

# Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship

The Performances of Blood

Cecilia Sosa



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QUEERING ACTS OF MOURNING IN  
THE AFTERMATH OF ARGENTINA'S  
DICTATORSHIP

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CECILIA SOSA

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For Pulu, who made this book and the entire world possible

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## Preface

The aftermath of Argentina's last dictatorship (1976–83) has traditionally been associated with narratives of suffering, which recall the loss of the 30,000 civilians known as the 'disappeared'. When democracy was restored, the unspoken rule was that only those related by blood to the missing were entitled to ask for justice. This book has emerged as an attempt to both *query* and *queer* this bloodline normativity. Drawing on queer theory and performance studies, it develops an alternative framework for understanding the affective transmission of trauma beyond traditional family settings. In order to do this, it introduces an archive of non-normative acts of mourning. This archive runs across different generations. Through the analysis of a broad spectrum of performances – including interviews, memoirs, cooking sessions, jokes, films, theatrical productions and literature – this book shows how the experience of loss has not only produced a well-known imaginary of suffering but also new forms of collective pleasure. Ultimately, it suggests that the experience of violence sheds light on a new sense of 'being together' in the wake of loss.

To some extent, this book also draws from my personal experience. I grew up during the dictatorship and, although there are no victims in my family, the experience of loss and violence marked me deeply. As with many others of my generation, some of my closest friends have missing relatives and the resonances of this experience of terror have informed my affective and political environment during successive periods of my life. First at the highly politicised Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires, and then as a student of sociology at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, I found that traces of trauma inevitably echoed through these academic communities. The traumatic past permeated buildings, personal biographies and knowledge(s), composing their affective atmospheres across different generations. Later on, as a cultural journalist working at the national newspaper *Página 12*, I successively engaged with films, artworks, books and performances which proposed different accounts of this period. Rather than any other formal activism, a passionate rejection of the military terror perhaps constituted my main political drive. In those terms, I have joined the circuits of the *Madres* of the Plaza de Mayo encircling the central square, and many other demonstrations and campaigns organised by the expanded human rights movement in my country. Nonetheless, throughout all these years, as much as I felt touched and moved by the intensities of the aftermath of the dictatorship,

I also felt that these narratives did not belong to me entirely. Somehow, it seemed as though only the ‘direct’ victims had the authority, the privilege and ultimately the right to talk about these issues. As I will go on to elaborate, the ‘wounded family’ has created hierarchies, pedigrees, forms of inclusion and exclusion, and these secret barriers were difficult to cross. It was this silent and persistent mode of engaging with the unbearable that finally placed me outside, making me feel like a necessary but still a ‘secondary actor’ in the national drama.

It was only when I moved to the UK in 2007 with a Chevening Scholarship to undertake a Masters in Arts at Goldsmiths College that I realised that I could act upon those ambivalent feelings and learned to approach this experience from an alternative perspective. During my doctoral research in the Department of Drama at Queen Mary, I found not only the critical distance but also the creative tools that I needed to build this project. Over the last few years, I have successively engaged with performance studies, queer theory and the expanding work around affect to understand how to act upon these political feelings, and ultimately express my commitment to an intensity that I could not formerly master alone. This book is a result of this work. Drawing upon the perspective of a supporting actor, it addresses the role of those who felt touched and injured by violence in non-traditional ways. From this ‘outsider’ position, this book attempts to offer a new vocabulary to name the affective traces left by an experience of loss, which have not yet been fully articulated. Ultimately, it offers a new vocabulary to show how the realms of the family and kinship are inescapably political and also the threshold space where unconventional pleasures can be inscribed.

This book challenges traditional conceptions of kinship. Throughout its pages, I introduce a series of case studies that show how the language of kinship has expanded as a result of violence. This alternative ‘feeling of kinship’ does not respond to bloodline traditions, but rather to what has been described by David Eng in another context as the ‘collective, communal, and consensual affiliations as well as the psychic, affective, and visceral bonds’ that go beyond family settings.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, I want to show how the experience of grief has finally brought to light a new idea of community.

The field of performance studies is particularly new in Argentina. It does not exist there as an autonomous discipline of research. Despite the presence of a strong and lively community of theatre directors and practitioners, the country has not yet been consistently reached by the ‘performative turn’, which is widespread in universities further north.<sup>2</sup> My critical and methodological approach to Argentina

<sup>1</sup> David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship. Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> I have explored the implications of doing performance research outside hegemonic centres in my presentation ‘From the South’, an appointed intervention at the round-table ‘Re-considering the Inter- and the Intra. Contested performances’, which took place at 17th Performance Studies International Conference, May 2011, Utrecht, Netherlands.

post-dictatorship draws upon the research undertaken within local academia and brings a new resource to bear upon plural ties that propose a common condition of survival. As a result, this book benefits from a non-normative and, hopefully, original position to contest victimising accounts of memory and trauma. From here, I also hope to contribute towards the emergence of a developing field.

