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VIOLENT STAGES:
EXCESS, MEMORY AND RITUAL IN CONTEMPORARY THEATER IN BOGOTÁ

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Abstract

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By Camila Aschner Restrepo

This dissertation explores how contemporary theater in Colombia has been responding to recent histories of violence in the country. I analyze how theatrical productions construct aesthetics of excess that effectively re-inscribe memories into the public by operating as ritual spaces. In the first chapter I study Mapa Teatro's *Los santos inocentes*, which is based on an homonymous festival in Guapi, Cauca, and the massacres of the Naya River. I read the play as an example of what Antonin Artaud called "theater of cruelty" and set it in dialogue with theories about carnival, theater and excess. I analyze how the play brings together instances of joy and pain (festival and massacre) in a single theatrical event that overwhelms the audience and makes it part of a story that dissolves the borders between truth and fiction. The second chapter is based on Teatro de Occidente's *Homo Sacer* and its theater of fragmentation. I read this production in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's work of the same title that served as inspiration for the play in order to understand the different types of sacredness that the production seeks to restore to human life. I argue that the performance effectively recreates the space of a mass grave forcing its audience to occupy the place of the victims. In the third chapter I study Nicolás Montero and Humberto Dorado's *El deber de Fenster*. The play is based on the main testimony about the massacre of Trujillo, Valle, and builds a documentary piece around it. I read this play in dialogue with theories about torture and testimony and argue that the play itself becomes a new instance of testimony that interpellates the spectators transforming them into witnesses. I also analyze the role that ghosts play in the production in order to understand the role of the memory of the disappeared on stage. The last chapter presents the three plays in dialogue in order to show the operations that they perform together on excess, memory and ritual and how they become new instances of violence on the stage.

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INTRODUCTION

Theater has become increasingly important in Bogotá over the last two decades. On the one hand, it has become more visible in the city, generating new communities of theatergoers willing to explore old and new productions from national and international artists. On the other hand, the local theatrical production has also increased as more professional and non-professional artists take the risk to explore new languages in dramaturgy and performance. Part of the visibility that theater has gained in the city comes from the creation, in 1988, of the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro de Bogotá (FITB). Ever since its foundation, the festival has been celebrated every two years in the city. The festival, which started as an event for the exhibition of the theatrical production of the Latin American region, has grown over the years to become the biggest international theater festival of the world showcasing companies and productions from all around the globe.

In parallel with the development of the FITB as an institution and its sponsorship of local theatrical productions through the creation of contests and other incentives, many other independent associations have been trying to create networks of collaboration among artists in order to establish mechanisms of support that allow theater companies and their productions to maintain some continuity. One of the most important independent institutions is the Corporación Colombiana de Teatro, which has provides support to local artists through the organization of theater festivals and academic events. The Corporación is run now by Patricia Ariza, one of the founding members of the Teatro La Candelaria and one of the most prominent

actresses in the country, and her partner Carlos Satizábal, dramaturge and director. The institution organizes every year the Festival Alternativo de Teatro (which takes place at the same time as the FITB every two years in order to take advantage of the presence of international visitors) and the Festival de Mujeres en Escena, which was especially designed to showcase theatrical pieces and performances created by women.

Aside from these independent efforts, the local government of the city has provided some institutional support for theater and the arts through the Instituto Distrital de las Artes (IDARTES), which organizes yearly contests in dramaturgy and theatrical research and sponsors the publication of the *Revista Teatros* that gives visibility to local artists and critics. Despite all these official and unofficial efforts and the richness manifested in the number and quality of local theatrical productions, theater in Bogotá and Colombia in general, remains a “poor theater,” with most artists struggling to make a living through other activities in order to self-sponsor their artistic creations.

However diverse in their purposes and aesthetic expressions, the theatrical productions of the last three decades share in common the influence of the national context of violence. As Marina Lamus Obregón asserts,

En los últimos treinta o treinta y cinco años se viene produciendo un teatro que se constituye en correlato artístico de los hechos de violencia. Y a este repertorio le está sucediendo lo mismo que a algunos estudiosos de las ciencias humanas, quienes han agotado los

adjetivos para calificarla, pues los rótulos con los cuales se podrían identificar dichas obras, como un subconjunto dentro de la producción teatral del periodo, parecería no contener satisfactoriamente todas las obras, las teatralidades y las manifestaciones asociadas, creadas o promovidas por los teatristas del país. (Ministerio de Cultura 2012, 17)¹

The proliferation of artistic productions, in line with the proliferation of violent events, has exhausted the traditional genres under which one could place the theater of violence. From openly political/activist productions to less explicit reflections on the conflict, most of today's artistic productions in Colombia relate in one way or another with the context of war. In fact, the influence of the conflict is so pervasive, that it is impossible to speak about any cultural production of the country without making reference to it.

