

Sosa, C. (2011) 'Queering acts of mourning in the aftermath of Argentina's dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and Los Rubios (2003)' in Druliolle, V. and Lessa, F. (eds.) *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, New York: Palgrave

CHAPTER 3

Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and Los Rubios

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Why a Queer Reading?

It might sound strange to propose a “queer” reading to address the aftermath of Argentina's last dictatorship. How might it be possible to connect a political and theoretical field usually associated with the struggles of lesbian, gay, transgendered, and bisexual (LGTB) groups with the experience of mourning triggered by a process of state terrorism in a Latin American country? If so, what could be the benefits of this perspective?

In recent years, the field of queer studies has expanded its boundaries to address issues that are not exclusively related to sexual and identity politics. A significant number of scholars have crafted new theoretical tools to engage with experiences of trauma, loss, race, and injury that can be particularly productive to approach the sense of bereavement and frailty left by 30,000 missing individuals in Argentina.¹ In light of this, I propose to revise the country's aftermath of violence through the lens of queer studies. Beyond sexual implications, in this chapter I use the term “queer” as Judith Butler primarily understands it, that is, as an argument against “certain normativity.”² In particular, my queer reading aims at contesting the

biological framework that has been traditionally employed to establish who counts as a victim in postdictatorial Argentina.

During the first years of democracy, to gain recognition by the state, the human rights movement evoked the politically powerful image of a “wounded family” in portraying the victims of state repression. As Jelin argues, “in post-dictatorial Argentina, ‘truth’ came to be equated with testimony of those ‘directly affected’ first and foremost in the voices of blood relatives of the ‘disappeared.’”³ However, more recently, the language of the family has turned into a trap that encapsulates and restricts the possibilities of understanding the transmission of trauma beyond bloodline inscriptions. Facing the need to develop new critical frameworks, a queer reading can work as a productive strategy to go beyond the traditional discourse of human rights groups. It can provide new images and vocabularies to account for the affective lines of transmission that have already permeated wider society.

In this context, the political powers attributed to the term “queer” are fruitful to challenge the biological normativity that is implicit in the heteronormative setting of a “wounded family.” In “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler famously argues: “If the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation . . . it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.”⁴ Since the work of queering is never complete, the “political purposes” of my reading become especially urgent after, since 2003, the Kirchners’ democratic governments⁵ have appropriated the position of the victims, to consecrate the idea of memory into a “national duty.” My proposal wishes to contest the politics of victimization that currently is the prevalent mode of engaging with loss. Thereby, the term “queer” refers, on the one hand, to its nonnormative content and, on the other, to the possibility of building an alternative strategy to respond to a so-called progressive and auspicious human rights politics that surreptitiously still champions a bloodline hierarchy of suffering. This perspective, far from dismissing the pain of those who have been “directly affected” by violence, endeavors to add to the debates that seek to enlarge the understandings of the resonances of trauma, including the emotional responses that might be tangential to those who have traditionally considered themselves as the “real” victims.

In addition, I want to make the case for liberating the category of trauma from victimization clichés. Ann Cvetkovich’s analysis of lesbian cultures in the United States is especially relevant to address the affective dimension of mourning in contemporary Argentina.⁶ Following her premise that the reverberations of trauma can serve as the foundation of a new public culture,

I seek to show how the affects that emerged in the local process of grief involve not only pain, sorrow, and guilt, but also new forms of pleasure.

Finally, this chapter seeks to highlight the nonnormative temporality involved in the processes of loss that exceeds the reproductive model implicit in the familial setting. In that operation, queer studies are also helpful in proposing links with the past that refuse a linear historicism and offer affective contacts across time to account for how traumatic experiences are transmitted from one generation to another. The “non reproductive” notion of queerness supported by Lee Edelman and the “queer futurity” developed by Jose Muñoz are especially engaging to suggest lines of exploration of grief as an experience related both to the past and to the future.⁷ More precisely, the final goal is to explore the unpredictable linkages among performance, kinship, and mourning that have emerged in the dictatorship’s aftermath. In this regard, a rephrased conception of kinship could be appealing to grasp different modes of infliction that have grown up outside narratives constrained by blood ties.

At the juncture of these insights, I will present my queer reading through the analysis of two case studies. First, I will propose a retrospective scrutiny of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo’s activism, arguing that their famous tagline “our children gave birth to us” (*nuestros hijos nos parieron/ nuestros hijos nos dieron la vida*) can be established as a point of departure of a lineage that reverses the biological tie as the primary bond. Second, I will contend that the film *Los Rubios* (2003), directed by the Argentine filmmaker Albertina Carri, envisages how the second generation of survivors brings to light a new idea of community based on the pains and pleasures of a shared mourning. By looking at these disparate materials, I will try to map how the traumatic past led to the emergence of a nonnormative culture of grief that goes beyond those directly affected by violence.

3.1 The Language of the “Wounded Family”

When democracy was restored in 1983, the network of organizations created by the victims of state terrorism assumed the form of a peculiar family. Most of the associations formed by the relatives of the disappeared evoked the biological tie to support their claims. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Relatives, and more recently, the Children and the Siblings constituted what I call here a “wounded family.”⁸ Seemingly, only those related by blood to the missing had the authority to claim for justice. As Elizabeth Jelin describes, a monopoly of power, memory, and pain was established: “those who have suffered directly or through their immediate relatives define themselves as the bearers of pain and memory.”⁹

In my view, this is the biological normativity that restrains the resonances of trauma from traveling throughout a wider society.¹⁰

Nevertheless, as Virginia Vecchioli suggests, it is not that the dictatorship only left a bloodline chain of victims, but that the evocation of a community of blood worked as an effective instrument of political intervention for the human rights associations for more than 30 years.¹¹ Although some organizations did not assume the kinship tie as the principle for public recognition, it was ultimately the one that was imposed.¹² The state played a crucial role in naturalizing human rights claims as a family issue. By creating categories such as “the relatives of the victims of state terrorism,” the democratic governments produced a legal framework in which the recognition of the figure of the victim became attached to the family. As Vecchioli argues, the full status of the “relatives” was acquired when the state disposed the law of economic reparation for the victims that defines the disappeared as those who “in the majority of cases were taken alive from the bosoms of their families.”¹³ Following on from this, the condition of victim became not only a kinship tie, but also a legal figure. Therefore, the very idea of the “disappeared” emerged in the public scene as the exclusive property of the relatives, who, via the reifying tie of blood, were transformed into victims. This legal framework set a fundamental paradox: by assuming a demand based on blood, the state proposed a familial narrative of victimization for the whole nation. In this way, the discourse of the family became the social norm.

