

# Ghostly Interpellations: Testimonial Inscriptions on the Stage

CAMILA ASCHNER-RESTREPO

---

*Colombian theatre-makers have been searching for aesthetic languages to speak about the national conflict for decades. By analysing two of the most prominent theatrical productions from the 2010s, I explore the mechanisms they employ for the inscription of testimonies on audiences. I argue that the use of ghosts onstage to make the disappeared present transforms these plays into both ritual spaces and testimonial encounters at the same time. I do this by engaging with Derrida's works on spectres, along with the work of Latin American scholars who have explored the ethical and aesthetic challenges of making art in times of war.*

El drama que desató la violencia es una herida abierta.

Cada vez que se vuelve sobre ella vuelve a sangrar.

Taller de memoria, Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Trujillo: una tragedia que no cesa* (Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2008), p. 205

El dolor de la masacre se prolonga con el dolor de la injusticia.

GMH, *Trujillo*, p. 23

Over the past decades, Colombia has seen an explosion of different artistic productions that deal with the unprocessed memories of the armed conflict. At least since the 1950s, playwrights, actors and directors have been experimenting with different forms and languages to narrate the war and its victims, placing themselves in the role of witnesses and creating communities of memory.<sup>1</sup> By recording and disseminating plural and extra-official memories and narratives of the armed conflict, artists have been filling in the gaps left by the absence of massive, public initiatives to set the record straight.

Colombia's Comisión de la Verdad (Truth Commission – CV) was established in 2017 as part of the measures taken to safeguard the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas. Even though it was originally planned to function for only three years, it was expanded until 2022 due to delays caused in part by the pandemic. Before that, in 2007, the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH) was established as part of the Ley de Justicia y Paz (Peace and Justice Act) and the peace agreement signed between the government and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the unified paramilitary forces in the country. The GMH operated officially between 2007 and 2011. As María Victoria Uribe and others have pointed out, despite the far-right

orientation of the dispositions that made its creation possible (which in turn sparked the suspicions of scholars), this organization worked with relative autonomy until it was discontinued.<sup>2</sup> Ever since, the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) has taken up the work of the GMH, conducting the research and publishing the *Informes*. In 2022, the Truth Commission published its final reports, showing the massive scale of paramilitary violence and the complicity of government forces. This has been one of the most controversial points in the documents and is also the main theme of the plays that I analyse here. These two, as well as a majority of the plays about the conflict, have dealt specifically with paramilitary violence.<sup>3</sup> The plays that I examine in this paper were created before the establishment of the CV, during the time when the GMH was in place. This context is most relevant to understanding the importance of these and other productions that were staged during the past two decades. A few, like *El deber de Fenster*, used the *Informes* published by the GMH as their main source material, becoming a pedagogical tool for the dissemination of their content. Other playwrights did their own private research, looking for victims and working with their testimonies.

This work of memory in the midst of the construction of a disputed official historical narrative is comparable to what has happened in other contexts, such as the South African or Peruvian cases.<sup>4</sup> A few particularities of the Colombian context are worth highlighting: first is the creation of both the GMH and the CNMH in the midst of an ongoing conflict, with all the dangers this situation posed to those who submitted to the process of declaring their truths (which is pivotal for the development of *El deber de Fenster's* story and its main character's destiny). Second is the remarkable disconnection between the population of the largest cities and the stories of the victims, which mostly take place in rural areas of the country. Despite the news coverage and the pedagogical work advanced by the organizations, most urban dwellers hear the news in the theatre as if for the first time. This disconnect adds even more value to these plays and the experiences they create for their audiences.

While the number of plays and the poetic mechanisms to deal with memory are varied, in this paper I will engage with two case studies that focus specifically on cases of forced disappearance.<sup>5</sup> Among the many theatrical productions that engage with victims' memories, the ones lending bodies and voices to the disappeared have created an important trope in the contemporary theatre of violence. Speculation over what happened – either through official documents, third-party accounts or fictionalized reimaginings – becomes a pivotal task in the process of honouring the victims by giving them names, stories and feelings, but also in the general process of mourning, which is often made almost impossible by the lack of information and the absence of a body. In this paper, I argue that the use of ghosts as a stage resource serves as a substitute for the incomplete processes of justice that have taken place in Colombia over the past decades. By lending their bodies to the disappeared, actors become mediums for inscriptions of truth among the public.<sup>6</sup> I also argue that this effect breaks the barriers between the facts of the conflict and the urban audiences by means of building an intersubjective bridge between the paradoxical incorporation of the actor-ghost and the viewer.

***El deber de Fenster: remembering the Trujillo massacre***

What has come to be known as the *masacre de Trujillo* is a series of violent events that took place in the municipalities of Trujillo, Bolívar and Riofrío, in the northwest of the department of Valle del Cauca between 1988 and 1991. The official reports register a total of 342 victims of homicide, torture and forced disappearance in a series of events that, despite their apparent isolation in time and space, are now framed as part of the same criminal project. Those responsible for these deaths are paramilitary groups and cartels from the region. As the play *El deber de Fenster* (Fenster's Duty) shows, the investigation also proved the involvement of official forces (military and police) in these crimes.<sup>7</sup> The facts were initially brought to the attention of the Colombian justice system thanks to the statements of Daniel Arcila Cardona, the only witness to the crimes. His character as a witness was met with scepticism by different private and public actors during the investigation, due to Arcila Cardona's participation in the events, first as an accomplice and later as an informer.

