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Letters to the President: participation beyond the public sphere in Argentina, 1989–1999

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ABSTRACT
President Carlos Menem received thousands of letters from citizens during his two consecutive administrations (1989–1999). Most often Peronist and working class, they wrote to him to seek financial or material aid, praise, criticize, advise, communicate political opinions and invite correspondence. They injected their letters with intimate details of everyday life, their understandings of democracy, and their sense of the successes and failures of the state at meeting those criteria and forging a democratic identity for the Republic. This article provides contextualized readings of a sample of those letters in an effort to elucidate why their writers looked beyond the public sphere to express themselves, and chose the letter to the president as method. It argues that discursive participation in the public sphere remained elite-dominated, and mass mobilization did not provide the individualized results or political bonds that the letter writers sought. Furthermore, as an activity that Juan Perón had actively encouraged, writing to the president appeared an object lesson in good Peronist citizenship. The “mythical basis of the legitimacy” of Perón and his version of Justicialism had been his “direct contact with the people” (Plotkin). The letters reveal how citizens in the 1990s sought to reconstitute this imagined proximity with a Peronist president in a newly democratic context.

In early July 1994, Ana María, a young mother from the agricultural city of Tres Arroyos, Buenos Aires Province, sent a carefully crafted handwritten note to President Menem. She declared in her letter a fervent appreciation for his magnanimity to the nation, informing him that she and her offspring gave thanks to God “que sea usted [sic] el administrador de los bienes Argentinos.” The Peronist head of state appeared in her declaration as a Christ-like figure, not only divinely sent but also a local emissary of deific messages; “Dr. Menem”, she addressed him deferentially, “leemos y escuchamos que en determinados momentos, Usted expresa palabras de Dios.” A general election was forthcoming in May 1995 and Menem had succeeded in negotiating as a component of the Pacto de Olivos, signed on 17 November 1993, a reform to the constitution enabling him to run for a further term of office. Ana María concluded her correspondence by praying for the wellbeing of Menem and asking, as the elections neared, that God would grant him longevity of office. The adoring citizen staged

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an imaginative encounter with the president through the most intimate form of communication available to her: she offered to Menem her thoughts on Argentina and his role within it through the labours of apparently private, and probably unrequited, epistolary correspondence.

Accompanied by a pile of less reverential letters, such expressions of devout exaltation from grateful citizens landed in the presidential in-tray, or at least crossed the desk of a junior secretary, almost every day during the decade (1989–1999) in which Menem held office. Citizens wrote more than 10,000 letters to President Menem to seek financial or material succour, praise, criticize, advise, narrate to him their everyday lives, share their political opinions, and invite correspondence. The letters offer detailed accounts of the hardships that ordinary Argentines faced amid the structural reforms of the 1990s, their understandings of Peronism and democracy, and their perceptions of the success or failure of the state, and particularly Menem, at consolidating a democratic identity for the Republic. Men and women, young, old, and from across the social spectrum, sent letters, but a disproportionate number appear to have come from the swelling working class. Their addresses enable us to trace their homes to villas, poor districts of cities including Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Mar del Plata, and small provincial pueblos scattered across the country. In common with earlier decades, Peronist support was particularly high among working-class Argentine citizens compared with the overall population in the 1990s. As Noam Lupu and Susan Stokes note, “what is striking is how little interruption in lower-class support the Peronists suffered, even after Menem's neoliberal turn: in 1997, 1999, and 2003, workers were still more likely to vote Peronist than Radical” (2009, 76–7). This relationship of class to political affiliation is borne out in the letters overall: tacit hints of working-class identity emerge in the visual and material qualities of many of the letters that Menem received, including orthography and handwriting that may indicate low levels of educational attainment, and a majority of letters state or hint at Peronist affiliation. What reasons drove these Argentine citizens to look beyond public spaces in their attempts to be heard? Why did they choose a letter to the president as a method for this voicing? What type of connection did they seek to forge with the president and the state through their communications? The present article addresses these questions through exploring the protean set of political opinions, emotions, grievances, and desires that ordinary Argentines, and particularly Peronist devotees, expressed in their letters to the president amid the political and economic precariousness of the 1990s.

By the 1990s, writing a letter to a political leader figured in the Argentine social imaginary as a method of both Peronist and democratic participation. Argentine historical memory determined its association with the performance of good citizenship under Juan Perón, the popular labour leader turned populist President (1946–55, 1973–74), and his charismatic wife, Eva Perón. Yet by the 1990s, it was also closely cleaved to the post-authoritarian experience. Following the formal transition to democracy in late 1983, plentiful citizens wrote letters to President Raul Alfonsín (1983–89). Such letter writing, the historian Jennifer Adair (2015, 224) explains, constituted “a political practice,” as citizens sought to carve out an active role for themselves in the new democracy. Citizens, in their letters to Alfonsín, “inscribed themselves as part of a new national project” rather than viewing themselves as passive recipients of political change (246). Correspondence sent to Menem reveals overlaps with this agenda. Letter writers in the 1990s appear to have viewed writing to the head of state as a mechanism for sharing in the production of political knowledge, an activity promoted by successive post-authoritarian administrations as a duty of democratic citizenship.
This article understands the letters to Menem, then, as political texts. By “political text,” I mean a written act that gives evidence of citizens opting for voice over silence and updating for the democratic context a discursive practice with Peronist resonance. The self-representations, requests, and ideas articulated in the letters to Menem reveal a cadre of citizens at once attached to Peronism and adept at articulating their opinions and desires through the new vocabulary of democracy pervading public discourse. The letters thus invite us to re-evaluate the dominant narrative of the Argentine 1990s as a decade associated with depoliticization and “empty glamour and gloss,” revealing instead an engaged minority of citizens to personalize, not reject, politics (King 2013, 274). We must avoid, however, confusing their words with influence. Epistolary correspondence enabled citizens to elect voice over exit but this article will suggest that the tangible and affective consequences of this choice, exercised outside the public sphere, often remain ambiguous. One immediate indicator that their effect was lacklustre is an absence of direct response: although an occasional letter is filed in the archive together with a copy of an official reply or a note that a reply had been sent, most citizen letters do not appear to have prompted a response.

Retrospective scholarship on Argentine politics and society in the 1990s has not typically focused on the voices of ordinary citizens. It has tended instead to concentrate on Menem and his flight from the first Peronism, on his neoliberal policy impositions, and on accusations that implicate him in acts of graft and crony capitalism or besmirch him for his scandal-ridden, and publicly reported, “private” life when president. At the same time, because Menem is rarely considered a philosopher-king, the political thought of the Menemist state has been little explored. Literature analysing political ideas derived from the Argentine government in the 1990s focuses almost exclusively on its economic dimensions. These ideas are typically viewed as the brainchild of the Harvard-educated Finance Minister, Domingo Cavallo (1991–96). Beyond the state, scholars interested in contemporary Argentine history typically focus on the public sphere, having scant access to past citizen conversations held out of public earshot. The focus on public sphere deliberation, in part a product of the challenge of accessibility, stimulates a view of the past that is partial both in terms of who it represents and which ideas it transmits. In the case of Menem, we lack understanding of the range of sentiments and opinions that contributed to keeping him in office for 10 years. Catherine Davies observes that “history is made up of the experiences and feelings of individual men and women,” the “vast majority” of which “will never be recorded” (Davies 2002, 532). In focusing on letters that “ordinary” Argentine citizens sent their president, this article thus both broadens the range of voices in the historical record and advances our understanding of the professional longevity of Menem, a controversial political leader.