Why does this biological normativity need to be challenged? As Jelin argues, the familial framework was largely rooted in the history of the country. The idea of the family as the “basic cell of the nation” was evoked by the military, which assumed the role of the “strong father” and whose role was to “extract and destroy the infected social tissues” and “re-establish the natural equilibrium” of the supposed “Grand Argentine Family.”¹⁴ In that sense, the force of the familial language within the human rights movement can be perceived in continuation with the military’s narrative. While the military deployed the repression in the name of a “strong father,” the associations of the victims ultimately denounced a crime against the family and constructed their practices “not as metaphors or symbolic images of family ties, but grounded in literal kin relations.”¹⁵ Thereby, arguments that highlight the familial position of the victims tend to produce an experience of grief that flows into a hierarchical and private sphere. This familial framework conceals the nonnormative attachments and ties that emerged out of the experience of mourning, discouraging the considerations of more extended public commitments to the process of loss that remain silenced behind the enhanced qualities of blood.

The need of queering this framework becomes more urgent in the current period when grief has become a national matter. On March 24, 2003, the anniversary of the military coup of 1976 was declared a national holiday to observe a “National Day of Memory, Truth and Justice.” On March 24, 2004, the main detention center during the dictatorship, the Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA), was handed over to civilian authorities to be transformed into a site of memory. Speaking in front of a heterogeneous multitude that gathered to celebrate this historical event, President Kirchner addressed his speech to his “brothers and sisters” and congratulated the Mothers, the Grandmothers, and the Children for their “model of struggle.”¹⁶ By presenting the democratic state as the “head” of the victims, the Kirchner administrations have officialized the biological frame, leading to a substantialization of the identity of the victims. After several therapies of “forgiveness” indulged by former democratic governments, the laws that granted impunity to the military were overruled by the Supreme Court in 2005 and trials of members of the Armed Forces responsible for human rights violations have since resumed. Precisely in this seemingly auspicious context, I propose to take the *other* “side,” this space outside the framework that Edelman names the “structural position of queerness.”¹⁷ Beyond the familialism supported by the human rights movement, this strategy may help to rethink the experience of becoming “other” implied by the process of loss.¹⁸ Against the prevailing familialism, I propose a queer reading to revise the monopoly of the process of grief, all the more when the framework at play presumes a category of the victim that no longer corresponds to the modes of filiations in contemporary Argentina.

A crucial point should be clarified here. I am not simply suggesting that the language of the family should not be excised from any critical analysis. Rather, I propose to develop further the notion of kinship, to interrogate the extent to which its rephrased expressions may be a powerful tool to articulate a social critique of the politics of loss currently at play in Argentina.

3.2 *Calling the Biological Frame into Question*

The biological normativity that suggests that the victim of state terrorism only is a “wounded family” needs to be contested. But what are the implications of doing so? In *Frames of War*, Butler argues that “to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable.”¹⁹ Accordingly, although the discourse of a heteronormative family eventually emerged as the social norm, it never managed to contain the whole postdictatorial scene. If

terrorism introduced a horrifying breaking off of social ties, the biological narrative that was constructed to respond to that violence only worked to make the inside recognizable, dismissing other configurations and attachments that were left outside. For instance, the situation of the newborn babies who were abducted by the military personnel and grew up with their abductors disturb traditional kinship narratives, and demand new languages to apprehend the ongoing effects of trauma. By the same token, the constant appeal to a “true identity” performed by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in their struggle to recover the abducted children who were born in captivity stages a dubious ambiguity. The reliance on techniques of DNA testing, which allowed the successful restitution of 100 abducted children,²⁰ reinforces a sense of biological determinism that might ultimately conceal subtle forms of racism. The case of a recovered grandson who, after living away from home for 30 years, does not “get along” with his “brand-new” biological sister, whom I interviewed, already unsettles the association’s framework. Eventually, the Grandmothers opted to expel the “sister” from their organization. Can these new forms of contested attachments be resumed within the happy narrative of a heteronormative family, as most of the associations of the victims seem to be still demanding? I argue that they cannot. The aftermath of violence staged an unexpected scene of expanded ties that cannot be captured by heteronormative discourses. Rather, these other forms of attachments ask for an expanded conception of kinship.

If the process of mourning was perceived in relation to a community that was imagined as based on familial ties, my proposal here is to imagine a community built on a different basis, one in which the bloodline proximity with the missing ones cannot be conceived as a source of property. Instead, I seek a broader sense of belonging built on the basis of a common vulnerability and loss. However, may it be possible to shift the very schemes of intelligibility in which the idea of the victim was constructed? As Butler argues, when “an image lands in new contexts, it also creates new contexts by virtue of that landing, becoming a part of the very process through which new contexts are delimited and formed.”²¹ This “landing/shifting” movement can provide a fresh perspective to explain how the language of the family landed in contemporary Argentina, producing new possibilities within the “shadowy realm” of kinship. If familial ties, evoked by the associations of the Mothers, the Grandmothers, the Children, and the Relatives of the disappeared, have been effective in addressing the experience of trauma at some early stage of the recovered democracy, this framework was also shattered to produce nonnormative versions of alternative ties that are not constrained to the margins of the heteronormative family.