*El deber de Fenster* premiered at the Teatro Nacional in Bogotá after winning the Premio Fanny Mickey in 2009. It was written by Humberto Dorado and Matías Maldonado, and directed by Nicolás Montero and Laura Villegas. Two years later, in 2012, the play was staged again at the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro in Bogotá. Over several years, the play received much media attention, toured several countries and gained praise from critics, who portrayed the project as a brave undertaking in the name of memory. A big part of the recognition that this play gained comes from the fact that, unlike many others, *El deber de Fenster* became part of the 'mainstream' theatre scene. Its creators are well-known artists in theatre, television and cinema, and it was staged in one of the main commercial theatres of Colombia.

The storyline follows a German editor, Fenster, who is tasked with producing a documentary about the events of the Trujillo massacre. Therefore the play itself is constructed as the research process in which information is presented in a fragmentary way, is chronologically disorganized and is introduced by a multiplicity of voices, including that of Arcila Cardona, whose manuscript constitutes the main document on which the 'documentary' is based.<sup>8</sup>

The set resembles a domestic space, like a live-in studio. To the left, over a small refrigerator, rests an open closet exposing shirts and other items of clothing on hangers. At the centre, towards the back of the stage, is a wooden box marked 'fragile' with the number 11007 (the number assigned to the judicial process of the Trujillo massacre). A dedicated spotlight illuminates this box throughout the play. To the right of the stage there is a desk with a chair and a series of electronic devices that Fenster uses to play the audio and videotapes from the box, which constitute 'the material' he has to work with. The set also contains a telephone through which Fenster communicates with 'el ingeniero' (the engineer), whose presence is suggested in the play as the person who commissioned 'el deber' (the duty) for Fenster. Towards the front of the stage lies a table with different objects on it; the most prominent are a sculpture of a hand and a huge dictionary. On the right side, towards the back, there is a panel with small screens with broken images of a river and, at the

back wall of the stage, a large screen and two smaller ones on its sides, all hanging from the ceiling, where different images and news footage are projected throughout the play. Also to the right, overflowing the space of the stage into the first two-thirds of the rows of seating, we see a rope in the manner of a clothesline, which Fenster uses later to hang calendar days as the testimonies unravel, in an effort to organize the events chronologically.

The play begins with Fenster entering the stage looking like he just woke up and reporting to 'el ingeniero'. He then proceeds to take out the contents of the box: some videotapes and documents, which he reads out loud: 'Declaration of witness: I, Daniel Arcila Cardona, hereby make the following accusation about the abuses that were and are still committed on the part of the military and police forces and paramilitary groups in the service of narcotraffic.' As Fenster continues to read, we learn that the judge in charge of the process ordered a psychiatric examination of the witness, and the doctor declared him 'abnormal'. As Fenster puts a new tape in the machine, the president of the special commission designated by the Colombian government to investigate the events at Trujillo appears on-screen to explain how his commission, after exhausting all national judicial instances, presented a report to the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (Inter-American Human Rights Commission – CIDH). The president states that they provided the CIDH with detailed information of the violent actions that took place between 1988 and 1991 in Trujillo, Valle del Cauca, and which the commission framed as one continuous massacre. The end date designates the disappearance of Daniel Arcila Cardona, the main witness.

As Fenster begins to read Arcila's testimony, the latter's voice becomes audible from backstage as the manuscript is projected on the main screen. He describes how a member of the military in Pereira killed his brother while he watched. He reckoned that he was assassinated for refusing to cooperate with a band of *sicarios* (hitmen). Wounded, Arcila escaped to Trujillo knowing that he would be killed next, given that he was the only witness to the assassination of his brother. His testimony is interrupted by another witness declaring that the judge in charge of the process in Bogotá hid the evidence.

At this moment, Arcila (or rather his ghost) appears onstage and begins to describe, with great horror, the tortures inflicted on the prisoners. Fenster stops the tape and Arcila falls silent, weeping. Fenster, appalled, calls 'el ingeniero' and yells at him, 'Enough! What is the purpose of making a documentary about this horror? I don't want this any more. What's the use of these memories? I feel like the carrier of a disease.' Arcila was subjected to a psychiatric examination on 12 July 1990, which rendered his testimony invalid and exonerated all the people accused in his declaration from any guilt. He took refuge in Bogotá until 1991, when he decided to move back to Trujillo. A few days later, on 5 May 1991, he was detained by the police. Arcila remains disappeared until today. The lights go back on once Fenster has gone through all the documents available to him, but the play extends a few more minutes as the audience stays in the theatre and the director comes out to explain how the process is still ongoing.

***Labio de liebre: the victims without names***

*Labio de liebre* (*Venganza o Perdón*) (Hare Lip (Revenge or Forgiveness)) is a co-production between Teatro Petra and Teatro Colón. It premiered in 2015 on the occasion of the reopening of the theatre after renovations, and has been showing on Colombian and international stages ever since, selling out to this day (2022). The play has gained enormous visibility thanks to being widely acclaimed by national and international critics, and because it has played on diverse stages in different contexts, such as schools, universities and even members of the military. Fabio Rubiano, the play's creator, director and protagonist (he interprets Salvo Castello) is one of the most important dramaturges in Colombia, and Teatro Petra, his troupe, has been a point of reference on the national theatrical scene since its foundation in 1985. As its subtitle suggests, it is unclear whether the play is about revenge or forgiveness, since the ghosts of the victims are determined to torture their victimizer until he complies with their demands.

The stage resembles a small cabin in a forest. On the left side, there is a single bed beneath a couple of bookshelves. At the centre rests a sofa, in front of a television atop a small table. Behind the couch, there is a desk against a window that shows the woods outside. To the right of the window is an old refrigerator. There are also two doors, one on the left and the other on the right of the stage. Later we will learn that the former communicates with the bathroom and the latter leads outside. To the right of the main entrance there is a heater, which further emphasizes the cold weather, and a clothes rack.