\*\*\*\*

Writing this book has been (mainly) a joy and the most exciting intellectual adventure I have ever undertaken. This journey would not have been possible without the help, support and enthusiasm of many people and institutions. My gratitude goes firstly to Catherine Silverstone and Maria Delgado, my outstanding supervisory team at Queen Mary, University of London. Their priceless advice, guidance and critical feedback have been fundamental. I am grateful to Queen Mary's Department of Drama for hosting, supporting and funding my doctoral research. Its talented, thrilling and disparate community of performance artists, scholars and students provided me with the most cheerful and inspiring environment in which to develop my project. Thanks to the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (ORSAS), the University of London Central Research Fund, the Society for Latin American Studies, SCUDD and IOHA for supporting my research. Thanks to the Cultural Memory Seminar Series for welcoming me within the fantastic organiser team. Thanks to the Institute of Latin American Studies for enabling me to put together an exciting series of screenings of Latin American and Argentine films. Thanks to Jordana Blejmar for the intellectual companionship and the fun of coordinating them together, as well as the research group on Cultural Memory, Affect and Trauma at the Institute of Modern Languages Research.

This book would not have been possible without a network of Argentine artists and activists who shared stories, jokes, fears, critiques and enthusiasm, including Mariana Eva Perez, Paula Maroni, Charly Pisoni, Nina, Ricardo Dios, Lucila Quieto, Carolina Golder, Andrés Centrone, Ernesto Kreplak and Victoria Ginzberg. I am especially grateful to Albertina Carri, Nicolás Prividera, Lucrecia Martel, Lola Arias and the amazing crew of *Mi vida después*. Each interview was invaluable. Thank you Félix Bruzzzone for *Maira*. Thanks to Hebe de Bonafini for cooking at the former ESMA and to Bobby Baker for discussing in London those strange cooking lessons that took place at a former detention centre in Argentina.

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Thanks to my family for their love and support.

Early versions of some of the materials included in this book have already been published in different forms. The queer framework presented in the Introduction and the analysis of the film *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003) inform a chapter in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* published by Palgrave.<sup>3</sup> I have examined the *Madres* of the Plaza de Mayo’s performance as a mourning installation comparable to Louise Bourgeois’s *Spiders* in *Memory Studies*.<sup>4</sup> I have published on Lucrecia Martel’s

<sup>3</sup> Cecilia Sosa, ‘Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina’s Dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and *Los Rubios* (2003)’, in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, ed. Vincent Druliolle and Francesca Lessa (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 63–85.

<sup>4</sup> Sosa, ‘On Mothers and *Spiders*: A Face-to-Face Encounter with Argentina’s Mourning’, *Memory Studies*, 4.3 (2011), 63–72.

*La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) in *Theory, Culture and Society*, though the interview with the director appears for the first time in this book.<sup>5</sup> My contribution to the volume *No More Drama* locates Lola Arias's work within a collection of major world theatre directors.<sup>6</sup> A short review of *Mi vida después* has been published in *E-misférica*.<sup>7</sup> Vanina Falco's and her non-biological brother's stories have been developed in a special issue of the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, which I co-edited with Alejandra Serpente.<sup>8</sup> A condensed version of my work on dark humour and the children of the disappeared has been recently published in the *Journal of Romance Studies*.<sup>9</sup> In all cases, I am grateful to the publishers for their interest in my work and the anonymous reviewers for their precious comments.

The publication of this book has been made possible thanks to the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain & Ireland and the Spanish Embassy which awarded my doctoral thesis the inaugural AHGBI-Spanish Embassy Postgraduate Prize in 2012. Thanks again to Maria Delgado for her opening nomination and to my doctoral examiners Joe Kelleher and Jens Andermann for their outstanding support. I am grateful to the University of East London for giving me the time and space to complete this manuscript. Thanks to Scott Mahler, my editor from Tamesis Books, for bearing with me all through this adventure.

<sup>5</sup> Sosa, 'A Counter-narrative of Argentine Mourning. *The Headless Woman* (2008), by Lucrecia Martel', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26.7–8 (2009), 250–62.

<sup>6</sup> Sosa, 'Lola Arias: Expanding the Real', in *No More Drama*, ed. Peter Crowley (Dublin: Project Press, 2011), pp. 46–66.

<sup>7</sup> Sosa, 'Mi vida después (2009): Non-Kin Affects in Post-Dictatorial Argentina', *E-misférica* 7.2 'After Truth' (2011), <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-72/sosa> [accessed 13 December 2011]

<sup>8</sup> Sosa, 'Queering Kinship. Performance of Blood and the Attires of Memory', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 21.2 (2012), 221–33.

<sup>9</sup> Sosa, 'Dark Humour and the Descendants of the Disappeared. Countersigning Bloodline Affiliations in Post-dictatorial Argentina', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 13.3 (2013), 75–87.





## Introduction

In what ways are we ‘touched’ by the past? Are those who have personally experienced the effects of violence the only ones entitled to contest them? Can the rehearsal of trauma bring us pleasure in the present? In the wake of Argentina’s last dictatorship (1976–83), the organisations created by the relatives of those missing adopted the form of what I have referred to as a ‘wounded family’.<sup>1</sup> This broken lineage of mothers, grandmothers, children, relatives and siblings of the disappeared has been the guardian of mourning. For more than thirty years, this bloodline assembly of victims has commanded the experience of mourning, transforming the local landscape of memory struggles into a family issue. The tacit cultural rule of the post-dictatorship period stipulates that only those who were directly affected by the military repression are entitled to assume the right to remember. Nonetheless, in the last decade the *domiciliation* of this archive has started to be displaced: the aftermath of violence has witnessed a controversial displacement of the legitimacy of remembering from the ‘wounded family’ to a collective sense of co-ownership of trauma. Blood has been contested as the only refugee of memory. Yet I contend that the sanctity attached to these biological narratives of grief has prevented local and international scholars from understanding the transmission of trauma on a broader scale.

While challenging the politics of memory that have been subtly in play in Argentina during the last decades, I seek to provide an alternative approach for examining the aftermath of violence and the sense of bereavement left by the vanishing of thousands widely known as the ‘disappeared’, those who were tortured and secretly murdered during the military regime. Conversely, I shall propose what might be considered a provocative engagement with the insights provided by queer studies. In doing so, I want to explore the alternative forms of community and social belonging that have emerged in response to the military violence and its brutal attempt at the re-foundation of the intimate public sphere through an extreme biopolitical power. My

<sup>1</sup> Cecilia Sosa, ‘Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina’s Dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and *Los Rubios* (2003)’, in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, ed. Vincent Druliolle and Francesca Lessa (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 63–85.

conviction is that the insights provided by queer theory can be useful in envisaging the expanded feelings of kinship that have been configured in the wake of loss. Through the analysis of performances, films, literature and memoirs, this book maps the elusive affects that surround the experience of mourning beyond the boundaries of those who have been ‘directly affected’ by violence.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I seek to illuminate an alternative perspective to understand the transmission of trauma beyond bloodline inscriptions. This movement enables me to move beyond mandatory forms of memory. Even so, this assignment does not attempt to create grounds for over-expectation. Rather, it aims to uncover an expanded collection of pleasure emerging out of grief.

### **Why a queer reading?**

My queer reading works as a response to the human rights tradition in the country (and beyond) that still champions a conservative idea of the family. Beyond its implications in sexual communities and practices, I primarily use the term ‘queer’ in the sense that Butler puts forward: ‘Queer is not being lesbian, queer is not being gay. It is an argument against certain normativity.’<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Eve Sedgwick notes that queer does not simply designate same-sex desire but spins ‘outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all’.<sup>4</sup> Drawing upon these conceptions, I present my queer reading as an attempt to ‘fracture’ conventional discourses on memory in Argentina. The use of the term ‘queer’ is worth clarifying. I do not seek to name the participants of this project as ‘queer’. Rather, I insist on the value of exploring Argentina’s aftermath of violence through the lens of queer studies in order to contest the biological normativity that has become hegemonic. In so doing, I aim to provide new vocabularies to account for the affective lines of transmission that already permeate the wider society.

In recent years, this field has expanded its boundaries to address concerns that are not exclusively related to sexual and identity politics. Scholars such as Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, David Eng, Lee Edelman, Lisa Blackman, Carolyn Dinshaw, Eve Sedgwick and Sara Ahmed, among others, have craft-

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, ‘Victims, Relatives, and Citizens in Argentina: Whose Voice is Legitimate Enough?’, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard A. Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> See Judith Butler, ‘The Desire for Philosophy’, an interview conducted by Regina Michalik, Lola Press (May 2001), [http://www.lolapress.org/elec2/artenglish/butl\\_e.htm](http://www.lolapress.org/elec2/artenglish/butl_e.htm) [accessed 2 November 2011].