In this new context, I suggest that a postkinship framework might be productive to apprehend the transmission of trauma from a less restrictive perspective. For instance, the field of postkinship studies²² that was developed to grasp the nonheteronormative familial formations among gay parents could be useful to explore the anxieties raised by those biological siblings who ultimately reencounter each other in their early thirties, or even to grasp the underestimated linkages built between abducted children and their illegal appropriators.

However, the possibility of assuming this alternative framework also involves new sources of conflict. As Butler suggests, breaking out of the frame also implies breaking out of the designs of authority that sought to control that frame. In the Argentine context, this means going against what has been considered the most progressive human rights politics since the recovery of democracy. It also implies contesting the restrictive idea of the “us” championed by the victims’ associations that are still seen as the exclusive subjects of remembering.²³ In this sense, my queer reading is committed to freeing the left’s critique from its biological basis and reorienting it toward an alternative politics of loss beyond familial victimizations. The challenges are considerable, and so are the risks of misunderstandings. Conversely, this reading seeks to open the naturalized condition of “affected” toward a more inclusive idea of “us,” one in which loss can become the condition and necessity for a new sense of community.²⁴ The alternative seems to be clear: “Whether we expand our existing frameworks or allow them to be interrupted by new vocabularies will determine, in part, how well we consult both the past and the future for our present-day critical practices.”²⁵ This is the ethical imperative that animates my proposal.

3.3 *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Basis for a Queer Linage*

To map my queer reading, I will start with the well-known case of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the famous group of Argentine women that in 1977 started clamoring for the “alive appearance” (*aparición con vida*) of their children. Thirty-three years after their first public intervention, I propose to look backward to consider the political implications of a process that appears to be the fetishized iteration of a biological motherhood, and explore the extent to which the Mothers’ performance hindered the emergence of postkinship arrangements out of the experience of mourning.

Since the disappeared are dead without burial, the association of the Argentine Mothers with Antigone is not difficult to make. If there was a time when the disappeared had fallen beyond the borders of the human,

eventually the Mothers managed to confer legitimacy to their loss and transformed their act of mourning into a part of the public landscape. Their repetitive circles around the Plaza de Mayo ultimately reinscribed the disappeared into national history: the lives that were banished by the murderous state earned the right to be grieved as such. The disappeared reemerged from the sphere of the *abjected*: they were transformed into grievable lives.²⁶

Still, in which terms did the Mothers challenge the traditional forms of kinship? In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler states that Antigone “represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement.”²⁷ In a parallel sense, I argue that the Mothers performed an idea of motherhood beyond bloodlines that displaced traditional kinship arrangements. Let us explore this possibility further.

The Mothers' occupation of the Plaza de Mayo constituted the foundational event of a militancy apparently based on the nontransferable tie of blood. The Mothers enacted the Constitution of a new subject on the basis of a common injury evoked by their children's disappearance, and this very status provided the ground for their legitimization. Although the Mothers gathered as a political community constructed through the language of kinship, the fact that their action was from the beginning attached to a public space staged their activism as exceeding the margins of a traditional family, haunting the whole nation instead. Given this paradoxical Constitution, the Mothers performed a claim that did not belong to the private sphere, but rather to a national community imagined as a family. In that sense, the idea of motherhood evoked by the group became a sort of perversion of the political sphere. Although it was formulated as animated by a biological tie, the Mothers' origin was not “naturally” reproductive. Rather, it was the product of a political struggle. As the French philosopher Alain Badiou explains, there is something “purely haphazard” that links particular human beings to unforeseen events.²⁸ Even more, the idea of the subject does not preexist the event that it declares, but rather it is the very event that turns the subject into being. Thereby, subjects enact a subjective truth that is tied to a primary event that marks a before and an after in their private histories. Seen in this light, the event of their children's disappearance can be perceived as the inaugurating scene for the Mothers' coming into being: they did not exist as a collective subject prior to that event, nor did they survive later as individual women.

One of the Mothers' major statements, “our children gave birth to us,” bears witness to a peculiar inversion of biological roles. This curious tagline, which entangles life and death in the emergence of a new collective subject, also brings to light a peculiar conception of time. If, as Lee Edelman suggests, heteronormativity works as “the guardian of temporal (re)production,”²⁹ the

inversion of biological sequences involved in the Mothers' tagline can be rethought as animated by a queer temporality. The inversion of biological sequences also opened the space for an expanded conception of kinship ties. In his reading of Badiou, Jose Muñoz argues that the uncanniness attached to the effects and affects that occur in the face of the event makes what follows "the thing-that-is-not-yet-imagined."³⁰ In fact, what has not yet-been-imagined is that the Mothers' struggle, seemingly performed in the name of a biological tie, could turn out to be the basis of a nonfamiliar system of kinship. By staging their children as giving birth to them, the Mothers showed how time as the medium of advent can be deferred, refused, and contested from a nonbiological perspective. The Mothers showed themselves as subjects not constrained by a logic of death-in-life reproduction, but capable of proposing neither reproductive nor heteronormative accounts of kinship. In that sense, their struggle can be conceived as queer.

A major conflict eventually emerged within the original group of Mothers. In 1982, the first mass graves were found, making it impossible to maintain any hope that the disappeared could return alive. As Robben argues, the identification of the bodies by forensic groups opened the possibility for reburials, a new situation that apparently "would help raise the empathy for the rest of society for the victims of military repression."³¹ However, while one sector of the Mothers welcomed the forensic investigations and eventually the reburials, another group led by Hebe de Bonafini rejected them, arguing that they would not recognize the death of their children. This faction contested the principle of burying the bodies prescribed by its own Catholic background, and enounced this gesture as a refusal to heal. "Many want the wound to dry so that we will forget. We want it to continue bleeding, because this is the only way that one continues to have strength to fight," claimed Bonafini.³² The drastic gesture of denying the death of their children stressed the oppositional logic already involved in the Mothers' activism and placed them in the role of queer Antigones. Undone by grief, they assumed their fight as a stubborn resistance to the social order, one that flows beyond any pragmatic principles. While the more "grounded" sector, naming itself Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—Founding Line, accepted the economic reparations offered by the democratic government, arguing that it was a way for the state to assume its responsibility, the radical faction, known as the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, rejected the indemnifications.³³ "What are you going to protest when you accept the exhumations and the indemnifications? In no way whatsoever do I want a dead body, what I want is the murderer," claimed Bonafini at that time.³⁴