The first character to appear is Salvo Castello, a fictional character from 'el país más feliz del mundo' (the happiest country in the world), who, as part of a process of transitional justice, has been banished for his war crimes. Castello now lives in a 'neutral' country where it snows all the time. He sees himself as a misunderstood and underappreciated hero who helped build 'paradise'.

Then Alegría de Sosa comes out of the bathroom, first unnoticed. As she moves around the cabin, looking like she is cleaning up, she spreads dry leaves around the stage. She comes and goes at her leisure. Later, her son Granados Sosa, known as 'Labio de liebre' (Harelip), comes in through the front door, followed by his two siblings, Jerónimo and Marinda. As they introduce themselves, the audience learns that they are all farmers, members of a family that was killed by the paramilitary. We also learn that Alegría's sons, despite having died so young, have kept growing older, which they try to use as an explanation for why Castello does not recognize them.

In the middle, we also see (ghosts) of cows and hens who show up to tell the stories of how they were murdered. As the story develops, another ghost appears to narrate the facts: Roxi Romero, a journalist. At the beginning, she seems to be a character whose main purpose is to report and narrate Castello's life, until she confronts him, claiming that she had always been on his side until he had her killed.

The ghosts of the Sosa family take over Castello's apartment: they come and go at their leisure, use his bathroom, fight among themselves in front of him. He grows progressively annoyed by the situation, but he keeps ignoring their demands and

trying to get rid of them by claiming that he does not know who they are and has no idea what they are talking about.

Alegría tries to discipline her children and speak in the name of the family: they have come to ask for two things from Salvo Castello. The first demand is that he speak their names, which they keep repeating to him in the hope that he will acknowledge them and reveal the locations where their bodies rest. The second is for Castello to give back what he took from them: 'Completo' (a dog), a chicken and a few musical instruments which one of the children assures us he heard the assassins play in the house after the murders.

Each character appears with a mark that identifies them with their living bodies – even though the children have grown into adulthood since their deaths – and that is connected to the way they were killed. Jerónimo, whose head was severed, complains of constant backpain, as does his mother, who says that her back has not been the same since she was shot to death. The journalist, on the other hand, keeps dropping everything that she attempts to grab with her right hand; at the end of the play, we learn that is where she was shot first.

As the play advances, the stage fills up with dry leaves that the Sosa family spread every time they appear, while others are brought inside by the winds that the ghosts claim to move. At one point in the play, we even see Alegría bring in a bucket of leaves from the bathroom, claiming that she just had an accident and needs to empty it since she has been 'jartando tierra' (eating dirt) for such a long time. Each character takes a turn to tell their story, the day and way they were killed. Alegría explains how she wanted to be killed instead of her children until she realized she would be killed in front of them. In the end, they were all murdered.

As Castello's desperation grows, he finally agrees to submit to their demands. He pronounces their names with disdain and the stage opens up towards the woods behind his studio as he begins to confess where their bodies are buried so that they may go out and find them.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to most of the plays that engage with the history of violence, this one takes on the most difficult task of putting the perpetrator onstage. Salvo Castello is portrayed as a hypocritical, detached war criminal who submitted to justice with a triumphant apologetic speech (which the play keeps reminding the audience of), and at the end of the play is forced to show repentance by the ghosts of the family he murdered (although the play leaves open to interpretation whether or not the statement is sincere).<sup>10</sup> But, most importantly, he is portrayed as a human being, flesh and blood, the only survivor of all the horror he unleashed. A human being with feelings, desires and even fears. The victims are also portrayed as complex characters with virtues and flaws of their own, with backstories that nonetheless show that their only crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time in order to fall prey to the conflict (very much like Daniel Arcila and every other civilian victim of the conflict). The two brothers pick on one another like any two children would, while the sister resents her mother for not intervening while her father sexually abused her. Alegría does not deny it, and says that she owed her husband obedience, while we learn that it was Marinda herself who turned in her father, because she wanted him to die and

pay for everything he did to her, before becoming Castello's lover herself. Every one of them has reasons to resent the others; Roxi despises them for 'smelling like farmers'.

Even though there is no definite closure to the story, the play ends when the ghosts leave to find their bodies, and some kind of (incomplete, unsatisfying) peace is made. Telling their truths, having their testimonies heard, and forcing Castello's confession seems to be enough to appease the ghosts.

### Ghostly testimonies

*El deber de Fenster* is closest to the genre of 'documentary theatre'. By assigning Fenster his *deber*, the duty to make a documentary, the production becomes the documentary; even further, the play puts everyone in the place of Fenster, assigning the audience the same task of putting the pieces together and constructing the elusive documentary. However, by performing this dual operation, the play is already a documentary, one that reveals, in its own display, the very difficulty – if not the impossibility – of its making by bringing to the surface the cracks inside the material it is supposed to take as its main source: the testimony of Daniel Arcila Cardona.

In the case of *Labio de liebre*, there is no direct reference to any particular event, but rather insinuations of all-too-familiar stories and situations. What is remarkable of this play is that it not only presents testimonies from victims but also evokes that moment of public enunciation that took place as part of the process of the submission of paramilitary leaders to the Ley de Justicia y Paz, designed by Álvaro Uribe Vélez as part of the negotiations between his government and the AUC, between 2002 and 2008.<sup>11</sup> The play showcases paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso's speech in front of the Congreso de la República, which is recited in unison by the Sosa family upon its airing on the radio.