Colombia's history has been marked by violence since the very moment of its creation. The different wars that have followed one another over the past 200 years give the impression of one long uninterrupted war that has lasted until today and does not seem like it will come to an end soon despite the latest efforts of president Juan Manuel Santos to open a new space for peace negotiations with the guerrillas.

¹ Translation: "During the last thirty or thirty-five years, we have seen the production of a theater that constitutes an artistic narrative of the acts of violence. And this repertoire is subject to the same phenomenon that the scholars of the Humanities have experienced: they have exhausted the adjectives to describe the violence. The labels that could potentially be assigned to these plays, as a subgroup of the theatrical production of the period, don't seem to satisfactorily encompass all the plays, theatricalities and associated manifestations, created or sponsored by the artists of the country."

The fact that it has always been there has made of violence a very important aspect of Colombian culture, which has prompted scholars of all disciplines of the Social Sciences and the Humanities to try to understand it as what it is: more than a disruption of the order or a state of exception, a constitutive element of the system itself. This violence is no longer linked to any specific war—at least not by traditional and modern definitions of war—and it permeates all instances of social life.

The conflict, however, has become in many ways invisible due precisely to its omnipresence. Elsa Blair asserts that the massiveness of the events, combined with the massiveness of the information that circulates about them, overwhelm the citizens to the point of blocking their ability to perceive and remember the events that take place every day throughout the national territory (Blair 2005). Nonetheless, the conflict has become a condition of possibility for any type of cultural production: we are dealing with an immensely productive violence that is reinterpreted and resignified every day in artistic and scholarly productions. In the realm of academia it has produced its own kind of scholarship, the *violentología*. The local neologism groups all the academic work produced by the *violentólogos*, another neologism to designate those scholars who dedicate their work to the study of the causes, mechanisms and consequences of violence in Colombia (Blair 2012). Coming from different fields such as History, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science and Psychoanalysis, their works share a common the effort to understand the apparently meaningless violence that permeates every level of Colombian culture.

But the real consequences of the conflict are much more dramatic than the marks it has imprinted in every level of Colombian culture. The war has left behind innumerable victims between the killed, the disappeared, and the displaced. The Centro de Memoria Histórica (CMH), the institution created by the national government as the official organization for the investigation of violent events associated with the conflict, estimated 123,000 people disappeared by 2012.² The CMH has, since its foundation in 2008, made every effort to collect and systematize testimonies of victims and their relatives, and has initiated efforts to take the executioners to justice. Despite these institutional efforts to include the voices and testimonies of the victims and their relatives in the official narratives of the State, most of the crimes remain unsolved and the Colombian justice system has not kept up to the task at hand. In the face of the inefficacy on the part of the official institutions to recognize the rights of the victims, numerous NGOs and victims' associations have organized and taken initiatives for the visibilization of these events.

In addition, the ongoing character of the conflict poses serious obstacles to the elaboration of systematic accounts of massacres and their victims. From prohibitions to rescue and bury corpses to the threats to those who have been brave enough to denounce the events they have witnessed, anyone is susceptible of becoming a new victim. A paradigmatic example is the case of Daniel Arcila Cardona, whose testimony is the central document of *El deber de Fenster*. Arcila witnessed

² <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/index.php/noticias/316-30-de-agosto-dia-de-la-desaparicion-forzada>

part of the Trujillo massacre and managed to escape to Bogotá to declare to the authorities what he had seen, only to disappear a few months later. The fear to speak up has spread all over the territory and has kept the voices of witnesses quiet, leaving the information about the crimes in the hands of the questionable public media. Therefore, the information about specific massacres is scattered and fragmented mostly over the archives of newspapers. Aside from the official reports of the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH), there are almost no available documents that could reveal details about massacres, kidnappings and disappearances.