The article takes a tripartite structure, examining in turn the history and theory, rhetoric and politics of citizen letter writing. The first section draws on historical and theoretical approaches to contextualize the act of letter writing to the president and to further develop the concept of the letter to Menem as a political text. The second section offers a taxonomic study of the principal “subgenres” of letters to Menem: advice, requests, and acclamations. The approach helps to identify the range of relationships with the president that citizens sought. The letter selection for this categorized analysis reflects the most frequently recurring types of letter to Menem, gleaned from surveying hundreds of the letters in the archives. It recognizes variety in the content and motivation of each individual letter, but takes these dominant subgenres as meaningful patterns that help to elucidate the ways in which many citizens imagined their actual and desired relations with the political leadership. The specific
letters that I cite embody a double exemplarity: they represent a wider subset, yet stood out in the course of my investigations, calling through their language or claims for prolonged engagement and attention. Although citizens referred often to contemporary politics, the sense of self-imagining and understandings of citizenship and democracy that emerge in the letters remained fairly stable during the 1990s, after the initial burst of often unalloyed satisfaction expressed upon the first election of Menem. I therefore emphasize parsing social and affective dimensions over closely tracing chronology in the structure of my analysis. The final assessment considers why, in a decade of state-commissioned public opinion polls and (by the end of the decade) increasing citizen-led mass mobilisations, this engaged minority of citizens looked beyond the public sphere to be heard, and imagined the letter to the president as a decorous and, they probably hoped, efficacious form of communication.

Letters to the president as political texts

Menem is not the first or only political leader to have been the recipient of epistolary communications. Letters and letter writing have long been crucial to communications between and within social strata and political communities. They have often fulfilled a political function, having “affirmed the authority of the elite” and offered “a means of expression for more marginal members of society” since ancient times (Earle 1999, 1). Letters sent by citizens privately to one other or to power-holders, or published in newspapers, magazines, or other public discursive spaces have thus played a pivotal role in historical studies in helping to understand the political beliefs and desires of citizens, and to reconstruct their networks of interaction. This attention to the political dimensions of epistolary cultures has included scholarship on Latin America. Work on letter writing in Latin America incorporates a far-stretching geography, from Mexico to Brazil and the Caribbean, and a relatively long chronology, covering at least the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including Gilly and Roux 1989; Wolfe 1994; Caulfield 1999; Bourgois 2003; Green 2003). Scholarly interest in letters written by citizens to political leaders in Argentina, though patchy in its chronological coverage, provides detailed and contextualized analysis (including Plotkin 2002; Elena 2005; Acha 2007; Adair 2015; Guy 2016).

The practice of citizen letter-writing to government officials in Argentina dates to the colonial period when, as literacy levels grew in the late nineteenth-century Argentina, citizens began writing to politicians to solicit favours, deprecate political adversaries, and opine on public life (Elena 2005, 88). Letter writing to the president became firmly established as a popular practice under the first Peronist administration. Perón began to solicit correspondence as a response to his first Plan de Gobierno in 1946 (Guy 2016, 2). In 1951 Perón initiated a bold letter-writing campaign, for which the more limited 1946 campaign set a precedent. Perón received an estimated 42,000 letters between late 1951 and mid-1952 alone (Elena 2005, 88). He actively elicited proposals from citizens for his second Plan Quinquenal (five-year plan), the social and policy agenda that he intended to enact during his second term of office. Under the slogan “Perón quiere saber lo que necesita su pueblo,” the state encouraged citizens to “mail in their requests and comments” (Elena 2005, 82). Just as the populace sought to know Perón, the campaign enticingly intimated, he also sought to understand their desires for the nation. The strategy thus embodied the affective dimensions of populism, promoting the leader as a Father-like protector who was intimately concerned with the views and struggles of his citizens. The campaign offered citizens a form of political participation
distinct from other types: “Rather than casting their votes anonymously or cheering from
the crowd,” Elena notes, “petitioners could convey their thoughts and sentiments to the
Conductor and his agencies on personal, even intimate terms” (Elena 2005, 89). It offered
them “an intimate mode of political participation within an increasingly restrictive order,”
one that citizens vigorously took up (Elena 2005, 81). The campaign thus established citizen
letter-writing to the president as an object lesson in good Peronist citizenship.15

Intellectuals and other citizens sent thousands of petitions to Argentine military leaders
and to political and religious authorities elsewhere, decrying state murders and abuses of
human rights during the years of military authoritarianism between 1976 and 1983 (“Una
muestra conmovedora de gran valor documental e histórico” 2015). But letter writing began
to burgeon again when democracy officially returned in 1983, President Alfonsín receiving
letters from lifelong and new Radicals and from staunch Peronists alike (Adair 2015, 247).
Adair registers a shift in the letters that Alfonsín received from residents of the industrial
suburbs of Buenos Aires from a spirit of hope in the restorative capacities of the new republic
towards a disenchantment stemming in part from “a growing awareness of new limits on
the state” (Adair 2015, 236–7). The letter writers did not hold back: their correspondence
increasingly lamented perceiving failures of the newly democratic government to fulfil the
Alfonsinist promise to feed, cure, and educate.

Beyond these past models and possible prior first-hand experiences of political letter
writing, citizens in Menemist Argentina could also draw on contemporary exemples.
Politicians and intellectuals continued the tradition of publishing polemics in the form of
open letters. Menem published one in February 1998 in which he indicated that provided
“la gente esté de acuerdo” he would contemplate seeking a third term of office (“De lo
institucional a lo partidario” 1998). Letters to the editor were permanent fixtures in the most
widely read newspapers, including Clarín and La nación. Even when the content suggested
careful editorial selection, their presence in newsprint framed the letter as a means for citi-
zens to voice political opinion and contribute to the public deliberation that putatively
formed the lifeblood of the new democracy. A letter written for publication is clearly written
with political content may have contributed to shaping perceptions of the letter as a valuable
form of political communication.

Historical and contemporary models evidently gave letters a privileged position in the
1990s’ social imaginary as a familiar form of intimate citizen engagement with national
political life, a status that had consolidated during the mid-century Peronist letter-writing
campaigns. Long-ranging quantitative research would be required to determine how con-
sistent Peronist affiliation among citizen correspondents was over the second half of the
twentieth century. It is nonetheless valuable to note that scholarship on letters to Alfonsín
does not note an overwhelmingly partisan majority among the letter writers, finding “political
supporters and opponents alike” to write to him, whereas my content analysis suggests that
Justicialists penned the lion’s share of letters to Menem (Adair 2015, 226). This distinction
may indicate that Peronist supporters were more inclined than other citizens to write letters
to the political leadership. Regardless of which party was in office, they may have viewed
this mechanism of bond creation, set in motion by Perón, as a mode of active participation
accessible to every literate citizen.

Citizens who wrote to Menem appear to have internalized historical precedents in which
a letter appeared as a socially legitimate form of political expression. The following section
illuminates how, despite variation in theme and content, their letters to Menem comprised, moreover, a specific type of political text. The anthropologist and political scientist J.C. Scott draws a distinction in his discussion of citizen discourses between the “public transcript” and the “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990, 2). He understands the two to occupy different spaces: “If subordinate discourse in the presence of the powerful is a public transcript,” he argues, “the term ‘hidden transcript’ can be used to characterize discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by power-holders” (Scott 1990, 4). Scott suggests that the “circumspect behaviour” of the public transcript, which often requires its producers to dissimulate their true beliefs and sentiments before the powerful, may “have a strategic dimension; this person to whom we misrepresent ourselves may be able to harm or help us in some way.” Thus, Scott contends, “With rare, but significant exceptions, the public performance of the subordinate will out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful” (Scott 1990, 2).