The importance of testimony, according to John Beverley, is that it addresses its recipient directly, in a conversation between a narrating 'I' and a projected 'you' and that

when we are addressed in this way, directly, as it were, even by someone who we would normally disregard, we are placed under an obligation to respond; we may act or not on that obligation, we may resent or welcome it, but we cannot ignore it. Something is asked of us by testimonio.<sup>12</sup>

And what is asked of us, the readers, is nothing but solidarity, since 'it is what really happened, "the real thing," truth versus lie – the Big Lie of racism, imperialism, inequality, class rule, genocide, torture, oppression – that is at stake in testimonio'.<sup>13</sup> By situating it in these terms, Beverley is implying that testimony is not just any story from a subaltern subject; it is a story of violence, and that 'something of the experience of the body in pain or hunger or danger inheres in testimonio'.<sup>14</sup> This presence of the body at the centre of testimony is vital to rethinking the role of testimony in *El deber de Fenster* as well as in *Labio de liebre*, where those with absent bodies, the disappeared, need to be embodied onstage by an actor playing their ghosts in order to speak their truths.

The strength of testimony, for Beverley, lies in its claim of truth: by addressing the other in a personal way, it establishes an implicit agreement to believe what will be told.



However, and this distinction is one of the main arguments of his book, this truth is not to be compared or set against *the* truth. In other words, Beverley argues that the value of testimony lies in its power to transmit something that is ‘real’ rather than ‘true’. He asserts that its effectiveness lies in its ability to create a ‘reality effect’ and that this reality, following Jacques Lacan, resists all possibilities of symbolization:

What is at stake in testimonio is not so much truth *from* or *about* the other as the truth *of* the other. What I mean by this is the recognition not only that the other exists as something outside ourselves, not subject to our will or desires, but also of the other’s sense of what is true and false.<sup>15</sup>

Or, to put in other terms, ‘we are meant to experience both the speaker and the situations and events recounted as real. The “legal” connotation implicit in its convention implies a pledge of honesty on the part of the narrator that the listener/reader is bound to respect.’<sup>16</sup> This idea of ‘experiencing’ is of great importance when we look at productions like *El deber de Fenster*, which re-create the moment of speaking out and giving testimony, making the audience part of both the declaration and the actions it narrates.

Testimony, by definition, responds to a necessity to communicate something. It is never a gratuitous exercise:

it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself. The position of the reader of testimonio is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom.<sup>17</sup>

It is also an exercise of memory and in the name of memory, one that builds a bridge between the private place of enunciation and the public which it addresses, and also one whose value resides in the fact that the narrative that it communicates, despite being the story of a single individual, speaks in the name of an entire group or class.

Furthermore, and with regard to theatre, I would like to explore the performative character of testimony by examining several things that testimonies *do*. I have already shown how Beverley calls our attention to the inscription of a particular body at the centre of every testimony, and I believe this is a central consideration for the analysis of theatrical productions that use testimonies as their source, such as *El deber de Fenster* and *Labio de liebre*.

*El deber de Fenster* brings the testimony onstage through three main resources: first, the projection of the manuscript as it is read, like a repetition of its inscription; second, the voice that ‘reads’ from it and operates as a narrator all through the play; and lastly, the appearance, around the middle of the play, of the ghost of Daniel Arcila Cardona. One could argue that ghosts and testimonies perform a similar type of work: they both appear in the realm of the living in order to inscribe a truth that comes from the realm of the dead. In *El deber de Fenster*, the memory of a dead person, Daniel Arcila Cardona, is brought onstage first through his manuscript, then through his voice, and finally through an actor who represents him, or rather his ghost. In Teatro Petra’s *Labio de*



*liebre*, it is the direct and indirect victims of Salvo Castello who haunt him in his exile in order to demand that he say their names out loud and reveal where their bodies are buried. In both cases, what the audience receives is a claim of recognition and truth, becoming witnesses of these stories.

### Spectres and ghosts

What is a ghost? Ghosts and spectres seem to be linked to the past. As Jacques Derrida wrote in *Specters of Marx*, 'a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.'<sup>18</sup> But 'coming back' from where? And for what? A ghost belongs to a temporality that is never present. It is an anachronism that presents itself to the living, producing a complex exchange in vision: the ghost is *visible* to the living (or otherwise we would not speak of spectres or apparitions at all), while it also *sees* the living.<sup>19</sup> However, this other time that the spectre comes 'back' from is not necessarily the past:

Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself whether the *spectrality effect* does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other.<sup>20</sup>

This disruption of temporality is one of the most notable aspects of the appearance of a ghost. In the particular case of *El deber de Fenster*, Fenster devotes his efforts to setting the time right: he attempts to organize the events chronologically by sorting the dates on the improvised calendar/clothesline. The importance of this disruption is also evidenced by the role that these ghosts play onstage, since their 'coming back' is a constant reinscription of their testimonies in the present.

The question of the visibility of the ghost leads us to the question of its phenomenality: 'the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other.'<sup>21</sup> We are dealing, first, with a 'thing' that does not belong completely to the realm either of the corporeal or of the incorporeal, and whose appearance consists precisely in its constant disappearance. But, however paradoxical, we are still speaking of a kind of incorporation, an embodiment of something that acquires a presence for the living who witness its return. In the case of *El deber de Fenster* and *Labio de liebre*, the question about this paradoxical incorporation acquires a new meaning as we analyse the ways in which the plays seek to bring the absent body of the witness and the victims to the *mise en scène*. The paradoxical incorporation becomes, then, that of the actor, who embodies both the disappeared and its ghost on the stage.