The partition of the original group eventually occurred in January 1986. The radical group, which, as Druliolle shows in his chapter, also resisted

the idea of memorials, performs a form of inscription of trauma that does not simply disrupt linear or reproductive desires, but also becomes stuck in the affective resonances of an impossible past. In that *stubbornness*, the Mothers have managed to place a demand on the present that embodies “a desire issuing from another time.”³⁵ Even more, this turn toward time enacted by the Mothers could be associated with what Edelman describes as the imperative of the death-drive involved in the position of queerness.³⁶ The death-drive impulse involved in their refusal to “accept” enacted a sort of excess that may be considered a way of disclosure with their generational carnal connection. In this manner, the Mothers perform what might be called an “impossible project of a queer oppositionality” that challenges any secure notion of kinship.³⁷ While still demanding for the “alive appearance” of their children, the Mothers enact an oppositional form of temporality, one that appears to have no future. However, this impossible claim has persisted in time, flowing outside language, and becoming not only an ethical imperative, but also a queer form of loyalty with their children.

The partition of the Mothers was indeed a fracture related to different ideas of “fidelity” in relation to the event of the disappearance of their children. Both sides began considering themselves as “inheritors” of their missing sons and daughters. In 1987, the so-called laws of impunity, which Crenzel discusses in the introduction, brought to an end the prosecution of military officers. By that time, the group led by Bonafini had progressively moved into a socialized conception of motherhood. If during the first public appearances each woman used to carry the name of her disappeared child written on her white scarf, eventually the Mothers decided to carry only the name of the group, omitting any personal details.³⁸ They also included a nonnormative pitch within their rounds that staged the extent to which the seemingly private losses had been assumed as collective: *Un hijo, todos los hijos* (One child, all the children). Bypassing any form of calculative rationality, the Mothers not only challenged the notion of uniqueness attached to the idea of the mother, as Nora Domínguez argues,³⁹ they also displaced the traditional family values to an extended field of attachments, affiliations, and affects that puts any secure notion of motherhood in crisis. Their claim “One child, all the children” advocated against blood as the only form of kinship. While endlessly circling around the Plaza de Mayo, the Mothers literally performed without end and without interruption a different conception of tie for the nation’s future.

There is an additional point to consider here. Regardless of the different factions, the ways in which the Mothers gathered together did not respond

to any traditional kinship category either. They defined themselves on the basis of a new “we,” bound together in rage, love, and desire. And in doing so, they built female networks that were not mediated by bloodline ties. Still, they were proud of recognizing themselves as siblings. “The fact of having a disappeared, just that, established a sisterhood between us,” stated one of the Mothers.⁴⁰ In fact, something similar could be argued about the associations of the relatives that followed the Mothers’ group. Although the Grandmothers and the Children also evoke their biological tie to the missing ones, they have all built inside their organizations alternative social arrangements that exceed any heteronormative formation. Precisely, the associations of the relatives seem to fit better this range of queer relations “that do not conform to the nuclear family model and that draw on biological and nonbiological relations, exceeding the reach of current juridical conceptions, functioning according to nonformalizable rules.”⁴¹ This is perhaps one of the most underestimated paradoxes of postdictatorial Argentina: the emergence of alternative kinship bonds that still seek to be perceived as conforming to the structure of a heteronormative family.

If the potential disturbance of kinship by the associations of the relatives may not have been perceived as such, it is precisely because the state played a crucial role in confining their action within the margins of the heteronormative frameworks. More precisely, as a way of configuring a politics of loss—and perhaps as a way of stepping outside violence—the democratic governments incorporated the emergence of the affective and social formations created by the “directly affected” by linking the category of the victim to the figure of a “wounded family.” Thereby, a queer reading emerges as the form of criticism that can displace the biological frames to glimpse beyond bloodline arrangements. This form of critique is the one that can also dismantle the operation concealed under the familial narratives, rediscovering the disturbance of kinship present in the Mothers’ performances and those of their descendants. Beyond what they could acknowledge themselves, the Mothers were pioneers of this disturbing displacement of ties. Retrospectively, their trajectory shows that it was possible to conceive lives interconnected in differential levels of precariousness at the expense of a new form of spectral and intergenerational relationality. This was the unpredictable contribution of the group to national mourning: the Mothers opened the possibility of conceiving an expanded sense of community through a queer reinvention of kinship ties. If it is only now that we are able to perceive it, it is precisely because the frame has changed. New voices have emerged to undermine the familial norm.

3.4 Los Rubios: *Undoing the Cult of the Victim*

To explore the continuities between the Mothers' ontological disturbance of kinship ties and those of their descendants, I propose an analysis of *Los Rubios* (2003). Although the unwritten rule of Argentine postdictatorship cinema stipulates that descendants and survivors must honor the name of the missing ones, the film directed by Albertina Carri not only rejected this dominant genre, but also challenged the compulsory demand of genealogical inscription that has become dominant in human rights discourses.

The film opens with a seemingly playful scene: a doll's house full of plastic toys performing the quotidian routine of a family living in the countryside. A few shots later, the scene is not so peaceful, not so quiet, not so *familiar*. The plastic toys turn out to be the deferred traces of a family that is not possible anymore, that perhaps has never been possible. In some forceful way, it becomes clear that what we are going to witness is nothing but the director's attempt to recover the traces of her missing parents: Ana María Caruso and Roberto Carri, a prestigious intellectual couple who were kidnapped by the military forces on February 24, 1977, and murdered that same year.

Los Rubios has nothing in common with traditional documentaries. All the conventions of the genre seem to be displaced, slightly removed, *queered*. Albertina Carri does not search for the quality of the evidence. All the more, the "epic" stories recalled by her parents' colleagues are projected on television monitors, like awkward supplements, uncomfortable or sterile fables of the past that the young crew views with infinite mistrust. The starting point of the film is already disturbing. The person telling the story is not Carri herself but an improbable alter ego, a woman in her late twenties who provocatively says to the camera: "My name is Analía Couceiro, I'm an actress, and in this film I play the part of Albertina Carri."

By converting the first person of the film into a fictional character that has not been "directly affected" by violence, *Los Rubios* challenges the identity politics that staged a figure of victim in bloodline inscription. In her analysis of the film, Nouzeilles argues that Carri disestablishes the public persona of the "daughter of the disappeared."⁴² This directorial gesture also calls into question the biological framework that established the legitimate subject of remembering in the aftermath of violence. However, Carri does not step aside. Provocatively, we can follow the director instructing the actress or debating with the crew the constant ups and downs of the plot. In doing so, the film also contests the idea of testimony as the expression of an inner and private "truth"; rather the possibility of giving an account of oneself emerges as a ritualistic performance that can be rehearsed, repeated,

iterated beyond bloodline inscriptions. As Alejandra Serpente also explains in this volume, *Los Rubios* stands for a politics of mourning where the experience of being affected is not limited to familial borders, but open to more expanded affiliations.

In a key moment of the film, the crew walks down the proletarian quarter where the director lived at the moment of her parents' disappearance looking for possible traces of the disappeared couple. Among the neighbors' elusive responses, the team is faced with a peculiar testimony. "I cannot remember anything about that family," says an old lady who used to live next to the family. "I just know that the three girls were blonde, the father was blond, the mother was also blonde. They were all blond," she states. From this conspicuous episode the film eventually takes its name. Still, the words of the woman trouble the crew: why was the brownish-haired family remembered as blond? Within the racialized discourse that has strong grounds in the cultural history of the country, the working class sectors have been traditionally recalled as "the black heads" (*cabecitas negras*).⁴³ As other scholars noticed, it seems not so difficult to understand why the Carris, an educated and wealthy family that did not have much in common with the rest of the inhabitants, were recalled as *blond*: they were the foreigners, they were the others.⁴⁴

However, I want to try a slightly different argument here. In my view, the film takes this indubitable sign of class to push it toward unforeseen implications. Rather than a mark of social status, the film beckons the idea of "blondness" as a feeling of strangeness in relation to one's "own name." Thereby, I propose to analyze the film under a spectral idea of inheritance that reverses traditional conceptions of victimhood.

3.5 A Touch across Times

In contrast to those who qualified *Los Rubios* as a "frivolous" and even "selfish" film, I argue that Carri offers an ethical response to the inexorability of her parents' absence. The titles have not yet finished when the actress in charge of the daughter's role reads aloud some passages of Roberto Carri's combative oeuvre. Her tone is so imperturbable, so distant, that it seems as if the radical discourse of the dead father were coming from a buried past. Although this early scene seems to stage an irreverent mood of engaging with the specters, I contend that Carri takes responsibility "under the injunction of someone who is not there."⁴⁵ If, as Derrida argues, responsibility is always an obligation "to honour the name which is not mine," he also suggests that the very idea of the name "is always in the future." How could it be possible to be true to the name of the other if this name has not yet arrived? Derrida's

answer evokes a queer sense of temporality: “You receive an old name from the past, but a name *as such* remains of a name-to-come; and the only way to sign with a name-to-come is, or should be a countersignature.”⁴⁶ By countersigning her own name, Carri offers an alternative mode of relationality with loss across time.

Argentina’s present not only responds to an obscure relation with the past, but also to an ethics toward the future. The nation’s trauma lies at the threshold of a spectral relation with the past that has to be responded in a time-to-come. If the Mothers’ trajectory can be conceived as a battle in the name of a backward fidelity, how, if not as a question of honoring the name of the other, could the singular spectacle of the descendants of the disappeared who have chosen to be known as *HIJOS* (the Children) be imagined? Without a doubt, both groups seem to perform an inquiry in relation to the boundaries of kinship in an expanded conception of time. However, since the linkage between lineage and truth remains quite problematic, a rephrased conception of kinship can help to perceive this seemingly familial drama under a new light. As Butler argues, “If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds, which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death.”⁴⁷ As I have argued here, the organizations of the Mothers, the Grandmothers, the Children, the Relatives, and the Siblings have relied on kinship forms to address the demands of death in the restored democratic context. Although they have evoked familial titles, they do not seem to conform to any of them. They have addressed forms of support, interdependency, and care through horizontal organizations that reunite people of similar generations who gathered together owing to their common condition of having suffered. They have evoked traditional kinship forms, but they have managed to build social arrangements that exceed the borders of blood. They have built nonmarital and nonreproductive ties that emerge outside the heteronormative ties, but that still rely on traditional kinship titles. Given this paradoxical Constitution, the pretension to inscribe their activism within a bloodline chain betrays the spectral resonances of the case.

Los Rubios plays out its battle exactly on that stage. The very idea of blood becomes countersigned to suggest nonbiological attachments in relation to the missing ones. Whereas the associations of the Mothers and the Children have been framed to make a cult of the victims, for the first time a *daughter* manages to establish a different fight with the ghosts. “I am

not interested in an advocate perspective. The name *HIJOS* scares me. I do not want to be a 'daughter' for all my life. I want to be other things," claims Carri.⁴⁸ And she does other things indeed. For instance, she stages her parents' disappearance in a quite hallucinatory way: a plastic spaceship swoops down from the sky and whisks away her toy-parents. While dealing with the impossibility of recovering those absences, the film reintroduces the figure of the disappeared not as familial propriety, but as the insuperable characters of a national fiction. By converting her parents into toys, Carri stages an alternative response to the familial normativity championed by the associations of the relatives. For this reason, I do not see her "toy-parents" as an impugnation of their figures, but rather as a process of "countersignature," that can also be perceived as a queer form of fidelity with the missing ones. Crucially, fidelity in this case does not imply simple repetition or reproduction. On the contrary, the idea of being true to the other, "*true* in terms of *fidelity*," implies in Derrida's words to "add something *new*, to give something to the other, something that the other could receive and could, in his or her turn, actually or as a ghost, countersign."⁴⁹ The fundamental novelty staged by Carri's process of countersignature is the fact that she does not take responsibility in the name of a "wounded family," but rather in the name of all others who might also have been inflicted by violence. In doing so, *Los Rubios* stages a new fiction of kinship for the present time.

While dealing with the painful resonances of an ongoing trauma, Carri's film never loses its singular lightness, and even a certain form of tenderness. In one of the last passages, we can see the actress in front of a birthday cake. She says: "I hate having to make a wish to blow out the candles on my birthday. I spent many birthdays making the same wish and I cannot stop wishing for the same thing: that my mum would come back, that my dad would come back, that they would come back soon." The director does not like the results and obliges the actress to shoot the scene several times. Once again, by highlighting the uncanny split of characters, the film displaces the familial content of the scene. That wish, iterated by an actress, no longer belongs to a victimized daughter, but rather to all those who become unraveled by that childhood flashback. In doing so, the film introduces the possibility of sharing as the unexpected aftermath of violence. Yet, the queer futurity of blowing out the candles of an improbable past may also bring a desire for a different future. In that sense, *Los Rubios* can even be grasped as a gift, the impossible gift for those who are not there to receive it.⁵⁰ Moreover, in the nonreproductive logic of the film, that gift becomes extended to an intergenerational and affective community beyond blood.

3.6 *Becoming Blonds*

Butler finishes *Antigone's Claim* with a doubt. She states that the Greek heroine “is caught in a web of relations that produce no coherent position within kinship.”⁵¹ Something similar could be argued in relation to the descendants of the disappeared: daughters and sons of vanished parents, brought up with relatives and friends in the best-case scenario, or with their appropriators in the worst, and in most cases, without clear knowledge of their origins. To some extent, for them the system of kinship remains unintelligible. Yet, *Los Rubios* offers an alternative answer to this indecipherable chain.

At the end of the film, Analía Couceiro, the actress who enacts Carri's role, stands in the middle of the countryside. She is not alone. The entire team and the director are also there. They are all wearing blond wigs on their heads. They all walk toward the horizon. It seems to me that this closing scene has the ability to read the postdictatorial scene under a new light. Undoubtedly, the wigs make reference to the testimony of the old neighbor who recalled the Carris as blond. But are the wigs just an ironic quote, the material sign of an oblique misunderstanding projected in time? It doesn't seem so. The members of the film crew who wear the wigs are not only descendants of the disappeared. In fact, most of them have not been directly touched by the state repression. In their cases, the wigs function as the deferred engagement that refuses the reduction of kinship to a regular family of victims. They appear as a fetishized object that draws the figure of a new community beyond familial inscriptions. The wigs offer a playful, creative, and still critical response to the monopoly of mourning supported by the associations of the victims. While extending the legitimacy of loss to a variety of kinship forms, the blond heads draw a more extensive idea of “us” for postdictatorial Argentina.

In her analysis of *Los Rubios* as a “postmemory artefact,” Nouzeilles describes the last scene as a “pantomimic performance of displaced identities.”⁵² We can push her argument a little further. As Butler reminds us, Benjamin also conceives an intimate relationship between pantomime and mourning. For him, pantomime is the form in which mourning takes place, a sort of choreographical and ostentatious gesture that is ultimately related to certain sensuousness of the bodies coming back from loss. Butler quotes Benjamin saying, “Comedy—or more precisely: the pure joke—is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt.”⁵³ Butler draws from the image of the dress to argue that mourning is linked to a material of clothing “that is suddenly, or even unexpectedly, felt against the flesh, the leg, or the neck.” In that way, she reintroduces the idea of grief as “a

certain encounter between a commodified material and the limb that knows only on occasion.”⁵⁴ It seems to me that the blond wigs appear as that artifact, that commodified material felt against the flesh. All the more so as Butler argues that “the dress is, as it were, laughing.”⁵⁵ To some extent, Carri’s wigs iterate that dress; they appear as the artifice, the sensuousness that animates the bodies of the film crew walking toward the horizon. Moreover, the wigs emerge as the artifice that laughs in mourning, and it is a laughter that mocks all familialism and stages instead the uncanny pleasures of being plural in loss. The blond wigs are Carri’s singular response to trauma, one that shows the familial framework in its artifice, and its potential undoing.

In her reflection on grief post-9/11, Butler suggests that grief has the capacity to un-do the subject, enabling new attachments and configurations. The new chorographical disposition of the bodies at the end of the film stages a form of mourning that “is not resolved into melancholia,” but rather, it emerges as a form of pleasure, a mode of becoming other, of becoming blond, and being undone by the process of loss.⁵⁶ Under this light, *Los Rubios*’ last scene becomes gracefully performative: it stages the wigs as a fetish element of a postkinship structure of an intergenerational and intercorporeal transmission of trauma. The youthful team enacts the spectral community of those who partake in and debate a common destiny, a community that displaces the borders of the monopoly of suffering and helps to conceive a broader idea of being inflicted. What this last scene reads, then, is the crisis of traditional forms of kinship governed by the linkage of blood framed in the postdictatorial period. It calls into question the state’s connivance with that familial language, suggesting an emergent ethical order where more diverse social arrangements are possible. *Los Rubios* offers a visual narrative for those attachments that might not necessarily be spoken or easily articulated. It envisions a nonheteronormative and horizontal community, which mocks fathers and leaders, opening the door to irregular relations of love, empathy, and care—unexpected ties formed around trauma.

Finally, the crew wearing the blond wigs has the lightness of a visionary dream. The embryonic queer family walking toward the horizon has the ability to highlight something that is still in a process of emergence in Argentine society: a new lineage where past and present are joined together through an experience of shared mourning. Yet, the film enacts a dream that invents its own future. It works as a self-reflexive object that offers a new fold to Argentina’s recent trauma, a centrifugal fiction that bears a complex texture of anger, guilt, responsibility, forgiveness, but also laughter. Carri makes a final wink to her viewers: in this trip they are all invited.

Afterword

As I gave the final touches to this chapter at the end of April 2010, a new incident in the so-called Noble case captured media anxieties. Ernestina Herrera de Noble, the director of the national newspaper *Clarín* and the iconic figure of one of the most powerful economic corporations of Argentina, has been suspected of being the illegal appropriator of her two adopted children, Felipe and Marcela, born during the dictatorship, and now in their early thirties. Although investigations have been underway for almost nine years, the siblings, via the family lawyers, pervasively refused to run the DNA tests that can corroborate that they are the descendants of disappeared.⁵⁷ The newspaper owned by their mother became the target of conspicuous governmental maneuvers. In a heated exchange of threats, the Noble family responded first with a public statement that bears the signature of Felipe and Marcela, and a few days later, with a short video featuring the siblings. The framing of the clip is surprising: staging the scene of an ordinary family, Marcela and Felipe sit on the couch of a living room. They hold hands. Marcela's blouse looks slightly untidy and sometimes the camera captures Felipe's gaze curiously out of focus. Despite the fact that a huge corporation supported the media event, the clip appears plain and even spontaneous. Keeping the same monochord tone, the siblings successively argue that they do not want to be "war trophies." They present themselves as "victims" of a government's campaign. "Thirty-four years ago our mother chose us as her son and daughter. Everyday, we choose her as our mum. Nobody can ever destroy this tie," they claim.

At the end of May 2010, the siblings were eventually forced to run the genetic tests in the terms requested by the human rights organizations. Even so, while the DNA results are still pending, how may it be possible to make sense of the whole episode? The narrative at play is already known. It is still the language of the family, but a language that is strangely displaced, subtly queered, this time from an unexpected "side." It has been said that the siblings are the "toys" of their mother, that they just *read* or *repeat* the language of their appropriators. But they do more than that: they iterate the biological normativity in place to make themselves part of an unexpected chain of familial victims. With the force of the norm, the language of the family traveled throughout society to become iterated by those who are precisely suspected to be perpetrators of violence as an attempt to legitimize their claim. In her analysis of the "Complete Memory" associations included in this volume, Valentina Salvi addresses the victimizing discourses developed by the relatives of fallen military officers in the "war against subversion", as a strategy to portray them as martyrs. The siblings Noble also share the

impulse to be recognized in their suffering, as part of a domestic realm suddenly endangered by violence. As much as the associations of the “directly affected,” Marcela and Felipe Noble share the desire to be perceived as familial victims. And in some contested sense, they probably are. The problem is that the reifying force of kinship operates to obscure fundamental differences. Yet, public declarations of human rights organizations showed themselves clueless to address this paradox: “The Noble case has been transformed into a war that should never have existed,” argued Estela Carlotto, leader of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.⁵⁸ Although she perceives the uncertainties of the case, she also fails to acknowledge them, revealing the limits of the narratives at play.

Still, something has changed. On April 30, a response to the video got published in another national newspaper. Mariana Eva Pérez, a theater director and herself daughter of a disappeared couple, argues that although it is impossible to discern the position of the siblings, their bodies become enacted by a violence that exceeds them. She contends that the term “appropriator” is not enough to give an account of the social dimension of the crime: “We need to invent new concepts,” she claims.⁵⁹ And she is right. From an unforeseen place, the biological chain has been surrendered. In a very disturbing way, the siblings’ discourse rejects the idea of family as something “natural.” Ironically, the Nobles do not rely on blood ties either. Precisely because of that, their case becomes particularly poignant to reveal the limits of the narratives of human rights groups. It exposes the extent to which the language of the family as the social norm functions precisely “by way of managing the prospect of its undoing.”⁶⁰ In a totally unforeseen way, the Noble case also claims for more advanced conceptions of ties in the wake of trauma.

In this chapter, I have presented a “queer reading” in response to the need for new vocabularies to address the aftermath of violence. I have proposed to move toward refigured frameworks of kinship to understand the new affective attachments that have emerged out of the process of loss. As much as the concept of “queer families” permeates, corrupts, and undermines the notion of the family as the exclusive space of reproduction and heteronormative practices, I suggest that the affiliations that have emerged in postdictatorship Argentina do not simply trouble normative desires: they also disturb the idea of a “wounded family” as the only victim of state terrorism. In doing so, they invite us to imagine new connections and ties that bind Argentine society intergenerationally. Given this, I have proposed to move into a rephrased conception of kinship that does not rely exclusively on bloodline and, ultimately, is based on a spectral idea of friendship. Still, this alternative perspective does not assume any

attempt to reconcile. Rather, it appears as an expansion of critical horizons to address the set of problems that unsettles traditional human rights discourses.

The American scholar José Esteban Muñoz suggests that *queerness* could be a mode of desire, a new form of temporality that applies for something that is still missing in the present and could be embedded with certain hope.⁶¹ If a queer reading is relevant to grasp the Argentine case, perhaps we may arrive at a stage where the idea of memory could move beyond the monopolist imposition of a “familial duty” and emerge instead as an intergenerational process of sharing that involves new forms of pleasure, as the image of the blond wigs seems to suggest. Frames have started changing. The sense of being undone by mourning whispers new sensuous forms of tie-to-come.

Notes

I am grateful to Catherine Silverstone and Maria Delgado, my supervisors at Queen Mary, for their constant support to help me develop this framework to approach post-dictatorial Argentina. I am indebted to Catherine for a critical reading of an earlier version of this chapter, and to Vikki Bell, my accomplice in the Argentine passion. Thanks to Alejandra Serpente, Valentina Salvi, Constanza Tabbush, and Matias Ison for their inspiring feedback, and to the editors Francesca Lessa and Vincent Druliolle who, after our meeting at the SLAS conference in Leeds (2009), believed in this book project. This research was partially funded by Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (ORSAS) and Queen Mary’s Drama Department. The Central Research Fund, University of London, and the Society for Latin American Studies supported fieldwork for the research on which this chapter is based.

