

**Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship:
The Performances of Blood,
Cecilia Sosa
Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2014
190 pages.**

Cecilia Sosa's volume offers an incisive, heart-wrenching yet joyful exploration through the aftermath of the convulse years of the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983), which brought horror and death to Argentine society with an estimated 30,000 people disappeared by the State (according to human rights organizations; 9,000 according to official figures), and of how Argentine society has managed to deal and engage with loss. The restoration to democracy in 1983 brought further pain by the passing of the "laws of impunity" (*Obediencia Debida* [1987] and *Punto Final* [1986]), which ruled that the crimes committed by military personnel below the rank of colonel would not be prosecuted, as they had been carried out by subalterns bound by "due obedience" to the military chain of command. Crimes against humanity would be, thus, left unprosecuted, with the only exception of the abduction of children born in captivity (an estimated 500). The laws sought, allegedly, to put a "full stop" to national unease and to help Argentine society to move on. A second blow was delivered during the presidency of Carlos Menem in the 1990s, when the highest-ranking officers that had been effectively convicted were granted a presidential pardon on claims that it was time "to kick start a process of national reconstruction in peace, liberty, and justice," Menem said.

While the publication in 1984 of the official report by the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP)—also known as *Nunca Más*—exposed the workings of the *Plan de Reorganización Nacional* (of the military governments) and detailed the atrocities committed at the clandestine detention centres (torture, identity theft, abduction, murder, among others), the complex relationship of Argentina with memory persisted and an open debate was mostly shunned from broader society at large. Divisive scars remained, as the ominous official silence has resulted in a feeling of impunity that, far from healing, has weighted heavily upon an Argentine society that, as Sosa argues, is—to a lesser or greater extent—marked by the experience of loss and violence. contextualized in both regional and national social developments.

Herself a child of the generation born into the dictatorship, and despite or precisely because of not having any disappeared family members, Sosa's study is driven by the question of how those who are not the direct victims of violence share in the collective experience of loss, and in what ways they can engage in mourning and grieving. Sosa's main claim is that in the post-dictatorship years, a "bloodline normativity" has ruled the narratives of loss in Argentina, where "it seemed as though only the 'direct' victims had the authority, the privilege and ultimately the right to talk about these issues" (xii). The activism of the main associations fighting for the "alive apparition" (*aparición con vida*) of the disappeared since 1980 are associations, as their names indicate, of relatives: *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (grandmothers),

Dolores Resano

Madres de Plaza de Mayo (mothers), and *H.I.J.O.S.* (children), and the legal framework, which makes relatives a legal figure for reparation (2), has stressed this condition. As a result, the fight for justice in the post-dictatorship has been construed around the evocation of biological ties to the missing, creating a “wounded family” in which non-members are not allowed to engage. This has somehow entailed a feeling of “exclusivity,” effectively creating an insider/outsider dichotomy that has cast out from the right to grieve the broader society not affected by personal losses.

In this context, Sosa’s study is driven by the aim “to both *query* and to *queer*” (xi, emphasis in the original) these narratives of blood and kinship. Drawing from Judith Butler’s notion of “queering” as resignification, and David Eng’s formulation of an alternative “feeling of kinship” that does not depend on familial bonds but rather on the “collective, communal, and consensual affiliations as well as the psychic, affective, and visceral bonds” (xii), the author explores the possibility of a new idea of community in Argentina in the aftermath of loss, and offers an innovative theoretical framework to do so. Deeply informed by performance, affect, and queer studies, Sosa analyses an archive of diverse social and artistic practices (civil and political activism, performance, theatre, cinema, literature, and the arts) up to the year 2008, through the lens (and sometimes the challenging) of notions such as Sara Ahmed’s “killjoy” figure, Horacio González’s “families of choice,” Diana Taylor’s “DNA of performance,” Weiner and Young’s “Queer bonds,” and Marianne Hirsch’s “Post-memory,” among others.

The cultural manifestations selected for the archive, although built on the experience of loss, Sosa argues, “share a non-normative impulse; they show how memory always exceeds the margins of duty” and “contest victimhood as the only mode of engaging with loss” (20). Thus, these manifestations—created, for the most part, by members of the “wounded family”—are nonetheless creating more inclusive and interstitial spaces where alternative affective arrangements can be established and where unconventional pleasures can be inscribed. The organization of the archive is clever, as Sosa explores acts and performances that get progressively more queer, non-normative, and even subversive, from the “iteration of loss” in the *Madres*’ almost ritual circling around the monolith at Plaza de Mayo since 1980, to Félix Bruzzone’s satiric novel *Los topos* (2008) which, the author contends, was somehow prophetic in announcing the official appropriation of grieving and loss that would take place during the Kirchner administrations. Néstor Kirchner managed to expand the community of loss and to create a feeling of “happy family” by declaring himself a “son” of the *Madres* and proposing “a non-biological adoption of trauma” (18), an act which, more importantly, entailed the abolition of the “laws of impunity” and the reopening of the legal proceedings in 2006. However, after his death in 2010, the narratives of loss and kinship have become somehow entangled and manipulated for much political gain, an issue that Sosa discusses in the last chapter through the “performances” by Mrs. Fernández de Kirchner as “the mother” and “the widow” of the nation. Sosa argues that the discourse of blood has, thus, become “expropriated from its biological basis” and memory has now somehow become “mandatory” (19), closing the circle and opening a challenging new phase for Argentine society.

Dolores Resano

Chapter 1, "Paradoxes of Blood: From the *Madres'* Queer Mourning to the Kirchnerist Era," explores how the *Madres'* fight queers the familial bonds from the outset and reverses genealogical lineage with their foundational statement: "Our children gave birth to us." The chapter explores the enactment of the *Madres'* claim for justice (circling around the monolith in Plaza de Mayo every Thursday at 3pm since 1980) as a queer performance, and also delves, through Ahmed's notion of the "killjoy" and Horacio González's "family of choice," into the cases of two abducted children who despite being reunited with their blood families by the investigations carried out by the *Abuelas* organization, challenge the reinforcement of blood ties and the "happy narrative" of reunion.

Chapter 2, "Black Humour and the Children of the Disappeared," explores the paradoxical case of the association H.I.J.O.S., which simultaneously contested and reinforced the bloodline normativity at the public and private levels. Though functioning internally as a micro-community of "blue-bloods" of loss, their acts of public shaming (*escraches*) in the wake of President Menem's pardons were "massive, festive, and mobile spectacles [...] which highlighted the absence of legal justice" (31) and which invited the larger society to take part, helping to establish loss as a collective experience. Sosa analyses how H.I.J.O.S.'s use of black humor as a tool to overcome feelings of victimization and rejection has produced a new and "non-normative culture of mourning," an "unusual form of 'happiness'" (28) from which the members can derive a sense of empowerment, and also explores the tensions that have caused the group to split, on the basis of a too exclusive idea of "us."

Chapter 3, "Undoing the Cult of the Victim: *Los Rubios, M*, and *La mujer sin cabeza*" analyses two films and an extended documentary (*M*) produced within the New Argentine Cinema that emerged in the 1990s, which contests the former, dominant tradition—especially in the so-called "genre of the disappeared"—of monumentalizing the past and creating a cult to the victim (51). Sosa reads these two works as "post-memory" films that, however, manage to *queer* traditional victimizing narratives and to offer non-normative readings.

Chapter 4, "The cooking mother: Hebe de Bonafini and the Conversion of the former ESMA," draws mostly from Nicholas Ridout's notion of "staging the real" and Bobby Baker's experimental performances to delve into Hebe de Bonafini's performative cooking lessons, *Cocinando política* ("Cooking Politics") at the former site of detention ESMA, which was turned into a site of memory (*Espacio de la Memoria*) in 2004. Bonafini's controversial figure has been instrumental in the reappropriation and transformation of the space by Argentine society, a space that has also generated a larger debate about collective memory.

Chapter 5, "The Attire of (Post-)Memory: *Mi vida después*," interrogates Marianne Hirsch's formulation of post-memory through an analysis of Lola Arias's theatre production *Mi vida después*, premiered in Buenos Aires in 2009. Sosa deftly shows in this insightful chapter how Arias' production engages critically with and challenges the notion of post-memory in very ingenious ways. The production, in which

Dolores Resano

six actors draw from personal experience, includes the stories of victims of the dictatorship and also of those not traditionally considered victims, which for Sosa is crucial as it helps “to grasp how the resonances of trauma can be processed collectively” (110). Arias’ subject matter and her “illegitimate” background made her subject of suspicions from colleagues and the media, as she (born in 1976) was not directly affected by State violence. Thus, Sosa shows how both the production (dependent on a collective framework in which actors help to re-enact each other’s stories) as well as Arias’ status as an “outsider,” come to show how it is possible to engage with a politics of memory from a non-normative perspective, in which “the experience of being affected is not limited to familial borders but open to more expanded affiliations” (111).

Finally, chapter 6 “Kinship, Loss and Political Heritage: *Los topos* and Kirchner’s death” explores the ultimate subversion of the “wounded family” narrative in Félix Bruzzone’s novel *Los topos* and the ways in which Bruzzone (himself the son of two disappeared parents) makes fun of the “wounded family” and the officialization of grief in the Kirchnerist era.

An engaging and fresh read, the volume’s main contribution to the field of memory and identity studies is that it succeeds in providing an innovative theoretical perspective to approach it. By reorienting the critique towards the possibility of more inclusive modes of mourning, it succeeds in answering the question of “how to recreate a creative politics of memory [...] which gives room to the expanded affiliations that have emerged in the wake of violence” (26).