In the case of *Labio de liebre*, the effect is pushed further through elements beyond the ghosts themselves. In *Haunting without Ghosts: Spectral Realism in Colombian Literature, Film, and Art*, Juliana Martínez proposes the category of 'spectral realism' to make sense of elements that appear in different formats and that manage to evoke the absence through a spectral *effect* that transcends the ghost.<sup>22</sup> I see this effect

coming from the use of elements onstage, such as the wind constantly blowing leaves from the outside into Castello's living room, and even from the appearances of the ghosts of animals, which I believe are halfway between the ghost and the spectre.

Ghosts come and go at their will. Their return can happen unexpectedly, through a sudden apparition, or can be caused by a voluntary action, a conjuration: 'Conjuration says in sum the appeal that causes to come forth *with the voice* and thus it makes come, by definition, what *is not there* at the present moment of the appeal. This voice does not describe, what it says certifies nothing; its words cause something to happen.'<sup>23</sup> The voice that conjures a ghost is, therefore, a performative one. By naming what is not present, it brings it into being; it constitutes a speech act.<sup>24</sup> This definition of conjuration makes us think of any theatrical gesture and its relation to spectres: by performing the role of an other, the actor brings that other to the stage through his/her body and his/her voice: another paradoxical incorporation.

But to conjure is more than just to name or to call, 'For to conjure means *also* to exorcise: to attempt both to destroy and to disavow a malignant, demonized, diabolic force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a specter, a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *post mortem*.'<sup>25</sup> So there is a double, contradictory relationship of living with ghosts: on the one hand, we call them to make them present, we even give them presence by lending them our bodies (as in the case of the actor) so they can return and perform some kind of action; but, on the other hand, we conjure ghosts in order to send them away, to ensure that they will not return any more to haunt us, in an action that seeks to give rest and peace to both the living and the dead. I believe that *El deber de Fenster* is an example of the former, while *Labio de liebre* shows the latter.

It is precisely this other face of conjuring, the one that seeks to send the spectre away for good, that links it to the process of mourning. In his reading of Hamlet, Derrida analyses the specific characteristics of the King's ghost. In the line 'The King is a Thing', he identifies three different *things* that constitute the Thing of the King:

1. First of all, mourning ... It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead ...
2. Next, one cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits except on the condition of language – and the voice, in any case of that which *marks* the name or takes its place ...
3. Finally, the thing *works*, whether it transforms or transforms itself, poses or decomposes itself: the spirit, the 'spirit of the spirit' is *work*.<sup>26</sup>

The first *thing* corresponds to the identification of the ghost with a dead body. This gesture, according to Derrida, constitutes a conscious decision on the part of the living to accept the ghost as a spectral remain of the former living being. It is linked to the process of mourning in the sense that, once it is decided that the spectre *is* that other being, one can give it a proper place and put it to rest. Further, for this it is necessary to know where the body rests, as *Labio de liebre* emphatically shows.

The second *thing* brings up the problem of the name and the language: the ghost takes the voice and the name of the dead; it can speak in its name. Finally, the third *thing* brings up the question of work and action. Every spectre performs a kind of work, and this becomes especially important when we look at the work that the ghosts in these plays perform onstage. One could say that the paradoxical incorporation that the apparition of a spectre entails takes place through the appropriation of and identification with three main aspects: body, voice and action. But these three aspects are conditions of the living and, most importantly, they constitute the markers of the identity of the dead, the identity that is erased by the act of disappearance and destroyed by dismemberment and disfiguration.

Still, the ghost of Daniel Arcila obeys all of the above 'rules' about the representation of a ghost on the stage: just like the ghost of Hamlet's father, his recognition is also determined by the clothes he is wearing, which coincide with those on the record. And even those clothes that appear as objects on the stage (Fenster takes out of the box the military clothes that, Arcila Cardona explains, the soldiers gave him) become, too, markers of the ghost's body. In the case of *Labio de liebre*, Granado Sosa keeps reminding his brother, Jerónimo, that he can bully Granado as much as he wants for his harelip because at least he did not lose his head like Jerónimo did when he was killed (and his body shows the scar). And let us not forget Alegría's back pains and Roxi Romero's right-hand clumsiness.

According to Derrida's definition, haunting can only take place in the context of mourning: the living need to know where the body is and whose body it is in order to finally conjure (as in exorcize) the ghost, which will stop its haunting and ultimately let both the living and the dead rest. This becomes impossible in a context such as the Colombian conflict, at least for now. Even with the amount of information that has come to light over the past few years thanks to the efforts of the aforementioned organizations, the truths that have been uncovered are still the centre of political disputes that try to undermine the legitimacy of the search through claims of bias.

However, the particular ghosts in these plays all come to perform a similar work: that of giving testimony, inscribing a truth from another temporality into the present, and leaving a trace in the collective memory. As Idelber Avelar has said in reference to this text by Derrida, 'Every urgent call for justice is, then, the result of a demand coming from a specter. There is no imperative of justice that does not imply, in one way or another, a settling of accounts with the past.'<sup>27</sup> And if the plays by themselves cannot bring absolute closure to these unfinished processes of mourning, at least they can generate noise in the audience, make the living remember the dead, make their loved ones feel part of a bigger society in collective mourning.

