

# Among bodies: reflections on ethnographic work and the repercussions of exhumations and identifications of the disappeared of the last military dictatorship in Argentina

Laura Panizo Universidad de Buenos Aires

[laura.m.panizo@gmail.com](mailto:laura.m.panizo@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This article will investigate the process of confronting death in cases of the disappeared of the last military dictatorship in Argentina. Based on the exhumation and identification of the body of a disappeared person, the article will reflect on how the person's social situation can be reconfigured, causing structural changes within the family and other groups. This will be followed by a discussion of the reflections generated by the anthropologist during his or her interview process, as well as an investigation into the author's own experiences in the field. This intimate relationship between the anthropologist and death, through the inevitable contact that takes place 'among the bodies', causes resonances in the context both of exhumations and of identifications in the anthropologist's wider fieldwork.

**Key words:** disappearance, exhumation, identification of bodies, relatives of the disappeared, military dictatorship, ethnography

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Although the theme of death was always an issue to confront, my coming *face to face* with death occurred in 2002 when I found myself taking part in the exhumation of the body of a disappeared person from Argentina's last military dictatorship. As an anthropology student working as an intern with the *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense* (Argentinian Forensic Science Team; EAAF),<sup>2</sup> my closeness to the body in the grave filled me with unease and a feeling of transformation. An atmosphere of elation and sadness was heightened by the fact that relatives of the disappeared who were waiting to recover the body that they had come to identify wanted to throw themselves into the grave to gather up what they had been looking for, over more than twenty years. What they wanted to take away was much more than human remains; it was a body, a story, an identity, a relationship, a ritual and a farewell.

I left this fieldwork determined to know what it was like for relatives of the disappeared when, after so many years, they were finally able to confront death clearly and accurately following the previous lack of a body. I wondered about the

new forms of ritual when they had not been able to perform the socially established funerary rituals. I wondered about ambiguity, transition, hope, searching and waiting. Out of all these questions, this article will focus on the way in which, beginning with the exhumation and identification of the bodies, both local concepts of death and the everyday practices of the social individuals concerned can be observed to undergo modification. In this sense, I am referring not only to the experiences of the relatives of the disappeared but also to my own experiences in the field, whether by being in intimate contact with the dead or interviewing the bereaved. In order to do this, the first section will refer to the experiences of some relatives of the disappeared who are part of the organisation *Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas* (Families of the Disappeared or Detained for Political Reasons)<sup>3</sup> to give an account of how, from the exhumations and identifications of the bodies, the relatives undergo structural changes in their everyday lives. For clarity, the concepts of *symbolic framework of interpretation* and *unattended Death* will be introduced, and a discussion will follow on the way in which death is understood as a social process that involves specific stages and specific rituals. Finally, I will reflect on my own experience in the field, my closeness to death and the reflection that the work of the anthropologist offers in a job involving an intimate relationship with dead bodies. In this connection between the experiences of the families and my own as an anthropologist, an account will be given of the way in which the practice of exhumations, contact with dead bodies and interaction in the field broadens the framework of understanding not only of those people directly concerned but also of those conducting the investigation.

For this study, besides carrying out fieldwork on rituals and public events related to the disappearance of persons, interviews were conducted with the families of the disappeared. It is interesting to note that this interview time was seen by many speakers as an opportunity to find an understanding that they could not find in other areas. In this way, the interviews acted as a place for dialogue and release with considerable cathartic power. Phrases such as, 'You anthropologists can understand'; 'I never told anybody this'; or 'Nobody was interested in this', generate profound reflection on the role of the anthropologist in the process of reconstructing the everyday lives of people who have had to face extreme situations.

In this sense, it can be seen that many interviews turned into reflective micro-rituals that opened routes of communication. The context of the interview becomes a special space where relatives of the disappeared find release, referring to things that they have never spoken to anyone about, and an out-of-the-ordinary place where they can share their pain. Some of the relatives therefore talk about experiences or perceptions that they do not share with other people whom they speak to, or with the rest of the family, to avoid causing them pain, and it became clear that they did not reach the same depth of exchange with other people as they did during this study:

I am not avoiding what I could. ... I have to tell you secrets, family secrets.<sup>4</sup>

That's why I am calling upon you, and every time I feel bad, I am going to really bug

you, because I never went into all this so deeply before. I called you because you are my confessor – look at the fix I am getting you into.<sup>5</sup>

Pollak states that testimonies concerning traumatic experiences ‘should be considered as true instruments in the reconstruction of identities and not only as family tales limited to an information function’.<sup>6</sup> Because testimony allows for reflection about oneself, the interviews, recorded in a digital format, were transcribed in their totality, printed and given to the interviewees. In this way, they were able to objectify their story through reading their own words:

I told you that today I felt like talking ... That’s why I called you and not somebody else. ... Do you know why I called you, Laura? Because I read everything that you ... I read it ... and I said, did I say that? Or rather, I knew full well that I feel it, that I live it, that I lived it, but why did I say it like that exactly? Maybe part of you is a psychologist.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, I paid great attention to the context of the interview, so that areas for reflection and dialogue could be generated. Therefore, references by relatives to their ‘thinking out loud’ or ‘linking together’ things as they talk and the significance of our participation in their daily lives as ‘confidants’ or people who make them ‘reflect’ about their experiences turned the ethnographic work into one more practice in the process of symbolic construction through which relatives appear in public and see each other.