The empirical realities of the letters sent to Menem complicate this theoretically tidy binary. Although they constituted interventions off the public stage, their citizen composers wrote their “lines” to be “delivered” directly to the ultimate national power-holder, the head of state. I propose in this article that we understand the letters that Menem received to constitute, then, a third variety of transcript: the intimate transcript. This transcript boldly offers to writer and receiver a safer space of critique than public discursive spaces. It abjures, even as it criticizes, public damage to the powerful individual to whom it is addressed. The intimate transcript thus at once confounds the subordination of its producer through maintaining his/her complaints “behind closed doors,” and sets out to intervene in the status quo by making power-holders their (apparently exclusive) audience. The citizen producer of the intimate transcript has at least a latent awareness of the role of public image management in maintaining political authority. His/her ambition, moreover, is not to dent the public reputation of the powerful. In Menem-era Argentina, many citizens perceived this lack of rabble-rousing to be crucial; despite myriad publicly expressed concerns about Menem as corrupt and dishonest, citizens feared that Argentine democracy might be too fledgling and wispy to withstand his departure, with no robust successor or political opposition in place.16

In this environment, I suggest, the intimate transcript of the letter to the president could function as a safety valve, allowing for the full gamut of political expression—from a joyful sense of intimate bondedness to political scepticism or disenchantment—in the controlled environment of non-public discourse.

**A taxonomy of letters: requests, invectives and acclamations**

When Menem became president in July 1989, the Partido Justicialista (PJ) was elated, though still fragmented, after the shock and embarrassment of losing the elections of 1983 to the Unión Civil Radical (UCR). The Radical president, Alfonsín, had initially attracted robust praise from the international community for his human rights efforts and the relatively smooth transition realized under his leadership but by the end of the decade the full extent of economic distress could no longer be ignored. Spiralling recession, inflation, and international indebtedness, partly an inheritance from the preceding military regime, pushed Alfonsín to negotiate a handover to Menem, the PJ leader, five months ahead of schedule. Despite the victory, Menem’s policies quickly angered, and further divided, the PJ. Public commentators increasingly submitted the president to opprobrium as the 1990s progressed. Even the
Peronist intelligentsia quickly became leery of his leadership, despite having supported the gregarious politician in his initial candidacy. Many of them came to deem Menemist Justicialism “a cynical electoral machine,” as Menem, first covertly and then with public gusto, “engineered the party’s embrace” of a neoliberal economic policy that grew the wealth gap and eventually increased inflation (Karush and Chamosa 2010, 1).

Peronist traditionalists had reason to feel disappointed. An antagonistic breach separated Menenist policy-making from the ideological underpinnings of the first Peronism. When the popular founder of the PJ, Juan Perón, became president in 1946, he had argued that import-substitution would pave the path towards national self-sufficiency. His views softened by his second presidential tenure in the 1970s but Perón still advocated economic statism and wealth redistribution. Menem won the 1989 election on the Justicialist ticket but in stark divergence from this preced ing economic vision determined from the outset that Argentina, in its bid for “una verdadera revolución de la producción,” would not make “diferencia alguna entre el capital nacional y el capital extranjero.” Argentina would seek instead to “facilitar las inversiones, alentar la producción industrial y mejorar la prestación de servicios” (Menem and Duhalde 1989). To fulfil these ambitions, Menem privatized 90% of all state enterprises before 1995, with many handed to foreign investors (International Monetary Fund 1998). His rhetorical and policy transformations also marked a sea change from the fiscal policy of the preceding Radical administration, which had implemented austerity measures and privatized some state enterprises but had also pursued efforts at national industrial renovation and internal growth (Rivarola Puntigliano and Briceño-Ruiz 2013, 248).

On 16 March 1991, in a speech that drew more than a thousand union leaders, politicians, and civil servants to the Cervantes Theatre in Buenos Aires, and attracted broad media coverage, Menem tackled the accusations emerging from within the party that he had disavowed Peronist values and detached himself and his government from the PJ. Although confirming his already evident disinterest in the party forming an adulating court around him, Menem also emphasized that he did not want “un Peronismo de rodillas” that felt weakened by his government or thought of it “como ajena” (Menem 1991). The message failed to persuade many Peronist and other public censurers, who continued to brush off his stated commitment to the party as empty politicking. In contrast to this public excoriation, however, Menem received plentiful letters from citizens throughout the 1990s in which they described a sense of bondedness with him, often articulating their common Peronist affiliation as the basis for this felt proximity.

Many letters gesture towards the accomplishment of Menem as a political communicator who spoke easily and charismatically to his audience and understood the persuasive affordances of multimedia resources (on his communications style see Sarlo 1994, 33; Guano 2002). Citizens expressed their gratitude for the munificent benefit that they perceived Menem, as a Peronist leader, to have brought upon the nation and their solidarity with the project of growth and renewal that they believed him to be directing. Guillermo, a worker in a food concession from Villa Constitución in Santa Fe explained in a telegram in October 1993 that he had become Peronist, “por la admiración que tenía y tengo por su persona.” Guillermo declared his affection for Menem to be “similar al amor de mi padre que lamentablemente no lo tengo.” In the emotional world of Guillermo, Menem reprised the traditional Peronist role as ultimate national father figure, substituting for the deceased biological father with political paternalism. The image of Menem as the natural successor to Perón had also drawn Carlos Antonio, from Torres, Buenos Aires, to him. Carlos Antonio wrote in June 1992
to offer his services as a bodyguard, having noticed “la vez pasada en ‘Montes de Oca’ el descuido de él mismo.” He informed Menem that he was his “más fiel seguidor y admirador desde que lo veía en el paleo de la casa rosada acompañando a la presidenta Isabel Perón en alguno de sus discursos.” Carlos Antonio sought to protect the president because “desde entonces, me sentí su mejor amigo desde el anonimato.” He stated explicitly the populist sentiment that implicitly threaded together many citizen correspondences: anonymity from the president and a feeling of intimate emotional proximity with him were wholly compatible phenomena. These citizens made no attempt to square Menemist policy-making with the values of Perón, but instead invoked authority and charisma as binding Menem to Peronist history, and they to Menem. Through the figure of Menem, these working-class letter writers seemed to sense, the nation might return to a nostalgically constructed golden age of Peronist citizen–state relations.

Constructing a classificatory framework for the letters that Menem received enables us to further understand the variety of relationships that citizens either sought to construct with the president or imagined that they already had with him. Despite the diverse motivations for writing to the president, the most frequent kinds of letters that Menem received were requests, invectives, and acclamations. These categories do not comprise classifications of subgenre in a literary sense, but varieties of subtext for correspondence with the president. Many letters possess an amalgam of characteristics drawn from each of these categories (and others), a slipperiness that makes clear the multi-dimensionality of the relationships that individual citizens perceived or attempted to construct between themselves and the head of state. It keeps us alert, furthermore, to the limitations of intellectual methodologies for reading documents whose writers did not intend them to be submitted to retrospective eyes or hermeneutic probing. Taking subgenre as an approach nonetheless helps to identify the citizen–state relations of which citizens imagined themselves to be part, and the motivations behind their epistolary acts.