### **The 'sacred duty to remember'**

Peggy Phelan asserts that 'performance and theatre have a special relation to art as memorial'.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, they constitute ephemeral memorials that have their own disappearance inscribed in their very appearance. It is in this idea of art as memorial that I see the true essence of plays like those examined here. After all, Fenster's duty is

not to mourn, and his work definitely does not bring peace to anyone. It seems that Arcila Cardona's only wish is to be taken seriously after being dismissed by everyone. The Alegría family just want Salvo Castello to say their names out loud, to be acknowledged, and to know where their bodies are buried. Ultimately, they want Castello to apologize, which he does, but leaving everyone to wonder about his sincerity. In the end, the claim for justice will not bring it by itself: the audience, like the living characters in the plays, will just have to accept the existence of these ghosts and coexist with them: 'being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations'.<sup>29</sup>

The politics of memory are present in both plays. One of the most striking elements of *El deber de Fenster* is the extensive use of media footage in parallel with the actions that take place onstage. Unlike other documents used in the play, like Daniel Arcila Cardona's manuscript and some interviews conducted specifically for the production, the fragments of news reports and newspaper headlines showed during the play have always been part of the public record. Most audience members have had the chance to see that information before; it has been on their television screens for over twenty years. In a way, the play puts everyone in the place of Fenster: a foreign editor who is presented with all the information at once, for the first time, which makes the audience share his duty too, that of learning and remembering. In addition, the fact that his task is presented as that of a researcher who has to elaborate a report on the facts further emphasizes the value of 'connecting the dots' in a context where the amount of information produced by an unstoppable and massive chain of events is overwhelming.

I believe that the extensive use of media footage creates another important effect in our perception of the news and the reality it portrays. In contrast with the sobriety and simplicity of the stage and the actions that take place on it, the footage constitutes the real spectacle, one that is brought to our attention once more precisely because we seem to have missed it. Ileana Diéguez has argued that we must think of these scenic discourses and strategies in connection with the times and places where they emerged, given that, in the 1990s, the political, economic and social spheres of Latin America became increasingly spectacular and mediatic. In response to the spectacularity of those stages of the 'real world', the theatrical productions have had to reinvent a space for the bodies, one that brings theatricality back to the basics of life.<sup>30</sup>

*El deber de Fenster* makes that contrast explicit by bringing the spectacle to the stage from the sphere of the outside world, while rendering the stage as a private space, that of an individual (Fenster) investigating these events from the comfort of his living room, of which the space of the audience becomes an extension. Diéguez identifies this contrast as one of the aspects of liminality that she uses as the main descriptive category to study contemporary theatre and performance in Latin America.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of Salvo Castello, his whole universe comprises his living room, which he cannot leave. He is condemned to live with his ghosts or submit to their petitions, which, paradoxically, when he does it at the end of the play, sets them free but keeps him locked in a twist that hints at the possibility of reparative justice. The stories of the ghosts that

haunt him cannot be traced to any specific historical event, but rather it is their 'generic' character that reminds the audience that each of them contains a multitude.

Plays like those examined here do not necessarily perform a specific work of mourning, especially if we understand that work as a process that brings peaceful rest to the victims and exorcizes a ghost from society. Rather, by bringing these stories back, they reinscribe them in a public memory that has made every effort to efface them. Seen this way, their work is more comparable to that of the commissions of truth and reconciliation, whose purpose, in many ways, is to prevent important cases from being closed or forgotten. The plays also relate to these commissions in their process of creation and production. In other words, the production follows the same process of investigation and 'discovery' necessary for elaborating the official reports. Even though the results are very different (these plays make no legal claims and put in effect no real justice), they serve similar purposes in the social imaginary through the fragmented, exhaustive work of collecting testimonies, acknowledging the victims' stories, organizing events in a coherent narrative, and inscribing private memories in the public sphere. Moreover, in the cases examined here, the fact that these plays have preceded and also transcended the work of truth commissions shows the importance of these spaces for the creation of communities of memory, with all its ethical implications.<sup>32</sup>

Why remember? What is the purpose of retelling these events? Fenster interpellates 'el ingeniero' at the end of the play with these questions. Fenster is an outsider who nonetheless represents the average citizen who rediscovers these events, for the first time. And his questions are probably shared by the audience: he resembles those who, like him, argue that 'it is always the same old story, the same horrors'. Salvo Castello keeps trying to silence his ghosts. At the end, he agrees to do what they ask, only in the hope that he will finally be rid of them.

*El deber de Fenster* offers the raw materials from which history is made: news reports, testimonies, real-life people who are affected by the violent events that take place in Colombia on a daily basis. The play itself becomes a testimony and re-creates the testimonial moment that Beverley describes as the interpellation of a self that speaks to an other with the hopes that he will be listened to, be taken seriously, and gain the sympathy of the speaker. In this way, the play is a reinscription of the testimony in the minds and bodies of the members of the audience. Fenster claims that he feels like the bearer of a disease, of an epidemic that he needs to wash out of himself. His repulsion in reaction to the events described by Arcila Cardona could be and in fact is shared by all members of the audience, some of whom actually leave the theatre at that point. Outrage and repulsion: the work of testimony.

As one of the clips in *El deber de Fenster* remarks, civil society's response to this and every other massacre in Colombia is one of indifference. Before making a judgement on this attitude, one has to consider the massiveness of the events and the overwhelming amount of information about them. Memory becomes elusive when an event is not even over before a new one arises. It is hard to keep track of specific tragedies when they are all mixed, and this is something made evident by the footage that the play brings to the stage.

In the case of *Labio de liebre*, there is no redemption for anyone. The play refuses to take part in the idealization of 'the victim' as a saint and shows the characters in their whole and contradictory agencies. The audience becomes not only a witness but also an accomplice to the deeds narrated onstage, including the sexual abuse of a girl, first by her father and then by Castello, her desire to take revenge on her abusive father by having him killed, and the complicit silence of her mother, arguing that she owed her husband respect.