Various authors in the social sciences have considered the reflective nature of work in the field. Rosana Guber stands out among them; she emphasises the way in which reflection during fieldwork is ‘a process of interaction, differentiation and reciprocity’ between two sides: the investigator and the individual subjects of the investigation.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, says Guber, the value of the interview lies not only in its referential nature but also in its performative character, as it produces reflexivity, both for the interviewee and for the interviewer.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the reflections of my interviewees on their testimony and the interactive space generated in the interview made me aware of how narrative constructions appear in scenarios of recognition and reflexivity around representations concerning the loss of a loved one. On the other hand, both the dialogue space generated so that interviewees could give testimony and the reflexivity around their narrative made these moments of ‘close quarters’ ethnographic work between the interviewee and the investigator into experiences that on a personal level were inspiring, reconstructive and transformative. Later, the article will discuss the way in which fieldwork can broaden the investigator’s framework of understanding.

## Disappearance

Among other crimes, the last military dictatorship in Argentina was responsible for the clandestine detention, torture, death and disappearance of more than ten thousand people. Against this background, various human rights organisations were

formed to protest on behalf of their loved ones. Within the fundamental interests of these groups, the humanitarian narrative and the concept of the innocent victim predominated in the discourse of protest.<sup>10</sup> Out of the various organisations, this work will refer to the experiences of relatives belonging to the organisation Families of the Disappeared, recorded during the fieldwork carried out between 2002 and 2011. Accordingly, although generalisations are made within this group, these should not be extended to all the groups or families who suffered the loss of their loved ones during the disappearance of persons in Argentina.

I would first of all like to point out that the experiences of the relatives in this group belong to what I have called *symbolic frameworks of interpretation*. This refers to the interpretative model of the group, which, through its choice of symbols and particular ideology, influences the way in which relatives make sense of death in the context of the last military dictatorship. In other works, I have developed the term *framework* within the social sciences. It should be highlighted here that a theoretical contribution has been drawn from María Julia Carozzi, who has used the concept of *framework of interpretation* to refer to 'the reproduction of systematically transformed situations' that modify previous frameworks of understanding.<sup>11</sup> I therefore talk here in terms of symbolic frameworks of interpretation that direct the way in which families in identity groups resulting from a situation of extraordinary violence understand death and make sense of that experience in a particular way, both publicly and privately.

In respect of the group's symbolic framework, I would like to stress an important aspect that can help us to understand the way in which families reflect on their experiences, which are characteristic of nearly all the members of the organisation, in the context of the interviews (in which the reflections of Hugo stand out). My interviewees all belong to an urban middle class, and they mostly live in the federal capital of Buenos Aires. Although, as in the case of Hugo, they are not all professionals, their experiences could counterbalance the experiences of other relatives in rural areas or from working classes with little access to formal education. In this sense, as stated in the introduction, although generalisations are made within the group, these should not be transposed to the experiences of relatives elsewhere.

Having clarified this, I would like to stress that Families of the Disappeared is an organisation that, in addition to producing a key discourse denouncing human rights violations, has been notable for: (1) the activism of the relatives of the disappeared; (2) the call for the 'safe return alive' of the disappeared and freedom for political prisoners; and (3) the public non-acceptance of the deaths until the bodies and the guilty parties appear. On the one hand, one of the organisation's essential characteristics is that it recognised from the beginning that most of its disappeared and imprisoned relatives were closely linked to politics and the popular struggle. Therefore, when the name of the organisation was chosen, 'for political reasons' was added, appropriating a recognised reality of which the creators were proud. This is why, from its early years, Families of the Disappeared not only fought for the search for the disappeared but also forged links with other social sectors that it considered equally abused in terms of human rights, maintaining the same ideological line as its relatives. Similarly, Antonius Robben points out on the subject

of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo that its members began to see themselves as the embodiment of the ideals and struggles of their children, so that the spirit of the disappeared 'reappears in a new incarnation and continues its presence in the political world'.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Families of the Disappeared demands recognition of the murders by the murderers and refuses to accept the deaths until the bodies and the guilty parties appear. In March 1977, the organisation published its first demand in the daily newspapers *La Nación* and *La Opinión* through an advertisement that marked the first anniversary of the coup d'état and demanded the 'safe return alive' of the disappeared and freedom for political prisoners. Similarly, the slogan 'safe return alive', appropriated in 1980 by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, meant, as far as the mothers were concerned, that they were still insisting that their children be returned alive in the face of a lack of explanation from the Government about their fate. They did not yet want to talk about death.

But although they began by looking for the disappeared alive, the passage of time, the testimony of ex-prisoners, the *Nunca Más (Never Again)* report (1984),<sup>13</sup> the Trial of the Juntas (1985)<sup>14</sup> and the identifications of bodies from the exhumations of clandestine burials brought the families closer to accepting the idea that the disappeared were dead. While Families of the Disappeared continues to speak of searching, this now includes the search for bodies and for *memory, truth* and *justice*. In this way, the families have fought, among other things, for those responsible for the murders and disappearances to be brought to justice, and the deaths are not recognised until that point.