I. Requests

Self-classifying Justicialists sometimes wrote only to acclaim Menem as heir to the authority and emotional legacy of Perón. More often, however, they wrote to make requests, and framed Peronist identity principally in the language of legitimization: it licensed them to contact the head of state; was reason for Menem to take their petitions seriously; and ought, they often suggested, to spur him to address them urgently. The items and experiences that petitioners requested varied extremely but reveal rife poverty, with scant access to healthcare, housing, and education. Citizens made appeals for financial assistance to help pay for food, rent, public transportation, or healthcare; for employment; for interventions in court cases; for pensions; and for donations of clothing, equipment for schools, and miscellaneous items for personal usage or enjoyment (requests include a truck, a sewing machine, a motorbike, rugby kit, and a family trip to Patagonia on an army airplane). Many letter writers requested to speak to the president about “un tema personal,” explain their ‘situación personal” or “problema personal,” offer policy suggestions face-to-face, “saludar al P.M.,” or “conversar personalmente” with him. These citizens, seeking direct interaction, sought to instrumentalize the partisan-based attachment that they claimed to feel for a variety of personal and political ends, appropriating in their requests the language of provision, rights, and state–citizen proximity that Menem used in his public discourse. They thus replaced the
self-portrayal as “above all apolitical citizens without an agenda” that laced letters to Alfonsín with expressions of a partisanship that came with a kind of quid pro quo (Adair 2015, 226). It demanded not only their faithfulness to Menem at the polls, but also his loyalty and provision to them, as fellow Peronists, in the intervening months and years between elections.

A letter that Oscar Antonio from Río Cuarto, Córdoba, sent Menem in September 1994 typifies this dynamic. Oscar Antonio was unemployed when he wrote the letter, in common with a sharply increasing demographic. The structural reforms of the 1990s led unemployment in Argentina to rise from 7.3 to 14.3%, compared with 4.5% for much of the 1980s (Pou 2000). Married with two children, Oscar Antonio explained that he had suffered discrimination at his prior place of employment for being Peronist. He requested a loan with which to purchase a truck to help him pick up work, not only as a struggling citizen but, moreover, as a Peronist who deserved special recompense for the damage that his loyalty to the party had apparently caused him. Another letter writer, Carina, also evoked her Peronist affiliation in her request. In November 1993 Carina wrote to Menem from Villa Allende, Provincia de Córdoba to solicit help in buying her father a motorcycle on which to travel to his new job each day. No public transport was available to take him, Carina explained, and without the vehicle he would be forced to reject the offer of employment. Carina first drew on an emotive arsenal—the loyalty of her father to the Peronist party, the depression that blighted him, her role as the loving and dutiful daughter (thus evoking the Peronist ideal of the family unit as the building-block of the state), and her belief that Menem was not only their leader but primarily their dear friend—before presenting her precise need. “Yo como hija, Usted lo entenderá,” Carina began, “quiero ver feliz a mi padre y por ello le solicito ayuda a Usted [...] necesito que me preste (o regale si Usted quiere) la cantidad de 15,000.” Carina had sent the request, she added, knowing that “para Usted esa cantidad no es nada, pero para nosotros es muchísimo.” She emphasized the gulf that she perceived between their world, depression-tinged and riddled with imminent unemployment, and that of the president, for whom money was evidently—the images of his glitzy life that filled the popular press indicated—of little concern. Carina concluded her correspondence by thanking Menem because, she warningly affirmed, “estoy segura de que no me va a defraudar.”

Her words appear not to have been chosen at random. The principal electoral slogan of the 1989 Menem campaign was “Síganme. No los voy a defraudar.” The catchphrase was a brazen attempt to differentiate Menem from Alfonsín, who had met domestic derision by the late 1980s for failing to stabilize the economy. Carina now brought the words of Menem to redound on him in remarkably direct form. She ended the letter on a note that fused her personal disappointment with the electoral promises of the party, and suggested that failure to meet her request—that of a loyal Peronist—would not only cause familial distress but also cheat her father of the democratic right to work that the Justicialist state had pledged to its citizens. Carina, like myriad letter writers who engaged more subtle discursive strategies, drew on the representation of both Peronism and post-authoritarian democracy that official discourse promulgated. Michel de Certeau asserts that the “presence and circulation of a representation […] tells us nothing about what it is for its users” (de Certeau 2011, xiii). If we want to assess this meaning we must analyze “its manipulation” by its “secondary producer”—a “user who is not its maker” (de Certeau 2011, xiii). Carina, like many of her fellow letter writers, here treated state representations dynamically as she became their secondary producer, reproducing state discourse in ways that spoke more personally, and more usefully,
to her individual wants and needs. The pledge not to “defraudar” became for her the promise of securing the means for her father to pursue self-advancement.

Letter writers evoked other points of perceived common identity with the president, beyond Peronism alone. Ethnic and regional identity figured strongly in these claims. Menem was of Syrian decent, leading dozens of writers to legitimize their requests through emphasizing a shared Arab heritage. One citizen wrote from San Fernando, Buenos Aires province, on 30 July 1994 to ask for help having suffered a work-induced illness, for which, the letter writer claimed, he had been dismissed as unfit for work. “Soy hijo de Árabes,” he wrote, “por eso confío [sic] en Ud. es por ese motivo que le escribo ahora.”25 Others traced a provincial connection, drawing upon common roots in La Rioja. In an effort to have their personal requests prioritized, these Riojans employed the rhetoric of provincial origins that Menem consistently emphasized as he attempted to counter nationalistic suspicions that his Middle Eastern descent falsified his claims to argentinidad (including Menem and Pavón Pereyra 1989). In common with the secondary producers of state discourse who evoked Peronist bonds, they viewed identificatory connections that they experienced as more proximate than the imagined community of citizenship alone as a potentially expedient route to having met their democratic rights—and a few other wants besides.

One group of letter writers strove to form a particular type of bond with the president. They sought a formally recognized relationship beyond that of subject or citizen. They hoped that Menem would afford them or their children the status of ahijado presidencial.26 In October 1907 the conservative president José Figueroa Alcorta had become the first Argentine president to pronounce a young citizen, the son of Enrique Brost and Apolonia Holmann, his “godchild.” The parents of the boy were Russian immigrants, living in Coronel Pringles, Buenos Aires Province. They sought to import the practice of state guardianship established under the tsar, whereby the state would protect the seventh male child born to the same parents (Balmaceda 2012). The practice of presidential patronage continued in Argentina on a de facto basis until 1974, when Isabel Perón converted the practice into law. Ley 20. 853 provided that the seventh son or daughter of the same sex of a husband and wife could be named ahijado/a presidencial. The child earned not only this entitlement but also the right to a grant for primary, secondary and university or vocational education in an approved state institution (Balmaceda 2012). This conversion to de jure status of the formerly de facto practice of presidential padrinazgo legally concretized the Peronist ideal of the nation as family, symbolically embodying the idea that the Peronist state left no child behind.

The law also constituted a device for social conditioning, making imperative the outward signs of Catholic faith. Baptism was a requirement of eligibility for padrinazgo. Parents also had to prove that each of the six older siblings of the same sex had been alive at the time of the baptism. This condition continued to be enforced in the 1990s, when parents continued to write to Menem to ask for padrinazgo. The padrinazgo programme director sent a note to the presidential office on 14 October 1994 concerning one family whose record was found to contain “una contradicción, ya que a pesar de que la familia practica la religión Católica, ninguno de sus hijos han sido bautizados.”27 He noted that he had taken the appropriate action, demanding a report “a la brevedad posible por qué motivos no fueron bautizados los niños.”28 Alberto Adolfo and Rosa Elena had their request of padrinazgo presidencial for their son Rodrigo rejected in September 1994 because of the premature
death of an older child. Like dozens of other anxious parents, the state formulaically informed them that “acuerdo al informe policial obrante en nuestro poder, los siete hijos deben estar todos vivos a la fecha de bautismo del séptimo.”29 The local police bureau having provided evidence to the contrary, their youngest offspring was denied padrinazgo.