Urban audiences have experienced most of the war in Colombia through their television sets, as a spectacle. This helps us understand the importance of bringing televisions, radios and media footage to the stage. They are reminders of our own forgetfulness. Further, they make explicit the problems in the presentation of these events as mediatic spectacles, as if they were not real.

The work of these plays also resembles that of the truth commissions in that the plays only go as far as to raise awareness of the facts they report. But they also differ in that, while the power of the commissions automatically makes any claim for justice an official one and opens up a process for its solution, the theatre in many ways does the opposite: the claim that is made onstage is stronger precisely because it carries its own impotence. In other words, while opening the space of the theatre to make public a private claim for justice, the very absence of it becomes public by the same gesture that denounces the crimes.

I believe it is important to distance ourselves from the postulates that affirm that making a theatre of violence is already an effort to make a symbolic reparation. We have seen in these plays that the experience of such violent events leaves the audience feeling anything but relief. In fact, as Fenster emphasizes, what takes place is a kind of contagion that affects mind and body like a disease. There is no promise of reparation, only an invitation to take part in something too big to carry by oneself.

### **Bodily inscriptions of embodied memories**

Elsa Blair has analysed the excessive aspect of violence in Colombian society and culture. In her book *Muertes violentas: La teatralización del exceso* (2005), Blair argues that death in Colombia is excessive, not only in the number of dead but also in the excess of the symbolic contents of its executions and the symbolic languages (verbal, visual, etc.) to name it and narrate it. Blair adds that this excess also exhausts the efficacy of all methods to deal with the violence, which in turn transforms it into something quotidian.<sup>33</sup>

Blair divides the act of killing into two big 'acts': the first act corresponds to the execution of the crime and the second to its symbolization, as well as its becoming spectacle through the media and other means of signification.<sup>34</sup> This second act she subdivides into three moments: the interpretation, the dissemination and the ritualization of the death. It is important to highlight Blair's choice to name these events 'acts'. Her book analyses massacres and homicides as akin to theatre in that they are deeply theatricalized in their practice and understanding.

As a consequence of the proliferation of these actions, they lose their meaning for a citizenry that becomes inured to being their spectators on a daily basis. The effects of this

naturalization, Blair asserts, go beyond the problem of symbolization: the excessive character and frequency of these actions renders them improbable and situates them in the realm of the unreal and the imaginary.<sup>35</sup> This, according to Blair, is the answer to the claims about Colombians' indolence and indifference to the horrors that their fellow citizens experience every day.

Blair links the theatrical aspects of massacres and of their dissemination with the unreality effect that impacts the general population of spectators. She believes that massacres operate as theatres if only to assert that this operation renders them incredible or fantastic. I believe that it is precisely because of how the media portrays these events that a different kind of theatre, like the one I explore here, is necessary in order to bring these spectacles back to the realm of the real and palpable. In other words, where Blair sees the relation between violence and theatre as the main cause for the loss of reality, I see the return of violence to the theatre as a restitution of that reality.

The power of these productions lies in how they communicate something that could not be communicated otherwise. Avelar argues that the construction of a narrativity for acts of horror is a struggle for power in which languages and dictionaries are the battlefields.<sup>36</sup> I believe, however, that since torture, pain and physical suffering are instances of the body and not of the language, they require real, live, close bodies in order to be expressed: something that only theatre as performance (as opposed to theatre as a text or script) can accomplish. Theatre establishes a space of pure presence both in the sense of being in a specific space and in the institution of an action in an inescapable present.

There is no theatre without embodied memory. Just as there are things that can only be remembered by and through the body, there are things that can only be communicated through it. The undeniable and inescapable presence of bodies is what distinguishes theatre and performance from the other arts. I believe that the effectiveness of theatre lies in that absolute presence. In the case of Colombia, theatre is connected to memory not only in its essence, like every good theatre should be, but also in its topics, in the narratives it inscribes in the public through the performance. But beyond a re-creation or portrayal of the memories of violence, the theatre analysed here makes specific claims about the nature of memory itself, and it does so, in part, by engaging the work of ghosts. After all, the histories 'documented' in these plays constitute histories of absence: absent people, absent evidences, absent memories, absent justice.

One of the most striking things about these plays is that audiences seem surprised by the events they refer to. For many of us, it was as if some kind of truth had been revealed. However, this first shock is followed by another, that we had all been attending to the 'real' spectacle for years, yet failed to notice it until it was displayed for us in the space of the theatre.

Moreover, even though the essence of said revelations belongs to the realm of public memory and constitutes a claim for justice, what this type of theatre shows us is that there is something about memory that can only be expressed through bodies in the context of that special event that theatre creates. In these cases, the memories that constitute the



material for the plays exceed all language and all efforts of systematization. The memories and their excesses are carried by individual bodies that unfortunately are no longer present to communicate them. This type of theatre, then, provides new bodies for the inscription of those truths and for their communication through the creation of a space in which that inscription passes from one body to another, as well as from the individual body of the actor to the collective one of the social, through the spectral intervention of ghosts.

There are things that only theatre can do. In these cases, the space of the theatre, which extends from the stage into the audience, becomes a ritual space in which a community is formed through the revelation of some truth that touches the very essence of every human being. It is not just any truth; it is a truth that springs from an excess and which can only be expressed through another instance of excess. It is also a truth that becomes memory perhaps because it has always lain in the place of death. At the same time, it is a memory that is inscribed on bodies and that can only be transmitted through the contact between live, human bodies.