### Funerary rituals

Before entering into the experiences of the families in respect of the absence of a body and the repercussions of exhumations, I would like to clarify some of the perspectives on which my analysis is based. Firstly, it should be emphasised that death is understood as a social process that we confront through various stages, including collective rituals and practices and individual experiences. For this reason, Van Gennep's contribution on rites of passage will be used, which, according to the author, accompanies the changes of state or situation suffered by individuals within society.<sup>15</sup> These rites or rituals occur at different stages of farewell, transition and acceptance and are accompanied by specific ritual symbols. It is also essential to be aware that I draw on the contributions of Victor Turner to understand the way in which funerary rituals, as is the case with rituals in general, not only help individuals to adjust to changes in their lives and focus their attention on certain specific processes or situations but also play a transformative role in social practices.<sup>16</sup> In this sense symbols apparently play a fundamental role as operators of social processes. They not only take account of the structural aspects of society but also give rise to feelings associated with these aspects, consequently guiding social action.

Finally, a brief reference should be made to the importance of the *dead body* in enabling funerary practices to be carried out. A particular characteristic of funerary rites found across various societies involves the fundamental role played by the body in regard to its symbolic treatment, as well as the practices

of farewell and separation that are performed, and the relatives of the deceased feeling 'looked after' and understood by the rest of society. In this ritual, where the deceased and their relatives are 'looked after' as members of society who are experiencing significant changes within the group, death is inhabited by the deceased, the relatives and the visitors. In this regard, I use the concept of 'inhabiting death', taking up the work of Deborah Durham in which she shows how the Herero people use the word *ondiro* (death) to designate a limited space in which death is inhabited by relatives and visitors. That is, the word for death means both a physical space and a social occasion. So people 'go to the death', 'go and cry at the death' or 'go and pay their respects at the death'.<sup>17</sup> As Turner says in relation to dominant symbols, in the ritual the dead body possesses sensory and normative poles that refer to social standards, structures and categories, as well as to physical and biological aspects that produce and evoke feelings associated with them.<sup>18</sup> The observable characteristics of the body are those which confront us when we meet death in person. So the presence of the body in the performance also causes feelings and sensations around death, the dead person and their participation in the ritual. Although the link between body and death involves in the first place a biological reference point, it also involves a social reference point and highlights aspects both of instability and disintegration (the loss of an individual within the structure of social relationships) and of harmony and cohesion (the support and protection of relatives and close family). Therefore, the dead body in the ritual performance becomes a *dominant symbol* that, according to Turner's definition, refers not only to natural and physiological phenomena and processes that cause desires, feelings and so forth, but also to principles and values of social organisation that guide people as members of groups and social categories.<sup>19</sup> The presence of the body in the ritual thus makes it possible to 'inhabit' death, and this direct experience of death, in which one experiences the loss of the loved one, enables self-reflexivity, because through the ritual readjustment the death is 'looked after', and with this so too are the relational changes that are created. Among the distinctive features of funerary rituals with the body present, it is thus worth highlighting that death takes on a presence via the body, through which it can be stated, spoken about, represented, experienced and shared socially. This and specific funerary symbols (among others, floral wreaths and the funerary use of the cross) as well as certain practices of the State (such as the death certificate) allow death to be inhabited and constitute what we could call a *socially recognised death*.<sup>20</sup>

For those who did not have the chance to recover the body, its absence and the lack of symbols of death, which hinder the death's social recognition, can make it difficult to carry out collective funerary rituals. A dead person who is also a living person – or who is neither dead nor living – is never going to be incorporated into the world of the dead, and this presents an obstacle for the relative's ability to integrate once more into social life and to replace the broken link. The lack of ritual and social recognition of the death produces what Ludmila da Silva Catela refers to as a lack of 'collective compassion' because 'those who should show support in the grief opt for silence or to ignore or deny the situation. As a result, the moment

of mourning the disappeared 'did not have the social and collective character that death usually has, and therefore it was a solitary grieving'.<sup>21</sup>

Faced with this experience of death without a body, relatives experience two opposing types of approach to the loss: what they call the *logical* or the *rational*, which accepts the death; and the *irrational* or the *emotional* – the one that springs up *from inside*, where hope resides. When Hugo was asked how long he had hoped that his brother was still living, he answered with more questions, referring to the year when the EAAF identified his body. Similarly, other relatives refer to these two ways of dealing with the loss:

What if I said that it was right up to the year 2000? Do you think logic and desire are two quite separate things?<sup>22</sup>

No, there is no grief. I always say here [she points to her head] I know that Alejandro is dead, but here, here, here or wherever [she points to her chest, to her heart] no, because what is rational [forceful] is one thing, and what is emotional or about feelings is something completely different.<sup>23</sup>

My son used to say to me, 'Mum, don't look for him alive.' It made me feel terrible, you see ... If they don't actually say it to me ...<sup>24</sup>

Until the body and specific information about the death appear, these two types of approach to the loss interact as possible modes of reality. This existential ambiguity, together with the lack of specific funerary practices related to the disappeared in general, blocks the development of the rite of passage of the subject from life towards death.