Alongside the many citizens who wrote directly to the president to request padrinazgo for their children, numerous others hoped to expedite their requests for financial assistance or an audience with the president through the claim of already being ahijado/a. This correspondence frequently failed to garner the warm, familial reply that their letters seemed to anticipate, meeting instead polite yet formal rebuff. Damián wrote to Menem in early October 1996 from Villa Perito Moreno, the villa (slum) where he lived, because he wanted to meet the president, his padrino, in person.30 Sergio Adrián Grillo, the presidential secretary, replied to him almost a month later. He apologized that “a pesar de sus mejores deseos, al Primer Magistrado no le será posible acceder a lo solicitado, en virtud de encontrarse abocado a la consideración de múltiples asuntos del gobierno.”31 Damián thus had his request rejected through a bureaucratic mediation that cut through any sense of intimate bond between president and ahijado. Julián Alberto, from Córdoba, had attained the status of ahijado under the military presidency of General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse (1971–73). The Cordoban wrote directly to Menem three times between 1992 and 1995 to ask for help in securing work in the small municipality of Villa Cura Brochero and, in the last of the letters, also to request employment benefits. In each case Julián Alberto used the attachment he imagined his status as ahijado to afford him as a legitimizing device for making direct contact with the president. Unfortunately for Julián Alberto, his “godfather” did not share this sense of proximate connection. He too received only protocolic replies from the Office of the President stating that his requests had been forwarded to the Dirección General del Departamento de Trabajo de Córdoba.32 Julián Alberto thus met the reality that the intimate bond apparently forged through padrinazgo was that in name alone, and he just another citizen whose correspondence would receive the same treatment as every other that the bureaucratic state processed each day.

Identity politics did not seem to any of these citizens—Peronists, Riojans, Arabs, or (hopeful) presidential godchildren—to be incompatible with democracy. It instead appeared to them as a way to access some of its apparent, if elusive, promises. Menem modelled himself as the new caudillo, Facundo Quiroga-reincarnate, and the message seemed to work (on this strategy see Goebel 2011, 211–12). Citizens, perhaps drawing on this self-portrayal as inheritor of the charismatic and clientelistic leader from La Rioja, sought to engage in self-interested relations of exchange with Menem, even as they acknowledged him as democratic head of state. Electoral results provide no reason to believe that the claims in the letters of sensed solidarity with the president were inauthentic; Menem won almost half the votes in the presidential elections of May 1995, a victory that could only partly be chalked up to the weakness of the Radicals and the newness of the rival Frente por un País Solidario (Frepaso) coalition.33 Yet, letter writers clearly also sought to harness their partisan and other sensed connections for self-serving ends. The recurrence of this characteristic hints at a new kind of Peronist citizen, at once loyal yet demanding. This citizen perhaps sensed a lack of viable alternative and remained dashed by the Peronist demise of the 1980s, but was tentatively willing to give the party another chance, albeit on reset terms.
II. Invectives

Letters of request tended to cushion their supplications with praise for the president or to frame his shortfalls as oversights based on a knowledge deficit that the letters aimed to correct. They stopped short of intimating state negligence or intentional lack of care. In another category of letter, the invective, citizens proved less reserved. These letter writers unambiguously articulated a perception that the injustices and privations that they faced were the product of a failure of the Peronist administration to intervene and assist. Where Carina had portrayed Menemist rhetoric as almost a lie, these writers gave no such quarter.

Menem had given poor citizens reason to believe that he could solve their financial and social adversities in his 1989 election campaign. He had engaged an emotive rhetoric to promise redistribution, employment for everyone, and high salaries, employing a vocabulary that “belonged to the ideological tradition of his audience: work, respect, dignity, wellbeing, justice” (Sarlo 1994, 35). By the mid-1990s, these promises were failing to materialize. Between 1991 and 1997, the Argentine economy grew 6.1% annually, the highest rate in the region. Yet this growth masked a more worrisome underbelly. Having committed to the convertibility plan, the government was inflexible and poorly equipped to deal with outside shocks. In 1995, when Mexico was forced to devalue its peso, the Argentine economy shrank by 4% as investors left the region and several banks collapsed. Despite some recovery, citizens continued to feel the pinch. Fixing the peso to the dollar also lowered the cost of imports, producing a flight of dollars from the country. This exit produced a decline in industrial infrastructure and employment opportunities in Argentina, a loss felt most powerfully by its poorer citizens. The complaints that Menem received in a steady stream throughout the 1990s, and particularly the later years of the decade, tell a story of citizens losing faith in his words as they found their lived realities consistently to attenuate the hopes that he had helped to inspire in them.

Plentiful letters referred with resentment and perplexity to missing pension payments amid the partial pension privatization scheme that Menem introduced in the early 1990s (Madrid 2003). Menem enacted the reforms in a bid to stem foreign capital flows and to alleviate the mounting financial difficulties facing the national social security system. To many citizens, subject to the bureaucratic upheaval and financial consequences associated with its establishment, this privatization did not appear as any such salve (Madrid 2003, 136). In July 1994 Francisco wrote from Córdoba, as he and his wife contemplated imminent vagrancy. Explaining that the Ente Provisional Delegación Córdoba (the regional administrative office) had failed to process his pension, Francisco detailed the destitution in which they now found themselves: “como Ud. podrá imaginar mi situación actual es bastante desesperante ya que al no tener entrada alguna, tuvimos que vender todos los Muebles, quedándonos solamente con la cama y dos sillas.” Making matters worse, he wrote, “ya la Carnicería, el Almacén, la Verdulería no me dan más fiado porque creen que yo les estoy mintiendo.” If his pension were not made available to him soon, Francisco continued, he and his wife would be forced onto the street. It was not only the immediate hardship of the situation that distressed Francisco, but also the longer-term injustice that his current penury represented. He had contributed for four decades to the state pension fund only now to receive “como pago este sufrimiento, esta amargura.”35 His historical faith in the national institution, which Perón
had rapidly expanded to great popular support, had promised to secure his future. Now, under the new generation of Peronist leadership, it seemed to offer only abandonment.

Francisco apportioned blame for his experience of misery to a government that he perceived to have failed to comply with its duty and promise of care. The disbelief of the local shop-owners was not, then, unreasonable, his letter intimated, but misplaced, for it ought instead to have been directed towards the failure of Menemist state care that seemed now to have superseded the once-Peronist promise that no Argentine worker be left behind. Francisco also suggested that the act of abandonment stretched beyond (or commenced outside) the state. The fellow citizens whose livelihoods rendered them the communal sources of life-sustenance, from butcher to greengrocer, were dismissive of his plight, fellow feeling and dedication to collective life replaced by the individualistic logic of neoliberalism that now appeared, paradoxically, to unify them against the impoverished underdog.

Francisco used the discursive space of the letter to narrate his view of the perception that other Argentines had of him. Presenting himself as nothing but an undesirable in their eyes, he thus reflected his sense of dis-belonging, as a long-time Peronist, in the “new” Argentina, with its shrunk state provisions and inflated emphasis on liberal competition and individual gain. In this instance, the archival record documents, however, a somewhat salutary ending. The letter was forwarded to the Administración Nacional de la Seguridad Social, and Francisco was informed on 12 August that he could collect his pension payment from the Banco Provincia de Córdoba.

Francisco was far from alone, however, in conveying the perception of a failure of state care or dissolution of assurances that the life projects of citizens mattered to the state. Citizens wrote on a daily basis to bewail their indigence, inveighing against an absence of labour opportunities, lack of transportation to reach work, or insufficient cash to buy food. Such complaints about specific privations also became conduits for expressing broader concerns at the felt disconnection of the president, and through his metonymic function, the state, from their everyday lives.