As a praxis, theatre is doing, its essence is action, as Artaud liked to remind us repeatedly in his writings.<sup>37</sup> In the cases presented here, what theatre does is inscribe a memory on bodies by means of other bodies/paradoxical incorporations. This makes us question the reality and presence of everything we see. It transforms the audience into a witness, but it does so by transporting the spectator to the place of the victim. This type of theatre produces a transformation by instantiating a reality that, in its embodied character, becomes undeniable. It is a total theatre that sharpens our senses and makes us vulnerable in order to expose us to some truth that we are meant to absorb through our skin and carry within our body – a revelation, a reinscription, an excess.

## NOTES

- 1 See Ministerio de Cultura, *Luchando contra el olvido: Investigación sobre la dramaturgia del conflicto* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2012), at [www.mincultura.gov.co/areas/artes/grupos/teatro-y-circo/documentos/Documents/Luchando%20contra%20el%20olvido.pdf](http://www.mincultura.gov.co/areas/artes/grupos/teatro-y-circo/documentos/Documents/Luchando%20contra%20el%20olvido.pdf) (accessed 14 March 2022).
- 2 María Victoria Uribe Alarcón and Pilar Riaño, 'Construyendo memoria en medio del conflicto: el Grupo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia', *Revista de Estudios Colombianos*, 50 (July–December 2017), pp. 9–23. See also the GMH's report, Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Trujillo: una tragedia que no cesa* (Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2008).
- 3 Paramilitary groups are right-wing militias that were founded as a way to counter guerilla violence. In 2005, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, then the president, made a demobilization agreement with the unified paramilitary forces, AUC. This is the background of the story of *Labio de liebre*, which I explore in this paper.
- 4 Yvette Hutchison, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). Miguel Rubio Zapata, *El cuerpo ausente (performance política)* (Lima: DIDI de Arteta, 2008).
- 5 Ministerio de Cultura, *Luchando contra el olvido: Investigación sobre la dramaturgia del conflicto* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2012).
- 6 The use of ghosts onstage is not exclusive of the Colombian context. Another remarkable case is that of the Yuyachkani group in Peru. When the Truth Commission was established (2001), the group offered to

- accompany them in their sessions with what they called *bienvenidas* ('welcomes'). In these welcoming sessions, Yuyachkani staged plays (mostly three: *Antígona*, *Rosa Cuchillos* and *Adiós Ayacucho*) that were created or adapted in reaction to the stories and testimonies that were being told in these sessions. Two of these plays (*Rosa Cuchillos* and *Adiós Ayacucho*) feature ghosts as their main and only characters: they come back from the realm of the dead to make either a claim of justice (Alfonso Cánepa in *Adiós Ayacucho*) or a claim of truth (Rosa Cuchillos) about what happened to their loved ones. Miguel Rubio, director of Yuyachkani, narrates this process in Rubio, *El cuerpo ausente*.
- 7 For more on the involvement of government forces in the conflict see the latest reports of the Comisión de la Verdad, available at [www.comisiondelaverdad.co](http://www.comisiondelaverdad.co) (accessed 10 July 2022).
- 8 In addition to having been present at two consecutive editions of the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro de Bogotá, in March 2012, President Juan Manuel Santos posted a video on his official blog, inviting the public to attend the play.
- 9 This claim of the ghosts of the disappeared to know where their bodies are is also a common trope in this kind of story; it is also the case of Yuyachkani's *Adiós Ayacucho* where the protagonist walks from Ayacucho to Lima demanding that the missing parts of his body (he was dismembered and thrown into a mass grave) be given back to him.
- 10 The speech reveals Castello's relation to Salvatore Mancuso, paramilitary leader. Fragments of his speech are played on the radio and recited by Castello and the Sosa family in unison. This speech is famous enough that most members of the audience will recognize it, even if they cannot point specifically at who gave it when.
- 11 The Law 975 of 2005, better known as 'ley de justicia y paz', contemplated that any actor of the armed conflict could receive lesser punishments on the condition that they demobilize and confess to their crimes. It is estimated that around 25,000 members of paramilitary groups submitted to it.
- 12 John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 1.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 7. Emphasis in the original.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 18 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 11. Emphasis in the original.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 48. Emphasis in the original.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 22 Juliana Martínez, *Haunting without Ghosts: Spectral Realism in Colombian Literature, Film, and Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).
- 23 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 50. Emphasis in the original.
- 24 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- 25 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 59. Emphasis in the original.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 9. Emphasis in the original.
- 27 Idelber Avelar, *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 20.
- 28 Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.
- 29 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. xviii. Emphasis in the original.
- 30 Ileana Diéguez, *Escenarios Liminales: Teatralidades, performances y política* (Buenos Aires: ATUEL, 2007), pp. 19–20.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 This also holds true for the case of Peruvian theatre. See Rubio, *El cuerpo ausente*.

- 33 Elsa Blair, *Muertes violentas: la teatralización del exceso* (Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia, 2005), p. xix.
- 34 Ibid., p. xxv.
- 35 Ibid., p. 5.
- 36 Avelar, *The Letter of Violence*, p. 49.
- 37 Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1979).

CAMILA ASCHNER-RESTREPO ([c.aschner@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:c.aschner@uniandes.edu.co)) holds a PhD and MA in interdisciplinary studies in humanities and social sciences from Emory University (Atlanta, GA). Before that she graduated as a historian from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá. She has also done postgraduate studies in performance and scenography at a pass in Brussels, Belgium. She currently works as Assistant Professor at the Department of Languages and Culture at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia.