

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Beyond “Roaring Like Lions”: Comadrisimo, Counternarratives, and the Construction of a Latin American Transnational Subjectivity of Feminism

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*This essay introduces comadrisimo as a way to highlight the complex relationships between discursive and material counterhegemonic practices, and between voice, victimhood, and agency. Comadrisimo explains how a transnational subjectivity of feminism, which I call comadre, enacts counterhegemonic agency in transnational communication systems through a relational framework. I argue that a Latin American comadre subjectivity emerges from a politicized comadre subject. The compadrazco system embeds this politicized comadre subject in a web of kinship and friendship relations, as well as oppressive asymmetrical global structures. Comadrisimo frames the critical engagement with the testimonio about the Salvadoran human rights organization, CO-MADRES, attributed to María Teresa Tula. The analysis results in an amendment to, and extension of, transnational feminist theory in communication studies.*

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In El Salvador and other Latin American countries, there are big differences between bourgeois women, who call themselves feminists, and other women. Sometimes we meet with these feminists, but all they do is talk, roaring like lions, but not doing anything. . . . Being united for women’s rights won’t do us any good unless we change our government.

— María Teresa Tula (1994b), pp. 125–126)

Founded in 1977 in El Salvador, CO-MADRES,<sup>1</sup> is a human rights organization composed of female relatives including wives/partners, mothers, and daughters of

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those imprisoned and/or disappeared by the Salvadoran National Guard. Strongly influenced by the guidance of Monsignor Carlos Romero, who was assassinated for supporting insurrection, the women's activism emerged from "Christian Base Communities" that followed a philosophy "that regarded poverty and exploitation as a sin" (Stephen, 1994a, p. 2). The CO-MADRES pacifist work included finding clandestine cemeteries, acquiring court orders to exhume bodies to determine the cause of death and identify the persons killed, hunger strikes, protests, demonstrations, and peaceful takeovers. Additionally, CO-MADRES members visited, supported, and educated political prisoners and brought them food and news from their families. This organization was so effective that it garnered attention from international human rights groups and was the first recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 1984 (see Stephen, 1994a, 1995)<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the Salvadoran government's deterrence, CO-MADRES was active well into the signing of the peace accords between the government and the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) on December 31, 1991, and continues activist work today. Currently, CO-MADRES seeks war reparations for victims and works toward healing society through educational programs and international, national, and local community projects with a goal to "... never forget the past or let it happen again" (see Mackey, 2012; [http://comadres.org/main\\_english.html](http://comadres.org/main_english.html)). While CO-MADRES's work documents women's human rights activism in El Salvador during the 70s and 80s, its contributions to understanding how women in transnational communication systems have enacted, and continue to enact, counterhegemonic agency, have been overlooked.

Although singularly attributed to CO-MADRES member, María Teresa Tula, the testimonio<sup>3</sup> *Este Es Mi Testimonio: María Teresa Tula, Luchadora Pro-Derechos Humanos de El Salvador* [*Hear My Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula, Human Rights Advocate of El Salvador*], is a form of non-Western collectivist rhetoric (Delgado, 1999; see also Scholz, 2011, 2012) that documents counternarratives of CO-MADRES members as a whole. Lynn Stephen (1994a), the translator and scholar who introduced Tula's work to the English-speaking world, argues:

CO-MADRES has deepened and redefined both traditional gender roles and what it encompassed under the umbrella of human rights. The meaning of mother has expanded to include not only taking care of one's family, but also of one's country, taking responsibility as a participating individual who stands up for the rights of all and demands adherence to democratic principles. (p. 4)

In contrast to Stephen's claim that CO-MADRES expanded the meaning of mother to symbolically include a nation's citizens in its activism, I argue that a more encompassing transnational subjectivity of feminism is illuminated through its members' counternarratives, which is further explained through *comadrisimo*.

In this essay, I introduce *comadrisimo* as a way to highlight the complex relationships between discursive and material counterhegemonic practices, and between

victimhood, voice, and agency, within transnational communication systems. Hegde (1999) argues that agency "has to be located within larger structures of power. . . . within the structures of gendered asymmetry in order to understand the victimization and resistance of women" (pp. 288–289), suggesting that agency enacted by postcolonial subjects within transnational communication systems (see Hegde, 1999; Shome, 1996) can function to disrupt asymmetrical power relations, while also being produced or constituted by these hegemonic discourses (see also Campbell, 2005; Sowards, 2010). To further explain "gender asymmetry," Hegde (1999) cites Fisher and Davis (1993) as she argues, "The challenge for feminists is to show how women, in their everyday practices, are torn between being victim of patriarchal structures and agents of resistance" (p. 293). *Comadrisimo* not only meets Hegde's challenge but also lays the groundwork for more robust theorizing about women's agency in transnational communication systems. Furthermore, *comadrisimo* is relevant to communication scholars because *comadrisimo* provides scholars a framework with which to complicate our understanding of how overlapping systems of oppression in transnational relations give rise to subjects of feminism and influence their forms of communication. Such a framework requires Western scholars to listen and pay attention to communicative practices that are culturally situated and expressed. Subsequently, *comadrisimo* complicates the binaries that have been created between agency and victimhood, and discourse and materiality, for women in the so-called third world. Lastly, by foregrounding Latin American women's counterhegemonic agency within transnational communication systems, *comadrisimo* amends and extends transnational feminist theory.