This sense of detachment repeatedly surfaced in complaints that Menem had failed to reply to their earlier letters, a claim of irresponsiveness that the archive seems to support. For the most part, even the formulaic letter that the office of Alfonsín sent letter writers appears absent. To be sure, not every letter writer expected a reply. Letters requesting assistance or an audience with Menem implicitly called for a response but other writers, sending in observations or opinions, acknowledged the busyness of presidential office and stated that they anticipated no response. They sought to inform Menem about their lives but were content without reciprocity, eschewing a need for dialogue. But the proliferation of repeat letters suggests that such phlegmatism was a minority sport. The lack of reply transformed letter writing into a unrequited act practised by the citizen towards the president, one that many writers claimed, in their second and third letters to the president, to experience as a rejection of dialogue or care. These letter writers held a common desire to initiate a conversation with the president and sorely felt the presidential rejection of this attachment, even on the occasions when they believed it to be, or diplomatically framed it as, a slip-up not a snub.

Jorge wrote to Menem from Rioja Province in February 1994 to congratulate him on the signing of the Convenio para la explotación del Fatamina, an agreement that the government heralded at the time for its potential to create provincial employment and economic development through mineral exploration. Reproducing the official position on the project,
Jorge expressed his “inmensa alegría” because “por fin, nuestra Rioja va a florecer, junto a la zona Oeste, como nunca.” Yet his happiness had been dampened, he informed Menem, because “También lo felicité por el Canal Federal y Camino a Chile, pero nunca tuve contestación alguna. No sé qué pasa.” Jorge had attempted to make his political approval known to the head of state, but his excitement at potential national progress had met no reciprocity. The acknowledgement that he had sought of a common enthusiasm for national development had proved wanting. Another saddened citizen, Cristina, wrote to Menem for a second time in October 1996, also to articulate distress at the lack of response to her earlier letter. She wrote of her disappointment:

Lo saludo con cariño y paso a preguntarle si recibió mi carta anterior, yo no pedía ni pido nada, solo quería que usted supiera la situación que vivo, y como me siento como argentina, y que usted me diga si hay esperanza o todo se termino. Me duele que no me conteste mi carta, en un momento difícil de mi vida el año pasado escribí al Papa y a los 15 días recibí su contestación... Le escribí a la Madre Teresa de Calcuta y en 10 días tuve la respuesta, a Usted hace como un mes y nada. Me gustaría que Usted me conteste, no me quiero sentir decepcionada.

Menem appeared to her, through his absence of reply, not to nurture her but to deny her existence, in marked contrast to the physically distant leaders in India and Vatican City who recognized her troubles from afar. Epistolary communications can function as “substitutions for the kind of giving that an ethics of care classically celebrates, the physical response to another whose need you can clearly see” (Jolly 2010, 12). The letters from these remotely placed leaders, perhaps ghostwritten or ventriloquized by assistants, appear to have functioned as just such stand-ins for Cristina. Against the silence that her letters to Menem met, they now also substituted for a felt lack of “official” care closer to home, a sensed absence articulated in many repeat letters sent by citizens aggrieved by an absence of earlier reply.

If Cristina and Jorge perceived the epistolary silence that followed their letters to the president as a deliberate lack of response, many letter senders told themselves—and, they hoped, the president too—the comforting story expressed by Teresa who sent a second letter to Menem from Mar del Plata in October 1996. Teresa was certain that her first letter, requesting help for her ailing brother, could not have reached Menem because she knew, she wrote, that if it had, the president would have replied. The care deficit implied in the lack of response was, in this conception, a corrigeable failure that could be chalked up to bureaucratic inadequacies, not the product of deliberate neglect. Even as she complained, then, Cristina maintained her faith in a populist sense of intimate understanding between leader and citizen. This conception of Menem as a benign leader, versus a broader bureaucracy deserving of criticism, is markedly similar to the apparent blamelessness of the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini as he appeared in letters that he received from ordinary Italian citizens when Prime Minister (1922–43). Italian letter writers, often living in dire circumstances, suggested in their communications with the leader a belief that “he would, if he had the information and means, intervene to rectify ills” (Duggan 2013, xvii). In both the Argentine and Italian examples, then, letters show the leader to function in the minds of citizens as a reliable emotional and political connection to public life amid a broader political culture of uncertainty, corruption, and wrongdoing. This conceptualization conforms to the central populist imagining of the leader as ultimate protector. In the Argentine 1990s, the fiction of the untarnished beneficence of Menem could enable trust and hope to be sustained among his supporters amid an economic scenario that threatened to chip away at any sense of optimism towards national or individual futures.
III. Acclamations

Alongside requests and invectives, Menem received plentiful correspondence expressing unmitigated praise, congratulations, and good wishes. These letters expressed gratitude for the national improvements that their writers perceived Menem to have effectuated and solidarity with his ongoing plans for Argentina. Like Ana María, the young mother with whom this article began, letter writers who wrote to praise Menem sometimes described his leadership as bequeathed by a Divine authority, beyond the democratic vote alone. “Usted ha sido elegido por la Divina Providencia y por todos los que votamos y reelegiremos” wrote Ricardo, from the Capital Federal, on 22 October 1993, following the success of Menem in the mid-term elections less than three weeks earlier. Communications in which Peronist letter writers displayed such a propensity towards exaltation suggested that they saw no possible conceptual conflicts in the idea of the leader as democratically elected and chosen by God. If populism relies “on a form of leadership that might be best described as religious (in the sense of its strong tendency to deify its causes and leaders),” the veneration of Menem not only echoed the structure of religious hierarchy but hinted also at a belief in national politics as the product of Divine design (Finchelstein 2014, 469).

Political emotions pervade the acclamatory communications. Marcos wrote in October 1993 from London, where he worked in the Argentine consulate. A civil servant for the past two decades, he informed Menem that he had not previously felt able to pronounce “una palabra en defensa ante las críticas recibidas por las condiciones de nuestro país.” Under Menem, however, this sense of unease had metamorphosed into a political emotion that he had not before experienced: national pride. Marcos now felt

[…] orgulloso de puedo [sic] decir lo que hizo su Gobierno por la Argentina y más cuando la gente de este país me lo refiere, como también puedo observar la cantidad de gente inglesa y de otras nacionalidades que golpean la puerta de este Consulado en busca de residencia en nuestro país porque ven en el paz y futuro.

Marco would have needed to look back to the early twentieth century to locate the most recent upsurge in English migration to Argentina, but his instinct that the country was becoming more open to the world and more respected abroad was not altogether misplaced. In 1989 The New York Times had expressed “tentative optimism” towards Menem. In 1995, this tepidity had converted into enthusiasm, the newspaper noting the “ringing endorsement of his economic agenda” by “economists, investors and foreign diplomats” (Sims 1995). The Spanish-language US newspaper El Nuevo Herald recorded that 67% of Miami-based Argentines had voted for Menem. It quoted one contented Argentine, expressing a broadly held sentiment among the Argentine community in the USA, who noted that Menem “tiene el país encaminado y lo más importante es que tiene el apoyo de Estados Unidos” (García Azuero 1995, 7). Marcos, then, was not exceptional in his sense of pride. His letter reflected a wider sense of pleasure among middle-class citizens who celebrated the improved image of Argentina in the West, after Menem adopted the Washington Consensus and abandoned non-alignment in September 1991.

The national calendar was punctuated by ample occasions that provided opportunity for epistolary manifestations of loyalty and adulation. Citizens sent Menem greeting cards on his birthday, on Día de los Padres and on Día de los Amigos. The effluence of glitter-studded, poem-filled cards indicated both the variety of bonds that citizens perceived between themselves and the president and the imagined tenderness of these relations. The arrival of
acclamatory correspondence often clustered around specific anniversaries, presidential speeches, or policy announcements. They came in concentrated form as Menem recovered from emergency surgery on his carotid artery on 14 October 1993 after he fainted when playing golf at the presidential residence in Olivos (“Yerba mala nunca muere” 2010). In the weeks that followed, hundreds of well-wishers sent him letters at the presidential office and the Instituto Cardiovascular de Buenos Aires, where he convalesced. Letters flooded in from foreign and former heads of state, politicians, local faith-based organizations, and the Argentine business community. Yet individual citizens penned the bulk of the correspondence. One after the other, they entreated Menem to make a speedy recover, and expressed shock, affection, and zeal for the president.

Letter writers who sent in their best wishes often praised the channels that were apparently keeping them informed about the health of their president. Statements to the contrary were notably absent, in contrast to the constant public expression of concern over perceived excesses of government secrecy. Ana Nélida wrote to Menem from Rosario on 19 October 1994 to wish him well, having “seguido paso a paso la información” in the newspapers regarding his wellbeing. Norma, from Buenos Aires, expressed gratitude for the “transparencia, dulzura y espontaneidad” of Zulemita Menem, the first daughter, who kept the nation informed about the recuperation of her father. “Lo he seguido por sus conferencias en televisio [sic] y lo veo más lindo que antes,” Luis Roberto told the president in a telegram from San Juan that same month. These citizens not only depended upon the state and media to stay informed about the health of their leader, but also believed both to be fulfilling their democratic duty to inform the nation. Letters from these citizens did not constitute complaints at a lack of knowledge or connection, but a move in an intimate relationship that they believed the state already to have established.

The letters that Menem received from citizens during his recuperation demonstrate the persuasiveness of his future-oriented rhetoric. Menem had initiated the narrative of his own survivalism a few weeks earlier, following a near-death experience. After his plane plummeted over the Province of Formosa on 18 September 1993, he half-jokingly instructed the nation not to worry because he had received a Divine signal; “God doesn’t want me to be killed […] He’s saving me for ‘95,” Menem reportedly stated (Nash 1994). Menem thus positioned himself in the hearts and minds of Peronist voters as duty-bound to continue as president for a second term, if the constitutional amendments of the Pacto de Olivos that would enable his re-election went ahead. One citizen wrote to tell Menem that from his “humilde lugar de trabajo formulo votos para su pronta y total recuperación, y que a la brevedad podamos tenerlo nuevamente al frente, como guía en el camino para alcanzar la nueva Argentina que las futuras generaciones nos exigen.” Elida and Roberto agreed, writing from Mar del Plata on 18 October to congratulate Menem on his recovery, which would enable him to “seguir llevando nuestra [sic] pais a la argentina sonada [sic].” Arcángel had a more specific idea of the timeframe for which he hoped Menem would preside over the nation. “Como argentino y justicialista,” he told Menem, “me tomé el atrevimiento de manifestar que todos lo queremos muchísimo como persona y como Primer Mandatario, que lo queremos ver bien y Presidente de todos los argentinos hasta el 2100.” These citizens evidently identified in Menem a comforting presence whom they sought to maintain as their guide as they faced the uncertainties of the future.
The swelling of positive public sentiment towards the president, and its expression as the desire for him to remain in office, was not lost on the professionals. Rodolfo, a public opinion research consultant, wrote to give Menem the good news in late October that year:

[…] “lo necesitamos” (su completo restablecimiento) tanto para la continuidad de la Nueva Argentina como para su reelección en 1995, de lo que no dudamos en lo mas mínimo […] viendo como el pueblo entero estaba pendiente de Ud., creo firmemente que ha logrado estar en los corazones de todos los argentinos.55

The operation that Menem underwent had not only saved his life, but also provided him with this optimistic, and ultimately accurate, gauge of his political life expectancy.

**Participation Beyond the Public Sphere**

What factors stimulated citizens to attempt to shift from silent subjects of the state to active interlocutors with it? Why did a letter to the president seem to them an appropriate or efficient method? We do not have recourse to knowing the other strategies, if any, adopted by the letter writers. They almost definitely did not have access to participating in public deliberation in print or broadcast media, which remained heavily elite-dominated. We do not know whether they participated in the anti-government mobilisations, or piqueteros, that punctuated Argentine political life from the mid-1990s onwards (further denting the view of the 1990s as a decade of depoliticization), most violently in the so-called Santiagazo in Santiago del Estero on 16 December 1993. Yet the genre and content of their communications suggest that these citizens were primarily interested in producing pragmatic and affective individual political bonds. Their letters made more personal claims than the issue-driven demands that motivated clusters of citizens to take to the streets and clamour for democratic rights. A protester may have rallied against unemployment; a letter writer directly requested a job. This distinction does not signify depoliticization but instead the personalization of politics.

The personal letters sent to Menem—intimate transcripts with a non-public status at their time of writing—collectively provided the state, through the self-reporting contained therein, with a wealth of information on the citizenry. The letter writers, we have seen, were typically conscious of this aspect of their communications, often depicting themselves as seeking to inform the state and fill in apparent gaps in its knowledge. This work, the re-democratized state had taught them, constituted part of their duty as citizens of the democratic Republic (for example, Alfonsín 1983). For this reason also their personal requests cannot be seen as flagrantly depoliticized acts. The letter writers appear to have posited themselves as willing participants in a “democratic” feedback loop where their output, they hoped, might positively influence the economic and social input that the state injected back into their lives. Such provision of unsolicited information to the state allowed it to take the political temperature of the citizenry through the information and commentary that its members, of their own volition, provided. Laced with stories, emotions, requests, and expressions of desire, the letters provided a greater gradation of the sentiment of citizens towards the state than could the impersonal box ticking of the opinion polls regularly commissioned in the 1990s for private party consumption and public dissemination (Vommaro 2008). Filing away and then classifying letters from citizens thus protected the letter writers but also safeguarded the administration, for—whether or not the state made use of their voluntary submissions—it made this detailed gauge of public sentiment a privileged state possession;
their expressions of discontent remained paradoxically outside public knowledge. Out of public earshot, the intimate transcripts of epistolary communication not only reflected a democracy with compromises but also contributed to its formation: one in which citizens, through choice or lack of alternative, discursively participated outside the pluralistic democratic model of public discursive dissent.

Viewed from the perspective of the state, the letters hardly constituted influencing, participatory acts: once opened, these paper arrivals quickly became the material of archival stockpiling, only rarely travelling through bureaucratic pipelines towards offices in which they might spark action. Yet for their letter writers, such communications appear to have been vested with far greater meaning and intentionality. As we have seen, a letter to the president constituted a formal return to the type of correspondence that rose to mass usage under the first Peronism. Then, the letter had underscored the “mythical basis of the legitimacy” of Perón: the populist image of his “direct contact with the people” (Plotkin 2002, 82). Peronist citizens in the 1990s appear to have attempted to re-create this legitimacy for Menem in reproducing through the letter the direct contact with the Peronist president that seemed to them now absent. In her work on the first Peronism, Donna Guy asserts that charismatic bonds in Argentina “have been formed as much by Argentines as by their leaders” (Guy 2016, 2). The bold claim risks downplaying the strength of populist techniques of persuasion, but the unsolicited letters to Menem indicate at least an element of such co-production. Letter writers in the 1990s perhaps desired the security of a leader who could stake a soothing claim, following the crisis of collective belonging in the preceding decades, to inheritance; a leader who could renew in the present the nostalgically remembered earlier Peronism of the mid-century. In redressing through their epistolary communications the void of imagined unmediated contact between president and citizens, and inviting Menem to respond directly to them, the letter writers appear to have striven to produce a new Perón for the post-authoritarian age. Glossing over the inconvenient truth of the prior impermanence of Peronism in power, Peronist citizens disoriented in both a democracy that seemed not to be creating conditions in which they might flourish and a Justicialism of increasingly unfamiliar contours could thus envision the uncertain national future emerging in the homely image of the past.56