Da Silva Catela has referred to the phenomenon of disappearance in terms of 'inconclusive death': 'For many years, the family of the disappeared *hope, search and open up spaces*.'<sup>25</sup> This term therefore refers to a process of death that might have begun but has not ended. This assessment is interesting because, while the disappeared stay on the margins, at the limit of what might be yet is not, the combination of phases that conclude the rite of passage is missing. The experiences of the relatives in the group discussed here make one think not so much of a death process that began but did not end, but rather of the lack of ritual spaces that could provide social recognition for the death, the deceased person and the relatives. I propose speaking of *unattended death* when death becomes a phenomenon that is not afforded any ritual attention. In emphasising collective funerary rites, then, I will speak of *unattended death* in cases where there is no dead person to be venerated and where the ritual practices that bring support and strength to the relatives are not performed. *Inconclusive death* and *unattended death* are two categories that reflect a type of confrontation with the loss that may involve, in the first case, a death that has no closure and, in the second, one that cannot count on social spaces to inhabit it, where the status of the disappeared as a dead person would be legitimised through collective action. In this sense, we can conceive of *unattended death* as the opposite of *socially recognised death*.



As there are no ritual actions in *unattended death* that could locate the dead and the relatives as such respectively within the social structure, this type of death has ambiguous and paradoxical aspects. In this sense, the disappeared can be conceptualised as intermediate beings that are *yet to be* or that *are and are not* at the same time. What is therefore typical of the disappeared person as an intermediate individual is that he or she is not symbolically resting in a single, fixed place, as he or she would be in a cemetery: 'Families of the Disappeared do not have a unique monument where they can go to perform the rites of death but fragmented times related to specific moments.'<sup>26</sup> Later, we will see how, on the other hand, through the exhumations: (1) *the unattended death* becomes once more a *socially recognised death*; (2) the phenomenon of death becomes socially legitimised; and (3) the social status of the person is reconstructed and relationships between the living and between the living and the dead are reconstructed.

### Death versus disappearance

The possibility of exhuming bodies through the EAAF produced a variety of reactions among various relatives and family organisations. Despite the different attitudes taken to the exhumations, what is not a matter for debate is that, by recovering the body, the symbol above all others of funerary rites is itself recovered. It is starting from the exhumation that funerary rites begin to be performed and the disappeared person begins to be a dead person. This is the end of ambiguity, doubt and any hope of life. The ritual process begins to run its course, and it enables the necessary steps to saying goodbye to develop.

It should first be highlighted that the bodies identified as being those of disappeared people are bones, which means that the urns in which they are placed for subsequent burial or cremation are small in size. The size of the urn, which looks like that of a child, is striking, given that the disappeared are adults. This can have a considerable impact on families, as Hugo says:

When I saw those remains, they were not my brother. Because it is impossible that someone who is one metre eighty tall ... it was impossible that he would fit into a wooden box fifty centimetres long. ... The body has not been recovered. ... They are bones. Do you understand?<sup>27</sup>

As for the identifications carried out by the EAAF, when what is recovered is only bone material, there is no morphological link between the body material and what the person was in life. In Hugo's thinking, a body is a body when its aesthetic and integral condition is directly related to the deceased person, and bones are not a body because they cannot be clearly associated with his brother. However, the various social players involved in the practice of identification grant legitimacy to the fact of the death, thus contributing to its social recognition. The identification process is then accompanied by meaningful signs of death such as the legalities, the death certificate and permission for burial:



I had the bones of my brother in a piece of paper in my jacket pocket. Because I had the identification that these remains were those of my brother. It was the first step. This is what certifies that ... it confirms with your DNA that it is your brother.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the presence of 'remains' allows the families to have a final closeness with their loved one before the passage of the life cycle concludes:

My mum came, she saw the urn with the little bones, she cried, she kissed it, my little boy, I don't know what, all those things that ... it's OK.<sup>29</sup>

The stage after the exhumation and identification can be problematic in terms of what to do with the remains. For some relatives, tradition states that the body is cremated once the wake is over, and within this tradition lies the general idea that once the person is dead, his or her body no longer has any significance. However, in the case of Mabel, recovering her son's body involved a process of enshrinement that turns death into a phenomenon where the body and the person are inseparable elements in the process of converting and consecrating the dead person as such:

That's another thing, I don't know what we are going to do with his body, because in our family we are all atheists ... so the body is nothing more than a body for any of us, the bodies of the dead in our family, it's just a body, it doesn't mean anything. Alejandro's case is different, on the one hand we say, 'We'll cremate him and throw him into the river,' and then we say, 'Are we going to cremate him after fighting so hard to get his body back? Then do we scatter him so that there's no longer anybody?' I don't know, I really don't know what we're going to do.<sup>30</sup>

The significance that families give to the identified remains, which as in the case of Mabel and Hugo runs counter to the usual representations around the dead body, as well as the different significances that can be conferred on the stages after exhumation and identification, may cause domestic disputes and tensions concerning a suitable resting place for the dead:

No, I don't want the cemetery, I want him to be cremated, and I want to take him to the park, where he used to play, and he's going to be there.<sup>31</sup>

With inverse logic to that of Mabel, Irma felt that cremation, as it granted him release, meant that he would be united with his biography, his childhood and his memory, in a dual movement of liberation and symbolic confirmation, when the body had been hidden for so many years, removed from reality:

To throw him into the air, so that he could be on the earth and not imprisoned in it. As if he was being liberated, like a thing that is in the air, you see.<sup>32</sup>

However, Irma did not insist on the idea of cremation, as it was important for her husband to be in the cemetery, in one resting place where they could go to visit.

