



## *Apropiación, Not Kinship*

### Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo's Resignification of Nurture against State Terror

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**Abstract.** – This article discusses how resignifications of the human rights NGO Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo contributed to transformations of post-dictatorial culture. For decades hegemonic media and perpetrators engaged state terror's reasoning to confront Abuelas' call for "restitution" of the children who "disappeared" during the last dictatorship in Argentina. Drawing on both the junta's self-appointed role of saviors and the benevolence of nurture, Catholic couples had thus rescued children from irresponsible "subversive" parents. In their struggle against state terror Abuelas' metaphor *apropiación* resignified nurture as violence, pushing politico-cultural change towards a universal right to identity. [Argentina, state terror, resistance, language and politico-cultural change, kinship]

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#### **Introduction: The Metaphor of *Apropiación***

Living amidst state terror involves not only experiences of pain but also terror of signification. At least since Joseph Goebbels coined the term *Sprachregelung* (Yahil 1990), state terrorist regimes have recognized the political significance of language for legitimizing their actions. Here, I focus on how state terror's antagonists achieve power by introducing particular language as well, establishing alternative notions to those of the power holders. I will try to show how the human

rights NGO Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), hereafter Abuelas, a numerically very small group of relatives of "the disappeared" in Argentina, learned to apply proper notions of kinship and identity in their struggle against state terror's violent molding of filiation and subjectivities.

For Abuelas' resistance included not only *poniendo el cuerpo* against power, endangering their own life. Next to the weekly marches around the Plaza de Mayo aimed at generating a public visibility of their demands and incessantly asking for their disappeared kin in the agencies of state terror, resistance also involved the realm of meaning. Seeking to "restitute" their grandchildren who were abducted alongside their parents or born in secret detention centers and afterwards registered by members of the security forces as their own children – which entailed the falsifying of names, dates of birth and family histories – Abuelas introduced an alternative term to flag this act as a state terrorist one: *apropiación*.

*Apropiación*, primarily a legal concept, is an effective metaphorical resignification of kinship founded on state terror; accordingly, *apropiadora*, *apropiador*, *apropiadores* for the people who raised disappeared children. This metaphor enables Abuelas to differently name the act of abduction and their living conditions in order to thwart a constructivist framing of kinship based on nurture and love, oblivious to state terror. In their struggle, Abuelas have restituted 130 grandchil-

dren so far, the last one in June 2019. These children, today adults in their early forties, are called *nietos/as* in Argentine public – hereafter *Nietxs* – which reflects the prominent searching efforts of Abuelas. By resignifying notions of filiation and identity widely disseminated by force and hegemonic media, Abuelas contributed to develop an alternative paradigm of a right to identity which had comprehensive effects on Argentine society and beyond. Thus, Abuelas opposed prevalent arguments that surfaced whenever a grandchild was found about restitution being harmful since “nurture” parents have raised them well and with love while their disappeared “nature” parents, given their irresponsible “subversive” orientation, had failed.

Metaphors articulate ethical judgments about the social world and are capable of generating affective reactions and “new realities” (Kurz 1993: 21, 24; see also Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Klemperer 2000). They “offer perspectives – ‘angles of vision’ that bring certain objects into sharp focus and blur others” (Pion-Berlin 1989: 22). Speaking in different terms than hegemonic factions establishes an alternative representation of society that implies a different practice of treating human beings. Yet, in my view, resignification as a form of “politico-cultural mobilisation” (Cohen 1993: 5) is insufficiently acknowledged when it comes to thinking about the relation of cultural change and social movements. Although the significance of ideas for the analysis of state terror has received some elaboration in classical studies about Argentina published since the mid-1980s, ideas of the oppressing groups stood in the foreground. As to resisting collectives, particularly studies of the modified sense of motherhood realized via political performances of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo as well as human rights activists’ application of a particular concept of genocide have shown how social movements gain power by producing alternative semantics to the ruling ones (e.g., Burchianti 2004; Seidel 2011). Here, I want to contribute to these studies by focusing on *apropiación* as an understudied concept developed by Abuelas which, in my view, had a profound impact on the way specific deeds of the dictatorship are narrated and judged in Argentina today.