As a transnational feminist scholar in Latin American/Latina/o Critical Studies in Communication, this project is not only grounded in feminist theoretical work but is also influenced by my upbringing in the United States and in Guatemala by my Guatemalan immigrant parents. Having witnessed and experienced the impact of human rights violations on families in Guatemala during the 1980s, I approach this work with a commitment to honor the voices of women in postcolonial regions who "are less likely to be represented, and if represented, they are likely to be trivialized, ridiculed, or marginalized" (Valdivia, 2000, p. 115). Providing a framework that explains how women in Latin America enact counterhegemonic agency begins my commitment. The CO-MADRES members' counternarratives are a strong starting point because they make evident transnational counterhegemonic practices that have further implications for transnational feminist communication theory. This essay unfolds in three parts.

First, to situate *comadrisimo*, the term "comadre" is culturally contextualized within colonial and neocolonial structures. Secondly, a transnational feminist analysis of *comadre* subjects' counternarratives reveal how they enact counterhegemonic agency by disrupting the effects of asymmetrical power relations deployed on the bodies of women and by positioning and contesting militaristic violence within transnational communication systems. I conclude by addressing how *comadrisimo* extends our theories of transnational feminism in communication studies by

foregrounding the relationships between the discursive and the material, and between victimhood, voice, and agency.

### **Comadre Subject/ivity Rises Above and Beyond Colonialism, Neocolonialism, and Neoimperialism**

Comadre is indeed a powerful term, and concept, and its connotations are unique to Latino culture. All Latinas recognize the most common definition of the term comadre—the one related to friendship and camaraderie. Comadres are the women they know they can count on, lean on, and ask for advice or for help when needed . . . comadres make up the support system women create for themselves on the personal and professional fronts.

—Nora de Hoyos Comstock (2012, p. x).

The name chosen by the activists of CO-MADRES conveys multiple meanings. "Comadre"<sup>4</sup> is a term that captures the malleability of a multilayered subjectivity that is not accounted for in the term "madre [mother]." In relation to the commonly known myth of "marianismo" influenced by Catholicism, Mother is defined as apolitical, nonconfrontational, and self-sacrificing (see Fabj, 1993). Existing scholarship in feminist rhetoric (Fabj, 1993; Foss & Domenici, 2001) has theorized the rhetorical strategies utilized by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo of Argentina within a motherhood framework. Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are known for displaying symbols of motherhood, such as photographs of their children, infant cloth diapers as head scarves, and the like as they march to seek information about their loved ones' whereabouts, as well as to protest the Argentinian government's stealth tactics of "disappearing" during the Dirty War of 1976. Implicit in this scholarship is that because the Madres' activism was biologically deterministic within their cultural context, they were able to surpass assumptions made about their apolitical voice by blurring the lines between the private and public spheres. Stephen's analysis of CO-MADRES is similarly framed by motherhood, but moves beyond this model to argue for an expansion of that frame. A *comadre* subjectivity understood within transnational communication systems differs dramatically from the motherhood subjectivity.

The hyphenated CO-MADRES, also known as the "Comité de Madres [Committee of Mothers]" can mean "with [co/n] mothers [madres]" but also alludes to the term "comadre." "Comadre" translates into "godmother of one's child" or "mother of one's godchild" (Carvajal & Horwood, 1997, p. 96) and is influenced by the Spanish colonial impacts of Catholicism in Latin American countries (see Camacho, 2012; Gill-Hopple & Brage-Hudson, 2012; Herrera, 2011; López, 1999). However, the meaning of "comadre" is far more complex than its literal translation. "Comadre" is further understood as part of the sociocultural practice of the *compadrazco* system that is influenced by Catholicism, which,

is created when a couple with a newborn selects another couple as sponsors (godparents) for their infant. The godparents assume the responsibility of protecting the child and providing him or her with religious instruction. . . . The godparents theoretically take on the status of second parents to the newborn and forge a special relationship with the child as he or she grows. (López, 1999, pp. 27–28)

Historically, these responsibilities were relegated to blood relatives. Over the years, this custom has changed to include key members of a couple's social support network (Camacho, 2012) and therefore, they are "bound by the same time rights and responsibilities as blood related family members" (Gill-Hopple & Brage-Hudson, 2012, p. 117). In short, godparents are responsible for the ethical, moral, and spiritual growth of their godchildren and each other. In addition to religious instruction, other functional areas that influence the godparent selection include socioeconomic strata as a social insurance of sorts (López, 1999, pp. 29–30). However, of particular importance is that the term also captures the significance of the relationship between fellow *comadres*.

"Comadre" is a term of kinship and friendship among Latin American women and Latinas and Chicanas, meaning that your friend and confidant will act also as your ally (Herrera, 2011). As de Hoyos Comstock (2012) states, "The term encompasses some of the most complex and important relationships that exist between women. Comadres are best friends, confidants, coworkers, advisors, neighbors, and godmother's to one's children" (p. ix). Extending the meaning of "comadre" even further, in Puerto Rico, the term refers to an empowered leader who looks out for her community and is considered an activist (Camacho, 2012, p. 124). Latin American women's human rights activism during the 1970s and 1980s was prompted by oppressive political systems that had dire consequences on their families and communities, thereby politicizing the *comadre* (italicized herein) role, which also has salience today. El Salvador is a case in point.