For the Argente family, discussions did not focus on whether to have a burial or a cremation but on the nature of the farewell ritual:

When Daniel's remains appeared, my sister said, 'Well, let's do something private,' and I said to her, 'You are soft in the head, this is a thing that the whole world has to know about, that a person who has been missing for twenty-four years was murdered by the military. We put five hundred people in Chacarita [cemetery] that day.'<sup>33</sup>

Rituals were then observed as having different meanings for different participants. For the sister it might have been an intimate and private funerary ritual that fulfilled the specific function of saying goodbye to the dead person and including him in the world of the dead, as was usual in the family tradition. For Hugo, on the other hand, burial became a public and political ritual. In this way, just as the funerary ritual took on a new meaning as an act of social denunciation, the body was transformed into a political symbol:

That ritual, that burial, was a denunciation, rather than something that helped me in my grieving, otherwise I would have had to do something intimate like my sister said. It was a political act.<sup>34</sup>

The dead body is transformed into a political symbol which, as Katherine Verdery maintains, produces ambiguity and does not offer one single meaning.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the political nature of the ritual is activated in accordance with the moral values assigned to the dead person and responds to the *symbolic framework* of interpretation through which relatives understand the past and the present and identify themselves within a group.

The burial ritual is set within a more general context of practices that Hugo has carried out within Families of the Disappeared, which are given meaning through the notions of *memory*, *truth* and *justice*. Both in the case of Hugo and in that of Irma and Mabel, native ideas of death are given fresh meaning. Because of the special circumstances of the death, the dead person, who is not an ordinary dead person like other loved ones, becomes a *political death*, inasmuch as the death is administered socially to give special meaning to what happened to the disappeared during the process.

It is interesting to note that relatives often do not confront the death in a clear and precise manner as soon as the remains are recovered. In the case of Hugo, for example, the way he struggled with the situation was part of a slow process that needed time and specific rituals. On the one hand, the fact that Hugo was unable to eat for months shows us how, when his brother's body was recovered, he began to face up to the death by looking at it directly:

After three months I got down to forty-six kilos ... until the doctor came ... and they said to me, 'Well, we can't see anything.' ... And one day I had an attack of convulsions, and tore off to the clinic in Lugones, and there I met Doctor Garabaldia, who I think saved my life. She said to me, 'We're going to do all the tests but the first thing you have

to do is to have therapy,' and I spent nearly two years eating only pureed food. ... What I had in my head was externalised in the oropharyngeal muscle, which is the one that controls swallowing, and it became atrophied. ... And then I went to physiotherapy and one fine day, thanks to the therapy I still believe, at Families, there were these puffed-up biscuits. ... I took a little piece, I put it in my mouth, let it dissolve. ... Two days later I was eating a sandwich of real bread, and then you see the consequences. Well that was another thing, that's why I tell you that it made me shit as well, and Haydee says that she found peace and that we don't all find it in the same way.<sup>36</sup>

Confronting death may be expressed in the body through problems with taking in food. With this symptom, Hugo was symbolically expressing his confrontation with death and the changes in his social relationships that this involved, as for more than twenty years his identity had been constructed around the figure of the disappeared. Furthermore, his concern with no longer being Hugo was manifested in his bodily organism, as the strength given to him by the tripartite search had all been directed at finding his brother's body:

We have legal problems with admitting people. ... Can I continue being a member of Families now that my brother is no longer missing?<sup>37</sup>

In fact, Hugo began a process of integrating his daily life more into the domestic domain, which became dramatically apparent after the end of the trial of those responsible for his brother's murder. He explains that he took a break from Families of the Disappeared, involving himself more in the lives of his wife, his daughters and his grandchildren:

Since the trial I will have been to Families four times. ... I don't feel the same burning desire to get up in the morning to go and do that.<sup>38</sup>

So I ask you, Laurita, what about when they are talking about these matters and they say, 'What do you think?' I'm sorry but I can't give an opinion on it. I could have given one in '99 on this subject.' That's where we start to split up, do you understand? Because I'm not the same as them now.<sup>39</sup>

What Hugo was worried about when he left behind his intermediate status was his new position in Families because of his change of identity within the social structure, given that the symbolic framework of the group no longer expressed his current existential situation. If the search for truth and justice had come to an end, would his belonging to the organisation be limited by his being a grieving relative and no longer a relative of one of the disappeared?