As Park has recently argued, the language of social movements deserves increased attention, offering “a more radical understanding of the role of language in social transformation” which “challenges us to take more seriously the place of language within movements of social transformation” (2019: 410f.). Even when Osiel discussed how

distinct normative conceptions of the world laid out different legal strategies in the *Juicio a las Juntas*, he still underestimated the significance of language itself, the importance of intentionally designed and employed concepts in the struggle for power.<sup>1</sup> How cultural change is also driven by the language of social movements can be demonstrated by the study of resignifications which obviously constitute one factor among many, although a very important one as I will try to show here.

Among Abuelas’ extensive activities of resistance, language is paramount in marking both oppression and liberation. The act of “resignificación” is a central medium of Abuelas’ politico-cultural interventions. The global aim of their resignifications is to realize a society in which human beings are enabled to live the true, i.e., “natural” qualities of a subject which rest on filiation. A kind of essentialist “bio”-self-knowledge would thus liberate individuals from the ongoing repression and its misleading interpretation by the last dictatorship and their allies. In Abuelas’ alternative paradigm, “bio”-self-knowledge is in itself liberating. This position led to an array of omnipresent essentialist figures in their narratives such as their common phrase that genetic identity is the real identity or frequent references to metaphors of roots and blood in explaining behavior or physical traits of *Nietxs*. Looking at resignifications may help to understand how small groups in terms of numbers such as Abuelas can achieve wide-ranging effects on society. Based on my ongoing fieldwork,<sup>2</sup> I will try to show how the metaphor of *apropiación*, a resignification of nurture kinship as state terror, has contributed to cultural change in Argentina and beyond.

1 This might explain why Osiel repeatedly claims that human rights collectives were “lacking in discernible political power,” a remarkable misjudgment in an otherwise path-breaking study (1986: 159; see also 176). Osiel’s underestimation might be best discernible in the fact that he does not mention that President Alfonsín was also a partisan of the human rights movement himself, being a founding member of the Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, APDH). Pion-Berlin (1989) and Feitlowitz (2011) are two further classical studies that do not address the language of human rights groups as a cultural production, even though the regime also had to respond to those collectives. Studies about human rights in Argentina and especially Abuelas have not yet paid particular attention to the metaphor of *apropiación* (see below).

2 Fieldwork in Buenos Aires totals 14 months so far (2008–2009, 2011, 2014–2015, 2017–2018, 2020), next to interviews and participant observation in Berlin, Barcelona, Hamburg, La Plata, London (2014–2019). I will, in some cases, not disclose the name of an interviewed *nieto/o* nor the date in order to preserve their anonymity.

Language alone is, of course, not capable of changing the material world and capital-based power arrangements nor cultural framings institutionalized by state terror. The necessity of political and material support as well as collective action is evident. Hence, the material resources and political support Abuelas received as an NGO – from international organizations, regional and national governments, churches, prominent figures, etc. –, need to be considered as should be the voluntary work of so many. In the Kirchner era (2003–2015) the local political and material support became so comprehensive that even human rights activists criticized it as an unduly co-optation. I think, however, that Abuelas' resignifications have a substantial, although understudied political significance since they became effective devices in the struggle for power.

I will now put forward my argument by first briefly sketching Abuelas' history and the process of restitution for which they are struggling. After discussing the reigning ideas which Abuelas had to counter I will then address the emergence and practical employment of the metaphor of *apropiación*.

### Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and the Restitution of the "Disappeared Children"

According to most Argentine human rights organizations, 30,000 people "were disappeared" during the last dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983) and the preceding two years of democratic government (Brysk 1994). Among these were approximately 500 children who were abducted with their parents or born in captivity. They were given either to orphanages, classified as NN, or, as in the great majority, to members of the security forces and other persons regarded as politically trustworthy. Most children were illegally registered as the consanguineal children of the receiving families. Doctors or midwives forged birth certificates, erasing any knowledge of their former families, names and histories of political violence. Falsifying personal data was important to hide the crime from the emerging groups of relatives searching for their disappeared kin.