1. To craft the idea of a “queer reading,” I am specially inspired by the works of Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, Lee Edelman, José Muñoz, and Heather Love, among other queer scholars.
2. In an interview conducted by Regina Michalik, Butler argues: “Queer is not being lesbian, queer is not being gay. It is an argument against certain normativity.” Judith Butler, “The Desire for Philosophy,” http://www.lolapress.org/elec2/artenglish/butl_e.htm.
3. 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), 177.
4. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), 111.
5. Néstor Kirchner was President of Argentina from 2002 to 2007, when his wife, Cristina Fernández, was elected to succeed him.

6. Cvetkovich's analysis explicitly rejects a pathologized account of the idea of trauma for American lesbian cultures and challenges its hierarchies by proposing a horizontal process that can be extended beyond obvious sites of suffering. See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexualities and Public Lesbian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
7. Lee Edelman, *No Future. Queer Theory and Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Here and There of Queer Futurity* (London, New York: University of New York Press, 2009).
8. In 1996, the children of the disappeared founded H.I.J.O.S, *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, against Forgetting and Silence). The emergence of the organization *Herman@s* (the Siblings) seems to confirm the productivity of the familial frame.
9. Elizabeth Jelin, "The Politics of Memory: The Human Rights Movements and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina" *Latin American Perspectives* 21, no. 2 (1994): 53.
10. The essentialization of family biological links in the discourse of human rights organizations is also acknowledged by Alejandra Serpente in her analysis in this volume of the transmission of trauma with the second generation of Chileans and Argentineans in the United Kingdom.
11. Virginia Vecchioli, "La Nación Como Familia. Metáforas Políticas en el Movimiento Argentino Por los Derechos Humanos" in *Cultura y Política en Etnografías Sobre la Argentina*, ed. Sabina Frederic y Germán Soprano (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2005).
12. The Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) works as a counter-example of the familial shape of human rights associations. Although the organization was founded by a group of relatives of the disappeared, it does not assume blood as the principle of public distinction.
13. Vecchioli, 257. The law of economic reparation for the victims was adopted in 1994.
14. Jelin, "Victims, Relatives, and Citizens," 180.
15. *Ibid.*, 182.
16. *Ibid.*, 195.
17. Edelman, 27.
18. I am following Judith Butler's account of the process of mourning developed in *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 21.
19. Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 9.
20. The estimated number of kidnapped children who grew up with false identities is 500. By 2010, the Grandmothers had managed to restore 100 identities.
21. Butler, *Frames of War*, 9.
22. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 102–130 (Chapter 5, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?"); Angela McRobbie, *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2005), 185–196 ("Mothers and

- Fathers, Who Needs Them? Butler's Antigone's Claim . . ."); David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship. Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
23. Jelin, "Victims, Relatives, and Citizens," 198.
 24. Judith Butler, "Afterword" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 468.
 25. Butler, *Frames of War*, 162.
 26. As Butler argues, "if a life is not grievable is not quite a life." Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34.
 27. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 24.
 28. Quoted in Peter Hallward, *Badiou. A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 114.
 29. Lee Edelman, in Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, and Roderick Ferguson, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 181.
 30. Muñoz, 21.
 31. Antonious Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 329.
 32. Quoted in Robben, 329.
 33. Today, Hebe de Bonafini's Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is the closer to Cristina Kirchner's administration.
 34. Quoted in Robben, 329.
 35. Carla Freccero, in Dinshaw et al., 184.
 36. Lee Edelman, in Dinshaw et al., 181.
 37. Edelman, 4.
 38. By contrast, the Mothers—Founding Line remained attached to the figures of their personal losses.
 39. Nora Domínguez, *De Dónde Vienen los Niños. Maternidad y Escritura en la Cultura Política* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2007), 282.
 40. Cited by Vecchioli, 244
 41. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 102.
 42. Gabriela Nouzeilles, "Postmemory Cinema and the Future of the Past in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*" *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2005): 266.
 43. In the mid-1940s, President Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1952, 1953–1955, and 1973–1974) reappropriated the term "black heads" to dignify the figure of the working class, his main supporter and the first source of legitimization of his populist governments. The term "black heads" has been inherited by his successors and still haunts the political arena.
 44. Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo Pasado. Cultura de la Memoria y Giro Subjetivo. Una Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2005), 146–151. Martín Kohan, "La Apariencia Celebrada" *Punto de Vista*, no. 78 (April 2004): 24–30.

45. Jacques Derrida, "As If I Were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in *Applying: To Derrida*, ed. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins, and Julian Wolfreys (London: Macmillan, 1999), 220.
46. Derrida, "As If I Were Dead," 220.
47. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 102–103.
48. María Moreno, "Esa Rubia Debilidad," *Página 12*, October 23, 2003, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-1001-2003-10-23.html>.
49. Derrida, "As If I Were Dead," 220–221.
50. Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 64.
51. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 57.
52. Nouzeilles, 275.
53. Judith Butler, "Afterword" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 470.
54. Judith Butler, "Afterword," 470.
55. *Ibid.*, 470.
56. *Ibid.*, 471.
57. Although in 2003 the siblings agreed to run the DNA tests to respond to the claims of two individual families who claim to be their biological ones, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo still want to cross their tests with all the information available in the National Genetic Database created in 1987 to respond to the affiliation disorders provoked by the last dictatorship.
58. *Perfil.com*, "Para Carlotto, El Caso Noble Se Transformó 'En una Guerra' No Deseada," April 1, 2010, http://www.perfil.com/contenidos/2010/04/01/noticia_0022.html.
59. Mariana Eva Pérez, "La Materialidad de los Cuerpos," *Página 12*, April 30, 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-5685-2010-04-30.html>.
60. Butler, *Frames of War*, 12.
61. Muñoz, 32.