I said, 'Will I have the same desire to go to Families, to work like crazy, to fight?' I never said that to them. I didn't see it very clearly until we were talking now. That's what is good about talking – not just telling you about it and giving my testimony, but it also helping me because I can see how things link up.<sup>40</sup>

## Laura Panizo

That is why Hugo feels guilty – for having achieved what other families were unable:

The judgment came from the Superintendence, and now I have it all, and I see people who are dying and they have nothing, and I want to hug them, I want to love them. ... And I, who just because of a natural fact am going to last longer than them, I have everything, and feel guilty again, it's incredible.<sup>41</sup>

That is the crappy situation, Laurita. I want to stop feeling guilty, I've got everything, I don't want it to be my fault that Lita doesn't know anything.<sup>42</sup>

The recovery of the body also made possible the social practices associated with death and the commemoration of the dead. The commemorative rituals of every 20 August, where homage is paid to the dead of the Fatima Massacre, mean to Hugo that the death is inhabited and socially looked after, which helps the grieving relative in the arduous task of *adjusting* to the fact of the death and to the structural change after so many years of searching:

They did a report on me on the radio and one of the journalists asked me if I felt better, and I said to him, 'Look, brother, I spent twenty-four years looking for a brother who had disappeared and now I have to try to get used to the fact that I have a brother who was murdered, and the only way I would feel good is if instead of talking to you I was having a cup of maté here with my brother.'<sup>43</sup>

'Getting used to', 'adjusting' and 'accepting the death' are part of a process that is both social and individual, where there is first denial and then gradually acceptance, recognition and communication:

I could no longer feel what my brother's death was. Why not be honest about it? Who after thirty years, in my case after twenty-four, can say, he is dead? What does it mean that he is dead? Was he not dead for twenty-four years? Why wasn't he dead from that moment? That's all. ... Let me try to get used to it. Because these are questions I am asking myself, it's not that I'm not answering yours. I am thinking out loud. Do you understand?<sup>44</sup>

It's easier for me that he's been murdered than that he had disappeared. My brother is as dead as my elderly relatives, in different circumstances. I think I have accepted it.<sup>45</sup>

Just as for Hugo, for Irma and Julio the recovery of the body meant the end of the search, as in 1989 they were hoping to find their child alive:

From '89 the process of thinking that he was already dead began. Then we got the idea that at the very least we would not see him again. So we had already started out on the mourning process.<sup>46</sup>

Look, it gives you peace, we know where his life ended, we have the truth; not justice, but the truth, we have it.<sup>47</sup>

Because the identification of the body is accompanied by information about what happened, those who recover the body feel privileged in comparison to the situation of other families:

I say that I am privileged, in inverted commas, because at least I know what happened to my son. I am not spending all day thinking, 'Is he alive somewhere, is he mad or in prison?' ... When the anthropologists saw that we were watching the exhumation of the corpse, one of them said to me, 'Do you want to have the file of everything that led us to find him?' 'Yes. Why would I not want to have it?'<sup>48</sup>

The fact and the manner of the death change not only the status of the dead person but also that of the grieving relative. In this sense, existential change produced by the fact of death has an effect on the structure of the institution, as being a relative of the disappeared is the social condition necessary for being a member of the group. In addition, a *symbolic framework* of interpretation, generated for the intermediate situation, could lack adequate tools for facing death and closing certain stages of the life cycle. Beyond these worries expressed by families about their participation in the organisation after the identifications, I observe from my standpoint that recovering the body implies the possibility of ritual and of confronting the death directly. In this way, the recovery of bodies marks a before and an after period in respect of certain practices related to the disappearance. For Julio and Irma as well as for Hugo, the continuing search does not concern their own family member. As a result, in the daily fight for truth and justice they move out of the role of direct victims to take on the role of companions.

Hugo, however, stopped taking cakes in on his brother's birthday and began a process of reintegration into normal everyday life. As mentioned earlier, this process became much more evident once the trial related to his brother's death was over. Through the body, then, the funerary ritual, which enshrines the dead person as such in the social space, can produce a movement from the public arena to the private – from the collective to the individual – and restructures the practices of the families.

We therefore see that when the relative has recently undergone the transformative experience of the rite of passage, and all its stages have been concluded, he or she is clearly established as a grieving relative and the dead person is established as such within the social structure. In this way, the ritual not only enshrines the dead person as such, but also establishes the relative, now a bereaved person, as a new social agent because, in any type of life crisis such as death, changes not only concern matters of ritual but also mark changes in relationships with close family and friends and in the structure of families and groups. As we will see later, field-work, similarly to the recovery of the body, also becomes a transformative area for all the individuals involved.

## With the body

In order to explore the theme of the disappeared and the lack of a body, fieldwork was also undertaken at wakes in the presence of the body, which are 'traditional' and typical of current Argentinian society, both in Greater Buenos Aires and in the city itself. As stated in the introduction, it was from the first exhumation and with my later ethnographical work that I began to confront death face to face in a personal manner. The interviews, the exhumations carried out and my participation in traditional wakes were events in which I felt *bodily* affected and committed. That is, I had to go through the tragic experience that the families lived through *with my whole body* in order to understand the extraordinary attitudes that they displayed in response to their needs. My body therefore became a melting pot of anxieties and satisfactions that found their outlet in sporadic moments, when I felt physically distant from my interviewees and where the therapy sessions played an important role as a release of tension.

According to Guber, the reflexivity of the investigator must be taken into account because when he or she compares himself or herself with the individuals being studied, he or she redefines himself or herself and finds a new place.<sup>49</sup> The emphasis on the reflexivity of the investigator is marvellously well narrated in the work of Pablo Wright on the repercussions of a visit by his informant from Formosa to Buenos Aires. The relocation of Ángel from Formosa to Buenos Aires (that is, from the informer's home to the anthropologist's house) and the consequent interruption of his daily life diminished for Wright certain concepts such as *fieldwork*, *distance* and *journey*; they distorted everyday practices and feelings and awoke sensitivities, leading the author to a more complex and rich vision of ethnography.<sup>50</sup> The experiences and reflections of Wright concerning fieldwork illuminated my own experiences, enabled me to broaden my world of knowledge and opened my sensitivities towards death and non-empirical experiences. This is why in the course of the investigation I could not avoid sitting on the side-lines of that non-empirical world, into which the families invited me with their statements. One mother of one disappeared, when she told me that she had resorted to clairvoyants, admitted,

Until then I was a complete positivist and I had absolutely no belief in those things, yet I went, and it really had an effect on me at that moment.<sup>51</sup>

It may seem paradoxical that I used the words of a family to explain my own beliefs on the subject, as I have not been directly affected in a personal way by a person's disappearance. But although fieldwork is a product of the interaction that leads to a dual reflexive process, in the words of this relative, despite considering myself totally positivist and a nonbeliever in these matters, I cannot deny that situations I have been in have exceeded the limits of my framework of understanding. I will restrict myself to one example. Together with the EAAF and the investigative team of the Museum of Anthropology of Córdoba, I took part in an exhumation in a cemetery of this city in the presence of family members. Two weeks later, I trav-

elled to Córdoba again to interview the brother and sister. Immediately after the interview I went to the Museum of Anthropology, where two colleagues were still working on laboratory tests related to the case. As they were displaying the bones of the exhumed body on a table in an anatomical order in order to take photographs, I mentioned to my colleagues that I felt exhausted, as I had just conducted an interview with the sister and she had told me repeatedly that her brother had communicated with her on successive occasions, so there were lots of clues that made her completely sure that the body being analysed in the laboratory was the one she was looking for. It was already eight o'clock at night and there was nobody left in the museum except the three of us. All the lights were out, except those in the laboratory that were focused on a white plastic skeleton, used as a reference to classify bones. While we were expressing our hopes that this was the body that the brother and sister were hoping to find, we were thinking about its identity based on the evidence. Suddenly the radio came on, which had been turned off by a colleague three hours earlier, and broadcasted a song whose strange melody seemed to take us back to the era of the dictatorship. Astonished and terribly disconcerted, we looked at the radio, looked at each other, looked at the body on the table, and looked at each other again. I suddenly had the feeling that I was sharing an experience similar to those of families who had felt a strong supernatural presence, a transcendental energy, since the disappearance of their loved ones. For a moment, I fully understood the true significance of the Gadamerian notion of the *fusion of horizons*. I glimpsed with appreciation what in the words of Clifford Geertz is *conversing* with the native, understanding his codes,<sup>52</sup> and when that multiplicity of meanings that the anthropologist handles is experienced through the body, we feel that we can all inhabit the experiences of others, with everything the word *inhabit* can signify: dwell in, occupy, be aware of, share. Moreover, *inhabit* can also imply *transforming oneself*, to revisit the experiences of Carlos Castaneda,<sup>53</sup> and *anthropology* could also be defined, in the words of Pablo Wright, as an experience through the world.<sup>54</sup> We anthropologists not only interpret social worlds; we also physically inhabit the same place as our interviewees.

When I returned to Buenos Aires, I could not stop thinking that the ethnographic experience – the *body-to-body* contact, whether with relatives or with the bodies of the disappeared – had impacted on me deeply, leaving indelible traces. From a different place from my standpoint in the experiences of the families of the disappeared, what was previously for me an *unattended death* owing to my ideas and original practices around death and dying became something close, to which I was forced to pay attention.

Moreover, my experience in the field, where over more than ten consecutive years I have interviewed individuals who are family members of victims of violent and extraordinary deaths and who were themselves also experiencing extraordinary ways of coming to terms with these deaths, allowed this to seep into my own body, so that I let myself be inhabited by the experiences of others. I began this chapter by saying that before 2002 confronting death was for me an issue with which I had to deal. There is no doubt that since this ethnographic experience – a fully physical experience – I neither inhabit life nor approach death from the same standpoint



as in the past. With an experience prior to being in the field that 'rejected' death and made it absent from my daily life, and with a knowledge of reality that did not allow me to understand any other types of possible approach, fieldwork and my anthropological training have made me feel totally transformed. In this sense, the symbolic frameworks of the groups echoed my own frameworks of understanding, and the repercussion of the exhumations and recovery of the bodies not only altered the daily practices of the families, producing structural changes in individuals and groups, but also, in the experience of fieldwork *among bodies*, altered my practices and conceptions around death, broadening my interpretative boundaries.

### Final words

In this article, I have reflected on the process of confronting death in the case of a group of relatives of the disappeared of Argentina's last military dictatorship, focusing firstly on the lack of a body and secondly on its subsequent recovery through the work of the forensic anthropologist. The analysis shows that the interviewees have an experience of loss in which what is missing, because of the lack of a body, is *death as a social process*, as it cannot be inhabited in social spaces where death and the bereaved are looked after by the community, and where the restructuring of social categories would be facilitated. Similarly, there are no opportunities for farewell where the family could accompany the dead person on the passage from life to death. Together with the tangible fact of the lack of a body, the concept of a symbolic framework of interpretation led me to see how members of Families of the Disappeared confront this extraordinary death, in both the public and private arena, in a very particular way. This lack of death as a social process, which is here called an *unattended death*, forms part of the symbolic framework of interpretation, through which the figure of the disappeared person is used as a form of political resistance that, given legitimacy by various social players, seems to allow rituals to be drawn up that do not focus on the death but, rather, on its absence and on the disappearance as long as the bodies and the guilty parties fail to appear.

Furthermore, I observed that the exhumations and identifications of the bodies enable the death to be faced in social spaces and generate new social classifications for people, causing structural changes within families and groups. It was demonstrated how the intervention of the anthropologist through specific practices such as the exhumation and identification of bodies or the carrying out of interviews makes a significant contribution to coping with the death, which in the case of the disappeared has been obstructed by the lack of a body and a lack of social recognition. On the one hand, exhumation allows the death to be faced in an unambiguous way and socially established funerary rituals to be performed. On the other hand, the context of the interview, as a special space that facilitates talking about experiences that are not spoken of elsewhere, becomes part of the process of symbolic construction through which relatives see themselves. Finally, in emphasising contact among the bodies, I have reflected on the manner in which fieldwork offers transformation to the investigator, related not only to their own categories of death but also to the shared understanding of social reality.

## Notes

- 1 Translated from the author's Spanish by Cadenza Academic Translations.
- 2 The EAAF is a non-profit nongovernmental organisation. Since 1984, it has been investigating cases of people who disappeared in Argentina during the last military dictatorship.
- 3 Hereafter I will use 'Families of the Disappeared' to refer to the organisation Families of the Disappeared or Detained for Political Reasons.
- 4 Interview with César, 3 April 2003.
- 5 Interview with Hugo, 27 May 2009.
- 6 M. Pollak, *Memoria, olvido, silencio* (Buenos Aires, Al Margen, 2006).
- 7 Interview with Hugo, 13 July 2007.
- 8 R. Guber, *El Salvaje metropolitano: Reconstrucción del conocimiento social en el trabajo de campo* (Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2008), p. 87.
- 9 Guber, *El Salvaje metropolitano*, p. 87.
- 10 E. Crenzel, *La Historia política del Nunca Más. La memoria de las desapariciones en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2008), p. 49.
- 11 M. J. Carozzi, 'El concepto de marco interpretativo en el estudio de movimientos religiosos', *Sociedad y Religión*, 16/17 (1998), 33–51.
- 12 A. Robben, 'El Asalto a la confianza básica: Desaparición, protestas y re-entierros en Argentina', *Cuadernos de Antropología Social*, 24 (2006), 11–49.
- 13 *Nunca Más* (Never Again) is the report produced by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons; CONADEP).
- 14 Trials of the military figures responsible for the crimes committed are still continuing today.
- 15 A. van Gennep, *Los Ritos de paso* (Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2008).
- 16 V. Turner, 'Dramas sociales y metáforas rituales' and 'La Antropología de la Performance', in I. Geist (ed.), *Antropología del Ritual* (Mexico City, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002).
- 17 D. Durham, 'Love and Jealousy in the Space of Death', *Ethnos*, 67, 2 (2002), 155–80.
- 18 Turner, 'Dramas sociales', p. 60.
- 19 V. Turner, *La Selva de los símbolos* (Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1997).
- 20 L.-V. Thomas, *Antropología de la Muerte* (Barcelona, Paidós, 1993), p. 61.
- 21 L. da Silva Catela, 'Sin cuerpo, sin tumba, memorias sobre una muerte inconclusa', *Historia Antropología y Fuentes Orales*, 2:20 (1998), 87–104.
- 22 Interview with Hugo, 17 November 2006.
- 23 Interview with Mabel, 16 July 2008.
- 24 Interview with Irma, 20 January 2010.
- 25 Da Silva Catela, 'Sin cuerpo', 95.
- 26 L. da Silva Catela, *No habrá flores en la Tumba del pasado: La experiencia de reconstrucción del mundo de los familiares de desaparecidos* (Buenos Aires, Al Margen, 2001), p. 158.
- 27 Interview with Hugo, 13 July 2007.

## Laura Panizo

- 28 *Ibid.*, 17 November 2006.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Interview with Mabel, 25 October 2006.
- 31 Interview with Irma, 25 November 2010.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Interview with Hugo, 17 November 2006.
- 34 Interview with Hugo, 13 July 2007.
- 35 K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 305.
- 36 Interview with Hugo, 17 November 2006.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 13 July 2007.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 27 May 2009.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 17 November 2006.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*, 27 May 2009.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 17 November 2006.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 13 July 2007.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 27 May 2009.
- 46 Interview with Julio, 2 June 2009.
- 47 Interview with Irma, 20 January 2010.
- 48 Interview with Julio, 2 June 2009.
- 49 Guber, *El Salvaje metropolitano*, p. 88.
- 50 P. Wright, *Ser-en-el-sueño: Crónicas de historia y vida Toba* (Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2008), p. 63.
- 51 Interview with Julia, 18 August 2002.
- 52 C. Geertz, *La Interpretación de las culturas* (Barcelona, Gedisa, 1997).
- 53 C. Castaneda, *Las Enseñanzas de Don Juan. Una forma Yaqui de conocimiento* (Buenos Aires, Fondo de cultura Económica, 2003).
- 54 Wright, *Ser-en-el-sueño*, p. 230.