The most prominent groups are Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, both originating in 1977 (Arditti 1999; Bouvard 2004; Veiga 1985). Abuelas was established by women searching for their disappeared children and grandchildren. Having met in the group of Madres, they soon became aware that their situation was not unique,

something unimaginable as Abuela's founder, the late Chicha Mariani, told me (Interview María Isabel "Chicha" Mariani, La Plata, April 2014). She was terrified when she first heard of other women searching for their grandchildren too, suddenly realizing that the kidnapping of infants was not accidental but intended. Searching for children demanded other actions than the search for adults. It became necessary, for instance, to go to orphanages or juvenile courts. In November 1977 this led to the establishment of a circle of relatives from within the Madres that signed their first petitions as Abuelas Argentinas con Nietitos Desaparecidos. Since the name of Madres de Plaza de Mayo became internationally known, also due to the media coverage during the Soccer World Cup in June 1978, they altered their name into Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo in 1980. Today, Abuelas comprises a team of lawyers and another six teams, among them the Archivo Biográfico Familiar, the Family Biography Archive.<sup>3</sup>

Living with an imposed identity and unaware of their history of violence, Nietxs were located either through investigations or their own requests asking state institutions to verify their identity. When genetic testing results are affirmative, *restitución* begins, a reincorporation into their erased filiation that entails not only the change of personal data such as the name or date of birth, but also the prosecution of the people who raised them, causing distress and anxiety for many Nietxs. Those who are forced to restitution experience this situation as a violent intrusion and often resist vehemently (Gandsman 2009). Over time, however, not a few change their stance towards restitution. The process of restitution is therefore complex and open-ended. Every person has a different trajectory and way of coping with their history of violence.<sup>4</sup> And yet, Nietxs face common structural demands deriving from the particular subject pos-

3 This team consists of Abuelas staff and social science students working voluntarily. They produce data about the disappeared parents via interviews with their relatives, friends, colleagues, etc. and collect personal belongings. When a Nietx is found, s/he will receive a "memory box" containing this material. Seemingly contradictory to Abuelas' essentialist discourse, this "constructivist" institute points at their oscillation between essentialist and constructivist rationales to explain kinship and identity. Víctor Penchaszadeh, a geneticist and early supporter of Abuelas, thus understands their narratives about genetic based identity as a metatruer forphor (Interview, Buenos Aires, September 2014). See Alvarado Leyton (2017) for an interpretation of Abuelas' essentialism as a strategic one.

4 See Lazzara (2013) for a quasi-phenomenological analysis of narratives of Nietxs, empirically elaborating the logical

avoid it. A woman who approached Abuelas for identity verification and turned out to be a Nieta, told me repeatedly that she does not like to hear that her mother, as she continues to call her, is termed an *apropiadora*. She feels uneasy when others call her that, an uneasiness she continually mentioned in four interviews spanning a time period of four years (Interviews anonymous Nieta, April and September 2014, November 2017, March 2018). Even though that woman lied to her and acted as accomplice in hiding her identity, she feels grateful because she had to work hard to raise her. Another Nieto criticized Abuelas' demand for punishment of *apropiadores* on principle, referring to the woman that raised him as "apropiadora". He told me that his case would be special and that it is narrow-minded to ask for punishment without considering each singular case and circumstance (interview anonymous Nieto, March 2018). His uneasiness is all the more interesting as he participates in Abuelas' activities and human rights acts. It reflects the consequential demand for punishment that comes with the term *apropiación* in Abuelas' usage. In my interviews, some Nietxs who keep contact with the people who raised them did not refer to them as *apropiador/a* but used "adoptive parents" or just "parents".<sup>30</sup> Another way of describing these people, especially among those who claim the only exception Abuelas make, namely, that a child was taken "in good faith" (*de buena fe*) – which means that the receiving couple had not known where the child was from and was therefore ignorant of his/her history of violence –, is to use the term "foster parents" / *padres de crianza* (Interviews Leonardo Fossati, Buenos Aires, April 2009; La Plata, April 2017).<sup>31</sup>

This uneasiness reflects the cultural change regarding the disappeared children which was induced by Abuelas as a collective and their supporters, nowadays guaranteed by international law. Today, it would be very strange to call appropriation by a different name in Argentine public. Al-

though grandmothers like Delia Giovanola or Elsa Pavón repeatedly told me that they do not ask Nietxs to cut their relationship with *apropiadores* as no one but themselves can make such a decision, they are firm in calling the people who raised them *apropiadores* and in demanding their punishment. Violence as cause of their relationship can hardly be legitimized anymore, even though it keeps resurfacing in romanticized forms.<sup>32</sup>