<sup>4</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC, London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 9.

ed theoretical tools to engage with experiences of trauma, loss and melancholia alongside grief and injury. By critically engaging with these insights, this book brings to the foreground the forms of attachment that have existed around, outside, or in the interstices of the relatives of the disappeared in Argentina. In so doing, it proposes an expansion of kinship studies to address the constellation of new intimacies that have arisen from a locally situated response to injury. Far from dismissing the pain of those directly affected by violence, I want to explore modes of grief that touch on less obvious zones of injury. While looking for new spaces (and faces) around and beyond bloodline attachments, I wish to show how seemingly less implicated witnesses can also adopt and partake in loss. Although these interventions are not politically articulated, they announce that it is still possible to imagine a politics of memory for expanded sectors of civil society. By turning discourses of victimisation upside down, this book brings to light a constellation of insurgent and playful versions of the performances of blood.

### **Queering the familial inscription of loss**

My perspective aims at contesting the politics of victimisation that have become the prevalent mode of engaging with loss. In particular, I will explore how the ‘Kirchnerist’ period (from 2003 to the present) has embraced the banner of the victims to transform memory into a national duty.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this book, I will show how this seemingly ‘progressive’ human rights politics also advocates a bloodline hierarchy of suffering at a more surreptitious level. Against the official discourse, I will show how different generations of Argentines have been connected, mobilised and entangled in the face of loss, and how they connect with disparate sites of memory – namely, a memory park facing the river, cooking sessions at a former detention camp, and a theatrical stage where a team of actors re-enacts the past by wearing their parents’ clothes. In so doing, I wish to explore how encounters with that traumatic past could bring to light new complicities and desires, with particular emphasis on the struggles of younger generations to build their own spaces in the present.

Heather Love argues that loss can be ‘*the form – of intimacy*’. In the same vein, I want to examine the specific forms of non-conventional intimate ties that have been built in Argentina in response to loss.<sup>6</sup> This book intervenes in both queer theory and memory studies, providing a bridge between fields

<sup>5</sup> In 2006, the 24th of March, the anniversary of the military coup, was transformed into a public holiday and national day of ‘Memory, Truth and Justice’.

<sup>6</sup> Heather Love, ‘The Art of Losing’, in *Lost and Found: Queering the Archive*, ed. Mathias Danbolt, Jane Rowley and Louis Wolthers (Copenhagen: Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 2009), pp. 69–85 (p. 82). Love’s emphasis.

usually conceived as separate. In a recent *GLQ* special issue on ‘queer bonds’, the editors Joshua Weiner and Damon Young include within the term all those ties ‘that appear under different conditions of negation, connections and constraints beyond the contractual agreements between autonomous, positively defined subjects as presumed in liberal theories of the social’.<sup>7</sup> In this book, I will conceive as ‘queer bonds’ those forms of relationality that contest the biological narratives of injury accounted for by the relatives of the victims in Argentina. By bringing those queer bonds to the foreground, I want to examine the alternative forms of support, love and care that have become possible in the aftermath of violence.

I am not suggesting that the language of the family should be excised from critical analysis. Rather, I propose to develop further the concept of kinship from a queer framework to address the new affiliations at play in contemporary Argentina. This approach becomes credible, since as Butler writes, ‘queer’ will remain a term that ‘can never be fully owned, but always and only re-deployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purpose’.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this book is also informed by pressing ‘political purposes’. Ultimately, this approach is concerned with reorienting the modes of critique towards a more inclusive politics of mourning, one in which a new ‘with-ness’ could be available to wider sectors of Argentine society.

### **Performing trauma: from victimhood to pleasure**

This book critically engages with the ‘oxymoronic popularity of trauma’ that has captivated scholars working in the humanities within Western academies since the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> While critically engaging with this tradition, the book stresses the productivity of non-victimising accounts of trauma to illuminate unpredictable forms of affection, support and care. In this initiative, I follow Ann Cvetkovich’s important work on lesbian cultures in the USA to explicitly reject pathologised accounts of trauma.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on this, I seek to show how the Argentine experience of loss contributed to building a new public culture of mourning in which alternative forms of pleasure were also delineated. Against conventional frameworks, this book focuses on pleasure. It asks

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Weiner and Damon Young, ‘Queer Bonds’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17.2–3 (2011), 223–41 (p. 223).

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Susannah Radstone, ‘Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory’, in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. S. Radstone (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 89–95 (p. 90).

<sup>10</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 11.