Historians and Latin American scholars have amply written about violent repression and insurrection in El Salvador starting in 1932 with the massacre known as La Matanza [The Slaughter] resulting in more than 30,000 deaths and lasting through the Cold War (see Anderson, 1982; Donnelly, 2007; Percy, 2006). During the mid-1970s and 1980s, two thirds of Salvadoran children under the age of five were malnourished, three fourths of rural families (making up two thirds of the population) were landless, food insecure, and less than 40 percent had access to piped water (Donnelly, 2007, p. 118). Thomas P. Anderson (1982) adds:

The troubles that were to convulse the country in recent times [the '80s] sprang from the profound dissatisfaction on the part of the peasant community over the fact that the land (and therefore the wealth) of the country was being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. The 'fourteen families,' which was a way of saying the very wealthy, had most of the resources of the country. (p. 171)

Given these circumstances, much of the population lived in destitution and therefore, the Salvadoran poor began to protest and demand a change in the social system. The ruling oligarchy, supported by the military, responded with violence to any group attempting to demand social change and egalitarianism (Donnelly, 2007, p. 118).

Violence against civilians increased in 1977, when General Carlos Humberto Romero became president. Romero passed the Law for the Defense and Guarantee of Public Order in November, which imposed press censorship, outlawed strikes and public meetings, and suspended due process under the law (Anderson, 1982). In essence, he declared "open season" (Percy, 2006, p. 107) on anyone who protested, during which *escuadrones de la muerte* [death squads] activity was rampant. The death squads worked closely with the president and the Salvadoran national security agency and were responsible for mass murders, tortures, rapes, and disappearances (Anderson, 1982, p. 175; Donnelly, 2007, p. 118; Percy, 2006, p. 107). The dramatic shift in political and social structures in Latin America during this period cannot be understood outside of transnational connectivities with the United States.

During the second half of the 20th century, the US was one of the primary developers of the "National Security Doctrine," which "widened the sphere of international conflict to Latin America in the belief that the region could play a strategic role in the fight against communism" (Feierstein, 2010, p. 489). Given the communist undertones of La Matanza, the United States offered El Salvador assistance in the 1930s, although it did not officially recognize its dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> El Salvador rejected this assistance in the 1930s, only to accept it in the 1980s when the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), made up of four guerilla groups and the Salvadoran Communist Party, threatened to topple the Salvadoran government once again (see Stephen, 1994b). Consequently, different forms of terror were used "in order to transform whole societies and to destroy any possibility of political opposition to pro-US policies" (Feierstein, 2010, p. 498).

As Stephen's research suggests, CO-MADRES members' activism was sparked by the volatile political environment in Latin American countries broadly, and in El Salvador specifically, through asymmetrical power relations with the United States, which prompted the violent tactics used to (en)force democracy. Having had such a strong political presence during the worst time of the repression, CO-MADRES representatives, who themselves experienced acts of terror, torture, and disappearance, traveled outside of the country to give their testimonios in Costa Rica, Europe, Canada, Australia, the United States, and other Latin American countries (Stephen, 1994a, p. 2). Their testimonios openly contested the stealth tactics employed by the Salvadoran government and military and supported by the United States. As a human rights organization composed primarily of women, they understood the effects of militaristic violence on women and girls and therefore met with international feminist groups. However, they quickly learned that the manner in which the groups addressed the gender character of oppressive structures dramatically differed from one another:

In El Salvador and other Latin American countries, there are big differences between bourgeois women, who call themselves feminists, and other women. Sometimes we meet with these feminists, but all they do is talk, roaring like lions, but not doing anything. ... Being united for women's rights won't do us any good unless we change our government. (Tula, 1994b, pp. 125–126)

Doña Tere's words reflect the concerns raised by Grewal and Kaplan's transnational critique of "global feminism" (Grewal, 2005, p. 143) by bringing to light "the hegemony of first world women's groups to affect women's lives and women's groups worldwide by creating a 'common agenda' that produced women as their subjects and as a target population" (Grewal, 2005, p. 143). Consequently, this "common agenda" was understood only through gender identity politics, ignoring the intersection of gender, ethnicity, race, and class within oppressive structures that impacted both women and men. In contrast to how global hegemonic feminist groups defined women and women's roles in human rights activism is the *comadre* subjectivity.

The tumultuous political situation in El Salvador was rooted in asymmetrical power relations with the US, affecting women, men, and children in numerous ways. Considering the particular role of the "comadre" within the *compadrazco* system in Latin America, one should not be surprised that discursive and material hegemonic conditions and constraints interact to constitute a *comadre* subjectivity. The CO-MADRES members' counternarratives were influenced by a sense of duty and responsibility to relational subjects and alliance building with other *comadre* subjects, and therefore contested and ruptured these constraints.

