one source, the ability to contact the state and trust they would be heard was unprecedented: “before it was only in dreams that one could imagine that a simple resident of a lost place could ask something of the National Government.”<sup>93</sup> Evita created an intimate letter-writing campaign where people sent her their immediate and private concerns and requests; Evita thus performed the role of the physical embodiment of state welfare. If official estimates can be relied upon, the letter-writing campaign was immensely popular; her assistants, interviewed after the fact, remember Evita receiving upwards of ten thousand letters every day.<sup>94</sup>

“Social justice” and the idea that social assistance was a liberal democratic right quickly replaced charity, “benevolence” and philanthropy— reportedly, the poor could “change their social conditions by fighting the aristocracy.”<sup>95</sup> The link between the state and the *Fundación* solidified as Peronism allowed the working class a new identity and a “major transformation in the nature, capability and strategy of labour organizations.”<sup>96</sup> Between economic exclusion, especially following the depression, and the “political marginality” that stemmed from the increased immigration and migration of unskilled workers, the rise of populism saw community in these shared experiences as an opportunity to bring together underrepresented people and politicize the working class.<sup>97</sup> It was the birth of a collective sense of identity, where workers felt connected by their common struggles and hopes for Argentina. First securing support from

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<sup>93</sup>A petitioner residing in Greater Buenos Aires, quoted in Eduardo Elena, “What the People Want: State Planning and Political Participation in Peronist Argentina, 1946-1955,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no.1 (February 2005), 95.

<sup>94</sup>Elena, “What the People Want,” 89.

<sup>95</sup>Anahí Viladrich and Andrés A. Thompson, “Women and philanthropy in Argentina: from the society of beneficence to Eva Perón,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 7, no.4 (December 1996), 348.

<sup>96</sup>Patroni, “A Discourse of Love and Hate,” 154.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

existing labour organizations, trade unions became the pillars of support for the early Peronist government, to the extent that the organizations' leadership held vetoing powers over some policies. This pressure on the government to fulfil the needs of individual labour organizations was a threat to Juan's personal politics, and his government quickly recognized the benefit in controlling a more centralized social assistance program.<sup>98</sup> The Fundación Eva Perón became the direct response to the issue of domineering labour unions; as the counterweight to threatening labour movements, it was moulded to fit Perón's political needs and became the "arm of the Peronist government" that brought Peronist doctrine to a broader Argentina.<sup>99</sup> As it centralized social assistance, the Fundación politicized social services, thus absorbing the work of both private charities and labour unions.

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<sup>98</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 142.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 143.

## Social Participation and The Female Peronist Party

Argentine women gained federal voting rights in 1947. In 1949, Eva founded the *Partido Peronista Femenino* (PPF), whose First National Congress of the same year had an attendance of around a thousand Peronist women. By 1952, the PPF had more than five-hundred-thousand members and was running more than 3600 *Unidades Básicas* (Basic Units).<sup>100</sup> These figures demonstrate the rapid growth of women's integration into politics. Official Peronist estimates claimed that about half of the "economically active" population had unionized by the early 1950s, a sharp growth from only twenty percent in the early 1940s.<sup>101</sup> While the gendered wage gap remained, women did receive salary increases and mandates for better working conditions, both of which led to an increased standard of living.<sup>102</sup>

The *Unidades Básicas* were centres where women could access childcare, vaccinations, take courses on domestic skills, learn a new craft, and even borrow sewing machines. The state encouraged women to make and mend clothes over buying new ones in an attempt to reduce demand within the struggling textile economy. Women who attended a *Unidad Básica* were equipped with the support networks, contacts, knowledge and the equipment to contribute to the workforce by sewing for profit, taking a secretary course or gaining experience in a new sector, in addition to her household duties.<sup>103</sup> A *Mundo Peronista* article quotes Perón as having explained: "It is essential to break the pattern of households where the only one who works and contributes to expenses is the household head. Everyone who is fit to work should be productive."<sup>104</sup> These centres facilitated this additional productivity.

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<sup>100</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 174.

<sup>101</sup>Elena, "What the People Want," 99N

<sup>102</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 179.

<sup>103</sup>Milanesio, "The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy," 107.

<sup>104</sup>"Vigías de la economía familiar," *Mundo Peronista* (1 October 1954), 17–18.



Members of the original feminist movement were not impressed with Evita's level of commitment to women's rights. Instead, there was a level of "humiliation" as their lifetime struggle for enfranchisement was quickly ended by an authoritarian government that they did not support.<sup>105</sup> They were in opposition to Perón's version of suffrage, which both Eva and Perón always presented in the quintessential Peronist fashion— with two conflicting reasonings. Suffrage was "granted" with the narrative that it was something Argentine women had *earned*, in a purported acknowledgement of their long fight for equality. On the other hand, it was presented as a novel stance on the rights of liberal citizens of democracy, again "granted," thanks to the efforts of Evita in voicing the needs of Argentine women.<sup>106</sup> From the nation's economic difficulties, thanks to export culture and agriculture along with Perón's second election approaching, this second narrative of Evita as the patron of suffrage became the government's preferred method of highlighting the integral role women had in the regime. In a 1952 interview in the Peronist magazine *Mundo Peronista*, a woman described the path to suffrage: "While the Peronist doctrine has granted us age-old rights, rights that the oligarchy never wanted to acknowledge, we have also acquired new obligations."<sup>107</sup> In describing the vote as an "age-old" right, she is alluding to female suffrage as something that women were always meant to have, not something that could be gifted. Yet the government promoted a vision of a reciprocal relationship between the regime and women, wherein women now had a "debt" that they could repay by voting for Perón.<sup>108</sup>

Unlike the Partido Peronista, which at least claimed democracy, the PPF was similar to the Fundación Eva Perón: independent from the state and completely under Eva Perón's control.

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>106</sup>Milanesio, "The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy," 101.

<sup>107</sup>"Presentes, mi general!" *Mundo Peronista* (May 15, 1952).

<sup>108</sup>*Mundo Peronista*, 1952, quoted in Milanesio, "The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy," 101.

This added to the almost indistinguishable nature of both organizations, with testimonies recounting a widespread inability to distinguish between PPF and the Fundación.<sup>109</sup> The Unidades were simultaneously part of the PPF and extensions of the Fundación Eva Perón, and this inability to isolate not just the perception of the organizations but the establishments themselves, which traded staff between each other, yet again demonstrates the complete integration of Peronism into everyday life and of Evita as emissary of social support. As centres of political interaction, the Unidades Básicas supplemented the Partido Peronista Femenino's claims of being an "apolitical" society, both separate from and in direct support of the state. Eva handpicked officials within the party as well as any female candidates for elections. Eva Perón was not a woman with tolerance for independent thinkers: women either supported Perón unconditionally or were removed from the party's ranks.<sup>110</sup> The party, with this necessary agreement, formed a new identity among the working-class women it represented as they now collectively held power and influence over not just their households but also their communities.

Education and female literacy saw vast improvements under Eva's efforts. In 1940, little over three thousand students were enrolled in public kindergarten. By 1950, that number had risen to nearly thirty-three thousand. The halfway houses run by the Fundación erased some of the stigma that had previously been associated with single motherhood, which was likely causal to the increased numbers of female graduates from university.<sup>111</sup> School also became a tool for convincing Argentines of Peronist ideals. Eva bleached her dark hair blonde upon beginning her acting career in the 1930s. A 1953 reading text for six-year-olds by Graciela Albornoz de Videla had a cover image of a youthful and feminine woman with bleached blonde hair, thus

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<sup>109</sup>Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 174, 177.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 179.

presumably representing a motherly Evita, holding up a doll and playing with children as a boy in the doorway runs up, holding a letter addressed to Evita.<sup>112</sup> The short and simple phrases that taught children how to write in cursive included: “Perón loves kids,” “my mother,” “my father,” “Perón,” and “Evita,” all written underneath drawings of Evita and Peron in wholesome, parental roles.<sup>113</sup> In another fourth-grade textbook published after her death, Evita is pictured in heaven in her plain and tailored suits as she raises her arm with her signature salute. The book is, once again, full of a posthumous praising of Evita as “the only woman in History who has merited the name ‘Standard-Bearer of the Workers’ and ‘Spiritual Leader of the Nation.’”<sup>114</sup> It goes further to say that “to speak of ‘social assistance’ is to speak of Eva Perón,” and that “the Spiritual Mother of Argentine children, fought throughout her whole life so that [children] would be happy and content. The only privileged ones are children.”<sup>115</sup> Not only did Evita influence women as they were, but she acted as a role model for the young girls expected to one day turn into Peronist women and spread the message of Perón’s work and legacy.

Peronism politicized “homelike” spaces, with the home converted into a political centre where women could perform their own “militancy.”<sup>116</sup> Women were encouraged to be frugal in their endeavours, working to rebuild the post-depression economy by both contributing to the workforce and reevaluating their managing of family finances. In a text published by the party

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<sup>112</sup>Graciela Albornoz de Videla, *Libro de lectura para Primero Inferior (niños de 6 años)*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lasserre, 1953).

<sup>113</sup>“Perón ama a los niños. Mi mamá. Mi papá. Perón. Evita.” Albornoz de Videla, *Libro de lectura para Primero Inferior*, 3.

<sup>114</sup>“[La] mujer única en la Historia que ha merecido el nombre de ‘Abanderada de los trabajadores’ y de ‘Jefa espiritual de la Nación.’” Angela C. de Palacio, *Libro de lectura para Cuarto grado (niños de 10 años)*, (Editorial Lasserre, 1954), 28.

<sup>115</sup>“Hablar de “asistencia social”, es hablar de Eva Perón...La Madre Espiritual de los niños argentinos, ha luchado durante toda su vida, para que ellos sean felices y estén contentos. Los únicos privilegiados son los niños.” *Ibid.*, 28, 38.

<sup>116</sup>Carolina Barry, “Los centros cívicos femeninos: prácticas políticas, tensiones y continuidades con el partido peronista femenino (1946),” *Desarrollo Económico* 52, no.206 (July-September 2012), 7.

quoting Evita's spoken word, she outlines this militancy theory and the relationship between doctrine and frugality with the intent that "[e]ach Peronist woman will be, within the home, a vigilant sentinel of austerity, avoiding waste, reducing consumption and increasing production."<sup>117</sup> In 1952, wages were thirteen percent lower than in 1943, though by 1953, economic historians widely agree that the state had controlled inflation and returned both the cost of living and wages to what they were ten years prior.<sup>118</sup> In a February 1953 weekly special, "The Word of Perón," published in *Mundo Peronista*, Perón is quoted as having stated that "[i]n even the furthest corners of the country, women have become our hardworking representatives, taking heed of our forecasts and listening to our recommendations."<sup>119</sup> Under Peronism, domestic tasks were respected and began to be seen as labour rather than simply a woman's calling, as the government ran campaigns on the "economically significant" work of a homemaker. They rejected the notion that economically important careers meant that tasks had to necessarily be exchanged for capital.<sup>120</sup>

Evita slowly shifted public perception of women from Perón's original mother-first campaign to a citizen-first and mother-supplementary role. While it is true that she believed herself to be an exception in that she had no choice but to devote herself to Juan and the cause, her views on motherhood did not perpetuate Christian ideals of submission to the individual husband. With Perón as a "divine" substitute for Argentine husbands, Eva's speeches instructed women to act alongside and within the descamisado movement to submit themselves instead to

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<sup>117</sup>"Cada mujer Peronista será en el seno del hogar, centinela vigilante de la austeridad, evitando el derroche, disminuyendo el consumo e incrementando la producción." Eva Perón, *Habla Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires: Partido Peronista Femenino, 1952) i.

<sup>118</sup>Milanesio, "The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy," 108.

<sup>119</sup>"La palabra de Perón: Plan Económico y Segundo Plan Quinquenal," *Mundo Peronista* (February 15, 1953).

<sup>120</sup>Milanesio, "The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy," 108.

Perón and Peronism. As contemporary Jesuit writer John Murray resolved, “*Peronismo* means Perón,” and so there can be no Peronism, no for-the-people populism, should Argentines not dedicate themselves to the man as much as to the cause. Murray imagines a necessary attack upon the Church to prevent the formation of a Catholic opposition party. He named this incompatibility after Perón and Evita’s undermining of the Church’s influence within trade unions and “*Acción Católica*,” or Catholic charity.<sup>121</sup>

The party granted women an avenue for political mobilization while finding utility within the Peronist state. The apolitical label was a way to integrate women into governmental structures without sacrificing widely held conservative ideals of the masculinity of politics: women did not join the party for “unfeminine” political reasons, but rather to provide and receive social assistance. It was more of a social welfare-based organization than a political party. With the dual-definition of feminism Eva promoted, between rights as an extension of women’s domestic roles and as a more progressive way of contributing to the regime, she linked each polarized group together in a common identity. Eva Perón incorporated the working-class women that old society excluded from public life, both “discursively and materially,” into public spaces.<sup>122</sup> The women’s party altered the nation’s societal involvement and economic structure, with increased wages, benefits, duties, improved conditions, and more socially acceptable female working roles.

Peronist doctrine claimed that women were the “highest moral reserve of the home.” Perón only labelled the exclusionary injustices women faced, from politics to the public sphere

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<sup>121</sup>John Murray, “Perón and the Church,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 44, no.175 (Autumn 1955), 269.

<sup>122</sup>Milanesio, ““The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy,”” 91.

to the workforce, as such due to their status as a “mother more than that of a citizen.”<sup>123</sup> Women, as wives and mothers, maintained propriety within the family and were responsible for its continuation to subsequent generations. Likewise, a 1949 American opinion piece refers to Eva’s role within society as supplemental to a state that was tired of her antics: “The army, up to now chief prop of the Perón regime, is said to be fed up with Eva’s politicking.”<sup>124</sup> If anything, this explains the party’s rumours. As with all things Evita, opinions on her usefulness were polarized. Within the new working-class identity, Eva Perón was a physical manifestation of the state’s commitment to its people as she embodied working-class values and acted as mediator. In her October 17, 1951 speech to the descamisados, she declared:

I have only one thing that matters, and I have it in my heart...it’s love for this people and for Perón. I gave you thanks, my general, for having taught me to know and love them. If this people asked me for my life I would joyfully give it, for the happiness of one descamisado is worth more than my entire life.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Carolina Barry, “El Partido Peronista Femenino: la gestación política y legal,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, no.8 (2008), 8.

<sup>124</sup>Williams, “The Hushed-Up Truth about Eva Perón,” 18.

<sup>125</sup>Perón, “Speech to the Descamisados.”

## Conclusion

Given Peronist control of the news and strict Congress-backed libel laws, censorship prevented the majority of critics from publishing anti-Peronist texts until after the military coup of 1955. Critiques of Evita began circulating following Perón's loss of power, and anti-Peronist literature almost immediately sought to uncover, or rather "expose," the "true Evita."<sup>126</sup> These texts scorn her, belittle her acting career, and link it to her political performance, naming her "deprived" upbringing as the reason for her power-hungry and social-climbing attitude. Peronist scholarship, even post-1955, is just as heavily tainted with speculation and personal opinion. They praise *their* Evita, honouring her memory fondly and "echoing" the symbology and the icon that the state and press created during her lifetime.<sup>127</sup>

As previously stated, Evita's own writing is not reliable. *La razón de mi vida* was a piece of propaganda more than it was an insight into any true sense of who Evita was. It showed how she intended herself to be perceived, which portrayal of herself seemed to her most effective for furthering the Peróns' political careers, and how she expected her followers to identify. It is for this reason that recent emphasis on discovering the woman behind the myth is not quite irrelevant, but certainly does not add much to discussions of the impact her actions had on the people she served. Peronist and anti-Peronist literature alike have already attempted to use what they believe they know to expose the benevolent and motherly saint or the vengeful and cunning witch.<sup>128</sup> The intersection between how Eva Perón intended to be perceived and the impacts of her actions can continue conversations in 2022 about performative politics and dual narratives.

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<sup>126</sup>Marysa Navarro, "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study of Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 12, no.1 (May 1980), 131.

<sup>127</sup>Navarro, "Wonder Woman was Argentine and her Real Name was Evita," 135.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

Argentina and the world's media is controlled, influenced, and represents distinct and polarizing societal identities, just as Peronists experienced between the censorship of the regime and the military junta's destruction of their opponent's achievements and archives.

Regarding the post-Perón destruction of files and removal of integral organizations, it is worth noting that the Fundación Eva Perón was among the first targeted establishments. By the time of the 1955 coup, its assets are estimated to have been over three billion pesos, with a yearly budget of one billion pesos.<sup>129</sup> American sources claim that Eva's initial contribution to the foundation was a simple ten thousand pesos, showing remarkable growth within just a few years.<sup>130</sup> Symbolically, the Fundación was the heart of the regime. Despite the Vatican's rejection of her canonization, the mythology surrounding Evita was remarkably saint-like and holy. Specific governmental efforts sought to use this public ideal to their advantage, casting statues, issuing stamps with Evita's smiling face, renaming buildings after her and publishing Peronist doctrine in small "devotional" leaflets nearly identical to those found in local parishes.<sup>131</sup> It was the connection between state and commoner, with Evita as the "bridge of love," that gave the individual Argentine relevance. After the 1955 coup-d'état, the military government sought to damage the reputation of Evita and Juan Perón by exposing the financial deceit and fraud that they believed must have been present. Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, one of the upper-class anti-Peronist women appointed to the commission investigating the Fundación, recorded that "it was a waste, craziness, but not a fraud. Eva cannot be accused of having kept one peso in her pocket. I would like to be able to say as much of all of those who collaborated with me in the dissolution of the

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<sup>129</sup>Jill Hedges, *Evita: The Life of Eva Perón* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 170.

<sup>130</sup>Eva Peron Fund Aided: Tax-Free Foundation Formed to Administer Fortune," *New York Times* (June 27, 1954), Special to the New York Times: 13.

<sup>131</sup>Fraser and Navarro, *Evita: The Real Life of Eva Perón*, 170.



organization.”<sup>132</sup> Though contemporary critics condemned the Fundación’s clientelist tendencies, as poor Argentines lined up to “beg for something,”<sup>133</sup> others recognized the plentiful life the average Argentine lived because of these methods and because of Evita: “Now, years later, I recognize that there was never a first lady like her. Who committed herself to others, the weakest, those who had nothing.”<sup>134</sup>

Perhaps this analysis will read more as a venture into each of Eva’s personas in an attempt to uncover who, how, and why she was. In a way, this paper is simply a case study of Evita and her legacy, outlining her obstacles, successes and policies in an attempt to determine her authenticity and her legitimacy because that is what the topic lends itself to becoming. Despite her personas and despite her politics, she was undeniably devoted to Peronism and the people of Argentina: “Everything I am, everything I have, everything I think and everything that I feel, belongs to Perón.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, quoted in Jill Hedges, “Evita: The Life of Eva Perón.” 170.

<sup>133</sup>Susana Fiorito, quoted in Jill Hedges, “Evita: The Life of Eva Perón,” 171.

<sup>134</sup> Helvicia Scamara de Gianola, quoted in Jill Hedges, “Evita: The Life of Eva Perón,” 171.

<sup>135</sup>Eva Perón, quoted in Cepero, “Photographic Propaganda under Peronism,” 207.

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