In the struggle for power and in fighting against "repetitions" of state terror in post-dictatorial democracy (see Rojas Pérez 2008), Abuelas' impressive array of politico-cultural interventions generates a public presence which constantly reminds society and individuals that the majority of Nietxs is still living out there with an imposed identity, that the military's action was state terror and that its damages continue. An insistence on the existential difference between appropriation and adoption or nurture counters the post-/dictatorial tropes of graceful salvations of subversives' allegedly doomed children. It disturbs the idea of a so-called post-conflict-society that should leave behind the past and learn to forget, a stance Macri's presidency turned into *oficialismo* again. But each new restitution confirms Abuelas' narrative anew. The cultural change also achieved by the metaphorical resignification of nurture kinship as *apropiación*, converting "historical", "adoptive", "social parents" into perpetrators of state terror, makes the politico-cultural dynamics Abner Cohen spoke of remarkably evident. Establishing *apropiación* for an act once represented as an act of grace, Abuelas resist post-dictatorial repressions.

But one has to be cautious when thinking about achievements in the matter of human rights. As

30 In a recent interview with a Nieto/a, for example, s/he used "apropiadores" only once, but with the following addition of "in legal terms" ("en términos legales"). Otherwise s/he used the terms "parents" or "adoptive parents" throughout (Interview anonymous Nieto/a).

31 Restituted in 2004, Leonardo Fossati is now a member of Abuelas' executive committee. Compare Argento's (2008: 241) comment about her work with eight Nietxs whose stories she published: "[s]ome of the protagonists of this book asked me explicitly not to include the name of the person who raised them or that they are not called appropriators in their narrative since for them they continue to be their 'foster parents'".

32 Eugenia Sampallo Barragan, restituted in 2001, caused public commotion when she announced her participation as plaintiff in the trial against her appropriators, being the first Nieta to do so. After the trial concluded in 2008, she gave a press conference in which she described how she was "morally" criticized for being ungrateful for the love and care she had allegedly received, [www.plataforma-argentina.org/spip.php?article470](http://www.plataforma-argentina.org/spip.php?article470), last accessed on 16 March 2021. Her refutation is a concise argument against the discourse of salvation and loving nurture. Soon afterwards a group of unnamed Nietxs shared her critique in Abuelas' bulletin (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo 2008). Ten years later, Eugenia Sampallo Barragan (2018) felt again the necessity to counter such claims which reflects their lasting presence, nowadays often couched as "love". This continuing ideology is of great concern for her, as she told me in two interviews (La Plata, November 2015, October 2017). So even though appropriators are no longer called real, adoptive, historic parents etc. in public, the semantics of loving nurture are alive and kicking, especially in court.

Argentine anthropologist Claudia Briones self-critically said,<sup>33</sup> referring to the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado in August 2017, it was erroneous to think that human rights are basically accepted if the rhetorics of a dictatorial past remain unchanged. In this ongoing struggle, then, Abuelas' resignifications continue to realize a narrative inevitability of political positioning for anyone who wants to speak about Argentine society, its past, present and future.

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33 Roundtable talk, Ibero-American Institute, Berlin, 20 November 2017.

## Errata

In the article “*Apropiación, Not Kinship. Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo’s Resignification of Nurture against State Terror*,” by Christian Alvarado Leyton, published in *Anthropos* 106/1: 2021, pp. 1–16, the following errors have been detected:

### Page 2:

(2019: 410f.)

**Correct:** (2019: 410, 411)

### Page 9, Fn. 22:

I have found the earliest published usage of “restitution” in Abuelas’ first issue of *Informaciones*, April 1982, p. 1, four years before “apropiación” surfaces in printed matter.

### Correct:

The earliest published usage of “restitution” I have found is in Abuelas’ first issue of *Informaciones*,

April 1982, p. 1, four years before “apropiación” surfaces in printed matter.

### Page 14:

As Argentine anthropologist Claudia Briones self-critically said,<sup>33</sup> referring to the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado in August 2017, it was erroneous to think that human rights are basically accepted if the rhetorics of a dictatorial past remain unchanged.

### Correct:

As Argentine anthropologist Claudia Briones self-critically said,<sup>33</sup> referring to the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado in August 2017, it was erroneous to think that human rights are basically accepted if the rhetorics of a dictatorial past remain publicly silent.