The notion of "relational" within a *compadrazco* paradigm extends beyond the maternal and the Western neoliberal individual and can be understood in the Spanish term "pueblo." Beyond its literal transnational of "village" or "lesser population," Stacey Hunt's (2006) research suggests that a pueblo in Latin American countries is made up by a group of people who are communally connected through shared ethnicity, race, and class. Furthermore, a group's class is determined by their occupation, which is influenced by their geographical location in relation to region, nation, and the world (see also Scholz, 2011, p. 209). These pueblos can include campesinos [farmers], mineros [miners], obreros [working class], and so on. Within these pueblos, women, men, and children fulfill ascribed roles to meet basic needs. Activism to promote social change was sparked when basic needs were not met because of oppressive sociopolitical structures. Moreover, in El Salvador, *comadre* subjects believed that social change and women's rights were inextricably connected, "I believe that the role of women in the revolutionary movement is central. Even if some men have gained some ideological and political consciousness, they still have a problem with women's rights" (Tula, 1994b, p. 183). *Comadrisimo* elucidates how the interaction of these previous relational elements gives rise to the culturally situated counterhegemonic discursive and material practices enacted by *comadre* subjects.

### **Comadre Counternarratives: The Enactment of Discursive and Material Agency**

Most Americans<sup>6</sup> still believe what their government tells them. ... They think the United States is going off to help the downtrodden, like Superman. Mr. Bush<sup>7</sup> says that he is ready to fight tyranny and dictatorship, and to defend democracy. But I know from my own experience, the United States doesn't always defend democracy. (Tula, 1994b, p. 175)

As Mohanty (2003) aptly observed, much feminist research about "third-world women" has perpetuated a binary structure of those with power and those without, creating a universal category for "third-world women" that has been highly problematized by postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars (see Diaz, 2003; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Kennedy, 2005; Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991; Narayan, 1995; Shome, 1996; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Spivak, 1988; Trinh, 1987). This narrow and limiting category is reflected in much research focused on sexualized violence, which has represented "third-world women" as merely (or only) victims and objects of male violence, as universal dependents, and as victims of the colonial process (see Mohanty, 2003). This research implies that women in war-torn contexts are "without power" and therefore do not, or cannot, enact agency. Grewal (2005) provides further insight into how gender-related persecution and sexualized violence is narrowly defined in legal discourse and in some feminist research, as she notes, "refugees were seen as the victims of globalization rather than as subjects of transnational or national networks of knowledge production" (p. 177).

In an effort to "interrupt the canonical silence about the other" (Hegde, 1999, p. 291) and to move beyond "the Marx who found it possible to say: they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 42), a transnational feminist commitment in communication studies engages the narratives produced by women in these contexts because their narratives do several things. First, they reveal how global asymmetrical power relations (see also Shome, 1996) influence local economic, social, and political structures and constitute subjects of feminism. Second, they serve as a foundation through which scholars can analyze how these dialectical relations often give rise to counterhegemonic strategies (see also Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Shome, 1996). Finally, these counternarratives help feminist scholars interrupt and rupture hegemonic feminism/s, which have been the bases of global women's human rights organizations (see also Grewal, 2005) further informing feminist theories, so that they account for a wider range of discursive and material phenomena. Furthermore, a transnational feminist approach can assist scholars in theorizing the ways transnational systems influence the "relationship between forms of violence (i.e., political, everyday, gender, structural)" and their rhetorical and material manifestations (Silber, 2004, p. 566). Subsequently, these counternarratives produced by women in such contexts can provide the richest theoretical insight into women's discursive and material resistance and self-representation.

A *comadre* subject's counterhegemonic discourse contests and ruptures unjust social conditions and constraints by revealing inconsistent government practices that are contradictory to a democracy. The unjust social conditions recounted in Doña Tere's testimonio highlight that democracy in no way was coming from the voice of the people, but instead functioned as a guise to maintain military control over poor Salvadoreños, while the oligarchy continued to economically gain from the system. Doña Tere recounts how Salvadoreños protested dangerous work conditions, exploitative work practices, and unacceptable wages, all of which contributed to the destitution of families. In a democratic nation where the *compadrazco* system is practiced, relational flourishing should be supported.

Relational flourishing is the ability to freely navigate the community by engaging in everyday activities such as grocery shopping, family gatherings, religious worship, having access to employment that is nonexploitative, and expecting that the government protect the well-being of its citizens. Therefore, a *comadre* directly confronts a government that works in opposition to this way of life by naming the violence that the government imposes on its citizens. The *comadre* subjects' counternarratives reveal and contest the various military tactics utilized by the government to instill fear in Salvadoran communities. These tactics included physical and symbolic acts encompassed in "disappearing."

### Recovering Los Desaparecidos [The Disappeared]

"Disappearing" people was commonly used by military regimes throughout Latin America starting around the 1960s and is considered by some as "the cruelest form of government abuse" (Brody & González, 1997, p. 366). Holland Cotter (2007) adds, "Disappearance generates uncertainty, paralyzes action, leaves an open wound" (p. 7). The mere threat of "disappearing" functioned as a form of political containment. An effective intimidation tactic that could result in disappearing was the labeling of anyone who was, or was *perceived* to be, subversive.

Once ascribed labels such as *terrorista* [terrorist] or *guerrillero* [guerilla], which were synonymous with "communist," not only would a labeled subversive be under surveillance, but so would be their entire family, placing everyone in the family in danger, including those within the *compadrazco* system. There was a clear element of guilt by association present in everyday lived experiences. The fear of what could happen as a result of a label was so insidious that it directly impacted family trust, as illustrated in Doña Tere's account of an interaction that she had with her husband about his union activism:

[He said] 'I didn't tell you what I was doing before because I didn't trust you. You could have turned me in. I also didn't know if you would be able to put up with everything if something happened to me.' He said this because it is something that happens a lot in El Salvador. Mothers turn in their children; children turn in their parents; husbands and wives turn in their spouses. (Tula, 1994b, p. 71)

"Guilt by association" is further illustrated by a judge's response to Doña Tere when she inquired about her husband's remains after he was detained and killed. The judge warned Doña Tere, "Don't look for him. This man is a terrorist. He is a guerilla. I know. Yesterday the army killed him and the others, and I had to go identify them. But don't be stupid. You will be taking on the identity of your husband and you might not even know what he was involved in" (Tula, 1994b, p. 95). The judge's response to Doña Tere conveys how family members inadvertently became implicated in subversive activities if their loved one was labeled communist and/or suspected of dissident behavior. Conversely, the judge's response to her speaks to broader assumptions regarding women's participation in activist work independent from their husband's activism. These scenarios contribute to understanding relational complexities within transnational communication systems. Additionally, by exhuming bodies and documenting the state in which they were found, CO-MADRES revealed and contested the government's undemocratic practices that were enacted by military forces.

Bodies showed evidence of wounds caused by various military torture techniques including multiple bullet wounds, acid in eyes, and mutilation of hands. Exhuming bodies was also vitally important to families because there was a chance that their loved ones could be identified. When a woman's body was found, however, she not only exhibited these previously mentioned wounds, but also exhibited evidence of rape and other sexualized violence. For instance, some women's breasts were cut off and parts of their genitalia were stuffed in their noses. The exhumation of bodies and the narratives that pieced together what occurred functioned to reject the symbolic annihilation intrinsic to the purpose of disappearing. Moreover, the conditions under which women were found specifically reflected how disappearances were connected to militaristic gendered and sexualized violence against women and therefore against a community; thereby providing insight into different meanings of "relational" violence within transnational communication systems.

### Relational Violence and Comadres as Allies

The *comadres'* counternarratives help us to understand "relational" violence in two ways. First, the meaning of relational violence within familial and community structures is evident in militaristic rape. Militaristic rape, or rape in genocide (see Bloxham & Moses, 2010), is a common form of "relational violence" used during civil wars, dirty wars, and genocide to target "symbols of the group's life force" (Von Joeden-Forgey, 2010, p. 72). McKinnon (2010) writes that the function of militarized rape "is to performatively seize power and control" (p. 86). Expanding, McKinnon (2010) cites Okazawa-Rey (2002) and argues, "that sexual violence is an often inevitable outcome of military states because patriarchy and militarism are inextricably bound" (p. 86). These ideas are supported by Doña Tere's arguments about the Salvadoran military's tactics:

We have to make people understand how men in power in El Salvador have turned into beasts who don't respect women of any age. Women from 13 to 70

have been systematically raped as part of their torture. This is the hardest thing to deal with. I feel deeply ashamed telling people that I was raped during my torture. (Tula, 1994b, p. 174)

Furthermore, McKinnon (2010) argues against "Western constructions that understand heterosexual women from Central America as strongly reliant on men for support" (p. 89) and therefore as merely "relational subjects" or as subjects "without a political identity or opinion." However, members of CO-MADRES, in fulfilling their roles as allies and confidants, complicate an understanding of relational violence. One issue this counterhegemonic discourse addressed with particular power was that of women's confinement in prisons.

*Comadres* imprisoned for their political activism provided a strong and successful support system for young women who were also detained for political reasons but not necessarily for involvement in dissident behavior. In fact, Stephen (see Tula, 1994b, p. 159) mentions that Salvadoran political prisoners were among the best organized and provided an exemplary model that worked toward political change in the country. Most of the CO-MADRES members endured torture and rape by the death squads. The *comadres* who survived shared their testimonios with other women when they were moved to prison and listened to the testimonios of other women political prisoners:

When you give your testimony, you start to relive all the difficult things that have happened to you. It's very hard to constantly remember all those terrible moments. But, when I think about the hundreds and thousands of people in El Salvador who have similar stories, and who never had the opportunity to tell anyone, then I feel I have to make a real effort to tell my story one more time. For them. (Tula, 1994b, p. 174)

In fulfilling their roles as allies and confidants, *comadres* created a space of support and nurturing for women who were confused about the actions taken against them. As *comadre* stories are recounted, women's experiences with repression are understood within a broad relational system: "We women would talk to each other about all the horrible things that had happened to us. We had been tortured and raped by as many as eight or ten men, and some got pregnant as a result. That is where some of these children<sup>8</sup> came from" (Tula, 1994b, p. 161). Unfortunately, some of the women's husbands rejected them upon their return home, suggesting that militaristic sexualized violence continues to affect the "life force" of the community. Furthermore, militaristic violence affected relationships at home by contributing to relational tensions. Doña Tere recounts her own experiences with domestic violence as her husband beat her because of her involvement with CO-MADRES (despite his own union organizing):

. . . he started to beat on me. This made me very angry. . . . I was trying to think about what I could do to defend myself. I wasn't going to put up with this treatment. . . . I started to yell back at him. 'You want a war, then I am going to give you war. You asshole, no one beats me.' . . . We had a big heavy pine table

and chairs from Guatemala. I grabbed one of the heavy chairs. . . . I hit him over the head with that heavy chair and he fell down on the floor. . . . That was the last serious problem we had as a couple. From then on, we understood each other. We would respect what the other wanted to do, and he never interfered with my work again. He started to support my work. (Tula, 1994b, pp. 77–78)

These are not the narratives that are often circulated about the agency enacted by marginalized women in Latin American countries, and yet they function to complicate a monolithic understanding of "relational" as well as the victim role that has been suggested by the limiting "third-world woman" category. Doña Tere and many other women defend themselves against domestic violence, but with an understanding that the violence in the home can be partially attributed to the stress that a broken economic system places on families:

My compañero was a working-class man who was very class-conscious. He had a lot of political experience—more than I did. He was always working to change the situation of workers who had been exploited by people in power. It seemed so strange to me that a man who I thought had more political consciousness than I did would be telling me not to get involved in anything. . . . It was difficult because he wasn't working. It is hard for an ex-political prisoner to get work. His name had been all over the press and television, and no one wanted to hire him. So he was stuck at home. (Tula, 1994b, p. 69)

Doña Tere's words reflect the complications that a corrupt political system places on economic structures, thereby making relationships within families adversarial. Moreover, her words suggest that there is no boundary between family relations and an oppressive sociopolitical system because militarized violence also intruded on family and community life.

Doña Tere complicates the meaning of "relational" even more as she asserts, no matter the pain caused by reliving instances of torture, that it is important she continue to give her testimonio because:

"Sometimes I think, 'Why am I telling my story to these people? Maybe they won't believe me.' Sometimes I ask myself, 'Why am I even alive to tell my story? How can I tell it another time?'" But I always answer that I have to tell my story because the tortures that we received in El Salvador were sent by the United States. (Tula, 1994b, p. 174)

The relational history between the US and El Salvador positions the Salvadoran government in a neoimperial relationship with the United States. Doña Tere's statement encapsulates that gendered sexualized torture needs to be addressed as part of the overall hegemonic ideology that creates the transnational conditions for human rights violations—in this case, rooted in the asymmetrical power relations between the United States and El Salvador under the guise of democracy. Therefore, when understood through a transnational feminist framing, "relational" within *comadre* counternarratives can also be understood in terms of the interconnectedness of

transnational systems that impact and influence national, social, and local structures. Therefore, *comadre* counternarratives express how "the intersections between race, gender, neo/colonialism, and imperialism are at the heart of militarized violence against women" (McKinnon, 2010, p. 86). In so doing, a *comadre* advocates for families, *comadres*, and other women by reframing the manner in which people in positions and spaces of global privilege and power understand the narratives produced by "third-world subjects" and therefore call for global solidarity.

## US/Salvador Transnational Relations

*Comadre* counternarratives push against an assumed disbelief of marginalized subjects when they share their experiences with violent repression. Doña Tere shares how audiences in the US commonly respond to her:

'How can you [Doña Tere] just be sitting here talking normally about all these tortures if they really happened?' It's as if they think that I imagined it all. There have been plenty of people who have heard my story and then questioned it. After I talk, they stay after and then come up to me. They always tell me that it is only the communists that administer this kind of torture. That makes me feel bad because I'm not making this up. (Tula, 1994b, p. 175)

This response is common when people of color share their experiences with racism in the US. Disbelief is an expression of whiteness, "a process of universalizing, through which white identity is inaugurated as the standard for racializing matrices—all racialized locations are compared to white identity" (Carillo Rowe & Molhotra, 2006, p. 168). In addition to whiteness, responses expressing disbelief to *comadres* are rooted in neocolonial power differentials where an "American/democratic" experience is centralized. To extend an explanation of disbelief through language, a *comadre* addresses how citizens of the United States "don't believe things until they see them" (Tula, 1994b, p. 174). The need to see to believe is also a cultural construction, or obsession, and perhaps also partially influenced by media representations in United States culture (see Valdivia, 2008). Nonetheless, a *comadre* responds to this cultural obsession, as Doña Tere states:

I'm not going to take off my clothes in public and say, 'Look, here are the scars from my wounds where I was tortured.' I'm not going to hold up a piece of x-ray film and say, 'Here is evidence of how my spinal chord was injured during my torture.' I'm not telling my story because I want pity. I don't want people to say, 'Pobrecita, poor thing.' We don't want people to feel sorry for us. (Tula, 1994b, p. 176)

To assume that a *comadre* wants to garner pity is to infantilize her by not taking her experiences seriously. Additionally, assuming that victims of torture would not have difficulty showing their scarred bodies is to revictimize them because their bodies do not hold the symbolic power that their counternarratives do. A *comadre* has already

bared her body by conveying detailed experiences about torture. To take *comadre* subjects seriously would be to heed their call for social justice and global solidarity.