It is widely recognized that underground networks and samizdat publications constitute forms of non-public participatory politics under authoritarian regimes, when a public sphere is absent or crippingly surveilled. The letters to Menem provide a compelling reminder of the requirement to be as attentive to spaces beyond the public sphere when tracing the varieties of political discourses, ideas, and sentiments that pass around and inform illiberal democracies.57 They also illuminate the fiction of the populist mantra of the unbreakably intimate bond between leader and citizen. Like leaders who preceded him, Menem did not read the letters from his citizens, and only rarely did his office reply to them. For him, then, there was no epistolary relationship: the letters were far from a technology of intimate connection. And even as the letters constituted modes of political and personal attachment for their writers, they remind us that the intimate transcript cannot be a wholly safe space for writer or receiver. Intimacy is chancy: the material and sentiments that bond its sharers are constantly at risk of becoming public knowledge. Its content may be revealed by one of its participants, discovered by an outsider—or its archive liberalized and its contents converted into the materials of history.
Notes

1. Legajo 11101707543. The letters discussed in this chapter are housed in the Archivo General de la Nación/Departamento Archivo Intermedio (AGN/DAI), Fondo Documental “Presidencia de la Nación.

   Secretaría Privada (1989–1999). Following scholarly protocol for writing about citizen letters drawn from contemporary and recent historical contexts, I have eliminated the surnames of letter writers to protect their identities.

2. Where meaning is not impeded, I retain errors in grammar and spelling found in the letters.

3. Archived letters carry a chief secretarial stamp but this marker is insufficient evidence to attest that they reached a senior administrator.

4. Like the letters to Alfonsín, the precise number of letters sent to Menem during his two terms in presidential office is unknown. I base this minimum on having seen 25 boxes holding around 400 letters each at the AGN/DAI in Buenos Aires. Some 40 boxes are accounted for but the content of these boxes also includes other correspondence, making the number of letters from citizens difficult to postulate. Furthermore, as the letters are not specifically documented, appearing only as part of the “fondo documental” of the Menem administration, it is possible that more correspondence from citizens to Menem exists, or previously existed.

5. A parallel emerges here with letters apparently sent to Eva Perón; when retrospectively published, they came with a “translation’ in correct Spanish” (Plotkin 2003, 162).

6. Recent scholarship on the political significance of writing to the head of state in other countries and historical contexts includes Eberle and Harris (2012), Duggan (2013), Cazorla Sánchez (2014) and Bernasconi (2013).

7. To the extent that authorial intentionality is accessible. There is a vast literature on this topic. This work is premised most closely on the ideas articulated in Skinner (2002).

8. See also Garibotto (2014). Sebastián Carassai perceives increasing political indifference in the 1990s in a recent article, but concludes with a more subtle perspective, noting the extent to which members of the growing mass of unemployed citizens sought to make themselves heard in the political space in the 1990s when, as piqueteros, they blocked roads and publicly announced their claims. See Carassai (2007, 45, 58).

9. Jennifer Adair notes, with one period of exception, an overwhelming lack of responsiveness from the office of President Alfonsín (Adair 2015, 224 and 230).

10. Eduardo Elena notes a like difficulty and thus similar predominance of “top-down” approaches in the first Peronist period that he examines (Elena 2005, 82). A key exception to this general pattern of the exclusion of voices of working-class citizens is the work of historian Daniel James. His scholarship nonetheless takes as its principal source-base retrospective oral accounts. On opportunities and obstacles to writing history based on oral testimony see James 2000, 121–3. Javier Auyero engages methodologies drawn from sociological ethnography, using oral histories and diaries of individuals without structural access to power to recount moments in recent Argentine history in Auyero (2003).

11. We should remember that letter writing has also always demanded literacy or access to a scribe, and so has rarely been the domain of the most marginalized members of society.

12. The thousands of letters contained in the Cairo Genizah have received particularly detailed historical treatment. A wide-ranging set of projects on letters is housed at the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters, on which see Lives and Letters (2014).

13. Perón was not the first head of state to solicit direct contact from citizens. He may have been aware that President Theodor Roosevelt (1933–45) had previously asked United States citizens to send him dimes to help with national reconstruction (Albertson and Kushner Gadarian, 2015, xviii).

14. Elena translates the slogan as “Perón Wants to Know What the Pueblo Wants,” shifting the emphasis from need to desire.

15. Eva Perón also apparently received tens of thousands of letters from citizens appealing for material assistance and financial aid via her charitable commission, the Fundación Eva Perón,
in the 1940s. Question marks hang over the authenticity of some of these letters, but if genuine they provide further evidence of myriad working-class citizens seeking to interact directly with the populist leaders, both to have their needs met and as an affirmation of their Peronist identity (Plotkin 2002, 162).

16. On expressions of this sentiment, particularly among journalists, see Guillermoprieto (1991).
17. On the sense of a divorce between Menem and the party see Levitsky (2001, 31).
18. Legajo 11101530348.
19. Legajo 11101189639.
20. This taxonomical approach to citizen letters to political figures draws on Fitzpatrick (1996).
21. See, for example, legajos 171026, 171015, 171012, 170918 and 170902.
22. Legajo 11101190079.
23. Legajo 11101523701.
24. By this time the Argentine peso was in use, and guaranteed by the currency board at a rate of one peso to the dollar.
25. Legajo 11101727849.
26. The requests for the status were plentiful. For examples, see legajos 11101190134, 11101524023 and 11101523971.
27. Legajo 11101710416.
28. Ibid.
29. Legajo 11101727271.
30. Legajo 0320439628.
31. Ibid.
32. Legajo 11101189904.
33. Menem won 44.94% of the vote in the 1995 elections, though the newly formed Frepaso, a coalition of progressive Justicialists and members of other leftist parties led by José Octavio Bordón and Carlos Álvarez, performed strongly, winning 29.2% of the vote.
34. Legajo 11101707524.
35. Ibid.
36. Menem had argued that “La reparación a los jubilados debe haberse de inmediato,” “no tiene tiempo,” and “debe haberse ya” (Menem and Duhalde 1989, 61). On the role of Perón in expanding the state pension scheme see Madrid 2003, 100–1.
37. It is possible that the Office of the President responded to letters without keeping a record of response. Although an occasional letter is filed together with a copy of an official reply or a note that a reply had been sent, most citizen letters do not appear to have prompted a response. The Office of the President may have responded to letters without keeping a record of reply.
38. Legajo 1110153072.
39. Ibid.
40. The chief private secretary to the president replied, acknowledging receipt of this second letter, in March 1994.
41. Legajo 0320599628.
42. Legajo 0320529627.
43. Legajo 11101529838.
44. Legajo 111 01523561.
45. Ibid.
47. Public figures, including Fernando Henrique Cardoso (then Brazilian Minister of Finance), former Argentine president Arturo Frondizi, and the British and Syrian ambassadors to Argentina, wrote to Menem to wish him well.
49. Legajo 11101530634.
50. Legajo 11101529946.
51. Legajo 11101530480.
52. Legajo 11101530615.
53. Legajo 11101530738.
54. Legajo 11101530601.
55. Legajo 11101530511.
56. I refer to homeliness in the Freudian sense: “familiar,” “native,” “belonging to the home” (Freud 1959, 2).
57. Under the Menem administration Argentina could be termed an “illiberal democracy,” in part because of the extensive usage of the presidential decree.

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