*Comadre* subjects call on U.S. audiences' sense of duty and responsibility to family, country, and democracy: "When there are macabre crimes and murders committed" in their country, many citizens use their voices to demand justice, "I've seen it on television here. When someone commits a bloody crime like a rape or a murder, they can be sentenced to die in the electric chair. And yet when these same kinds of savage crimes are committed in El Salvador, no one demands justice" (Tula, 1994b, p. 175). She indicates that when people are believed, then great solidarity can be created: "One of the positive aspects of being in the United States is that I have seen all the love and support that exists here for the Salvadoran people" (Tula, 1994b, p. 173), suggesting to U.S. citizens that solidarity can transform the unjust social and neo-imperialist conditions that foster fear and disbelief of transnational subjects. She continues, "I guess we keep talking because we realize that this is something that the U.S. public needs to know. They have to hear people who are from what is called the 'Third World' talk about the kinds of human rights abuses we suffer" (Tula, 1994a, p. 176). A direct call to action is evident in Doña Tere's words that challenge and deconstruct an individualist model of democracy, while simultaneously reflecting a transnational feminist practice: "In El Salvador, we don't run around calling ourselves feminists, but we are feminists because we are fighting for our rights. The difference for us in El Salvador is that our struggle as women comes together with our struggle for change in El Salvador" (Tula, 1994b, p. 125). Recounting women's activism in this way redefines "relational violence" within the context of militaristic and genocidal rape as well as within familial structures, thereby exposing the problematic impacts of the interaction between global, national, and local asymmetrical power relations.

### ***Comadrisimo* as a Discursive and Material Transnational Feminist Lens**

Women do share a common history. We are all different colors, but I think that we share some common sentiments and our blood is all the same color. We all have red blood, not yellow or orange. I think the suffering that women have gone through everywhere helps to build international solidarity among us (Tula, 1994b, p. 125).

In an effort to direct Western feminist scholarship away from representing women of the "third world" as merely oppressed objects, Mohanty (2003) emphasized the importance of making "the operations of discursive power visible, to draw attention to what was left out of feminist theorizing, namely, the material complexity, reality, and agency of Third World women's bodies and lives" (p. 230). *Comadrisimo* answers her call.

*Comadrisimo* offers much to the current and future theorizing of transnational feminist theory in communication studies, as well as critical Latina/o Communication Studies, specifically. *Comadrisimo* highlights the historical and contemporary complex

relationships between the discursive and material, and between victimhood, voice, and agency. In so doing, *comadrisimo* complicates our understandings of the agency enacted by women in Latin American postcolonial regions by revealing the relationships between how women are victims of transnational violence, as well as agents and allies who enact material and discursive counterhegemonic agency.

When understood within the underlying principles rooted in the ideals of the *compadrazco* system, coupled with a tumultuous political climate, *comadrisimo* highlights a *comadre* subjectivity with profound implications for transnational feminist communication theory. First, the *comadre* subjectivity is constituted and constructed from the relationships among the discursive and material constraints produced by transnational communication systems and deployed on the bodies of women through different forms of relational violence. Second, the *comadre* subjectivity resists common assumptions of Latin American women's victimhood, voice, and agency by shifting the focus away from a biologically deterministic motherhood framing. Third, the counternarratives of the *comadre* subject interrogate and challenge a myopic Western model of hegemonic democracy, which is founded in the ideals of individuals and not relational subjects, and therefore their enactment of agency and allied behavior is resistive and transformative (see Sowards, 2010).

Subsequently, *comadre* subjects invoke a particular ethos that responds to an oppressive structure of neo-imperialist capitalism and hegemonic democracy, gesturing toward a transnational feminism (see Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Kennedy, 2005). Ultimately, *comadrisimo* intervenes in hegemonic feminism and extends transnational feminist theory by confronting and rejecting a Westernized discursive framing of "feminist" and "feminism" and creates a framework that reveals how Latin American women activists respond to overlapping systems of oppression. In so doing, *comadrisimo* identifies how transnational coalitions are formed in response to transnational hegemonic structures.

Although Tula's testimonio is situated in transnational relations of the 1970s and 1980s, these relations continue to operate today, as evidenced in globalization practices throughout Latin America that have arguably been the impetus for an increase of Central American youth fleeing sociopolitical circumstances to cross the border—circumstances that have been created by transnational hegemonic relations. For instance, according to the World Bank, the 2008 global financial crisis influenced higher unemployment rates as well as a rise in food and energy prices in El Salvador. Although the poverty rate in 2013 decreased to 28.9% from 34.5% in 2012, contemporary crime and violence have impacted social and economic growth (see <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/elsalvador/overview>). In response to historical and current socioeconomic conditions, CO-MADRES has created current projects that support adults and children. However, CO-MADRES is not the only Latin American women's organization that continues to respond to historical and contemporary transnational hegemony.

*Comadrisimo* also sets the analytical groundwork to better theorize the enactments of Indigenous Latin American women's counterhegemonic agency that are

revealed in testimonios attributed to Rigoberta Menchú Tum (1984, 2000), Elvia Alvarado (1987), and Domitila Barrios De Chungara (1978, 1999)—women whose activism is and was strongly influenced by Catholicism. Subsequently, *comadrismo* can lead to more nuanced theorizing of contemporary enactments of discursive and material counterhegemonic agency enacted by women throughout Latin America who are supported by human rights organizations such as the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation (see, <http://frmt.org/en/>), Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (see <http://www.madres.org/navegar/nav.php>), and CLADEM [see, <http://www.cladem.org/>], to name a few. The challenge for feminist researchers, however, is to mindfully attend to how women *supported* by these organizations communicate with one another, which entails listening carefully to their current testimonios of struggle and resistance, and of survival and solidarity with other *comadre* subjects. I emphasize the importance of speaking with the women *supported* by these organizations because to speak only to the women who occupy positions of privilege in these organizations will run the risk of perpetuating hegemonic feminism that Grewal and Kaplan caution against. Lastly, *comadrismo* may also be relevant in understanding how women in countries in the Middle East enact counterhegemonic agency, and how their agency is influenced by religious and sociocultural practices that are relevant in disrupting their sociopolitical conditions created by transnational relations.

A *comadre's* discursive and material enactment of agency reflects a transnational feminism that Shome (2006) speaks of, as she also echoes Gayatri Spivak and Grewal and Kaplan,

the category 'woman of color' in which so much of critical race and 'multicultural' feminism has invested its energy becomes somewhat meaningless unless we are willing to stretch and situate it across the macro- and microcultural, historical, spatial, temporal, and economic relations that connect and disconnect (in unequal ways) the symbolic, emotional, psychic, and material lives of women and men in diverse parts of the world. (p. 257)

*Comadres* as transnational subjects of feminism take, "bourgeois feminists" across the world to task for merely "roaring like lions." As Doña Tere further states, "it isn't enough to have women in power, we have to change the whole system—in El Salvador, the United States, and Europe. If we don't, then we could die and another generation of feminists would be born with more ideas, but we would all continue to be repressed" (Tula, 1994b, p. 126). Subsequently, *comadrismo* reveals how political subjects' counternarratives decolonize a Westernized construct of a model of democracy that holds to the ideals of individuals consistent with neoliberalism. As transnational feminist scholars in the communication discipline, we are then tasked to theorize how transnational communication systems constitute, constrain, and influence the counternarratives produced by transnational subjectivities of feminism without invoking our own privileged academic framing that discursively perpetuates what it means to be a "first-world woman."

## Notes

- 1 Often followed by the following description in Spanish and English: "Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos Políticos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados de El Salvador "Monseñor Romero") [The Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador "Monseñor Romero"].
- 2 There was an error in Stephen's documentation. Stephen indicates that the CO-MADRES received the John F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. In fact they received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award.
- 3 Throughout this essay, I will not italicize Spanish, purposefully. In the context of Latin America, these terms are part of everyday speech, and therefore, would not be italicized. The exceptions are with the theoretical concepts of *comadre* and *comadrisimo*. Additionally, the literal translation of testimonio is "testimony" and connotes "bearing truthful witness" (see Beverley, 2004). In communication studies, testimonios have also been framed as a compilation of vernacular voices that are expressed through a testimonialista with the purpose of exiting the smaller community and circulating to a larger international community to incite action (see Scholz, 2011). Furthermore, testimonios have been theorized and amply discussed by academics in Literature, Latin American studies, Anthropology, Women's Studies, as well as Communication studies (see e.g., *Latin American Perspectives*, edited by Chilcote, 1991a, 1991b; Beverley, 2004; Gugelberger, 1996; Maier & Dulfano, 2004; *Human Rights Review*, edited by Cushman, 1999; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Detwiler & Breckenridge, 2012; Valdivia, 2000; Avant-Mier & Hasian, 2008). These discussions were largely incited by academic disagreements regarding authorship, authority and validity, and truth assertions raised about the testimonio given by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú Tum (1984). These controversies are not the focus of this essay.
- 4 "Comadre" translates literally as "godmother." However, the meaning of "godmother" is quite complex, which will be further explained in this section of the essay.
- 5 The United States signed the General Treaty of Peace and Amity twice, once in 1907 and again in 1923. The treaty stipulated that the signing governments would not recognize any government that came to power through illegal means. The US, however, had violated the treaty several times because of its own anticommunist policy. Therefore, despite that El Salvador had been governed by different dictatorships between 1930 and 1980, the United States still offered to curtail communism, which was considered a more pressing issue in accordance with foreign policy. See e.g., Anderson, "El Salvador: Influence in Trouble"; Percy, *The History of Central America*.
- 6 As a point of clarification, in Latin America, "Americans" are actually referred to as "norteamericanos" [north americans] or even "estadounidenses" [unitedstatesians]. In the Spanish version of the testimonio, she uses the term "norteamericanos."
- 7 She is referring to George H. W. Bush.
- 8 Many women who were political prisoners were able to keep their children with them in prison.

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