Aside from the official and non-official organizations that work on the recovery of individual testimonies in order to elaborate larger accounts of violent events, theater companies and other artists of different scales have also worked very hard to produce spaces to make all these memories part of the public. However, one should not assume that theater constitutes a “safer” space for circulating testimonies and demanding justice. In August of 2011, twelve theater companies of Bogotá were threatened by the paramilitaries. The “Águilas negras” circulated a pamphlet in which they stated that the time had come to “clean” the city from all those who, under the mask of artistic activities, were threatening the order and making propaganda against the government. The threats were brought to the attention of the police as well as the cultural institutions of the city, which immediately designed strategies to protect the artists. After the news became public, the *teatros* organized a march in Bogotá, in which numerous artists and sympathizers took the streets of the city to claim respect and protection for unarmed citizens and defend the arts as mechanisms to make claims in the name of

the defense of human rights.³ Despite being the most recent and notable case, this was not the first time that artists were threatened for their involvement in politics. Patricia Ariza, of the Teatro La Candelaria, has spoken on numerous occasions of the difficulties they have faced over time to make a theater that denounces the horrors of the national context, and the involvement of every single sector of society in them. Even though the threats in this case did not conduce to any real violent actions, they were effective in spreading fear among theater artists throughout the country. As a side effect, this episode also contributed to bring awareness, among the population, of the importance of theater as a medium to fight for justice.

In a context marked by the almost complete lack of justice, which has been in turn allowed by the absence of systematic and public accounts of violent events, the biggest battle that victims have to fight is that of memory. Only the inscription of private, individual memories into the public realm could potentially help in eliminating some of the indifference with which the citizens face the tragedies of others. After all, even the public reports reduce the victims to numbers, making it very hard for those who are not directly involved in the war to imagine the horror that others live every day. Since individual victims cannot do much to bring criminals to justice, they have organized in order to combine efforts to create awareness among the public. Even if awareness does not bring justice by itself, it

³ For more on this see the coverage made by *Revista Semana*: <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/teatros-bogota-bajo-amenaza-criminal/245753-3> and *El Espectador*: <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/bogota/articulo-294471-amenazan-grupos-de-teatro>; <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/bogota/articulo-295510-teatros-amenazados-aguilas-negras-marcharan-martes>.

can at least bring some relief from the acknowledgement of the horrors of those whose experiences are only available to most of the population through the coldness of the media.

The role of the victims is so important that they have also become the protagonists of the theater created in response to the conflict. Whether as an effort to bring the general population closer to the victims or as a pledge for resistance, many playwrights have incorporated the voices of the victims in their productions. As Enrique Pulecio Mariño asserts in his introductory essay to the latest work about the theater of violence in Colombia,

esta investigación es un intento por descubrir de qué manera los dramaturgos colombianos han sido afectados en su comprensión del mundo por el conflicto y cómo han elaborado su obra, ya como un grito de protesta frente a 'la realidad del sufrimiento,' como un gesto de perplejidad, una voz de denuncia, un esfuerzo por comprender, como crítica, como un rito de muerte, o como una plegaria elevada al universo a favor de las víctimas que aquí aparecen inmoladas en una atroz carnicería sin parangón en la historia de nuestro continente.⁴

(Ministerio de Cultura 2012, 33)

⁴ Translation: "this investigation is an effort to discover the ways in which Colombian playwrights have been affected in their comprehension of the world by the conflict and how they have created their work, either as a scream in protest in front of the 'reality of suffering', a perplexed gesture, an accusative voice, an effort to understand, a criticism, a rite of death, or a prayer to the universe in the name of the victims that appear here immolated in an atrocious butchery without comparison in the history of our continent."

In fact, the theater produced in response to the violent events of the recent history of Colombia privileges the victims as the protagonists, pushing the criminals to the background and showing them only as phantasmagorical presences that haunt the memories of survivors and witnesses (Ministerio de Cultura 38).

This dissertation constitutes a similar effort to investigate the ways in which contemporary theater deals with different memories of violence and the mechanisms that the artists use in order to bring those memories to the stage. While other scholars have made more global studies about the ways in which Colombian theater has historically portrayed violence, most of them (Lamus Obregón 2003; 2010 and Ministerio de Cultura 2012) take the problem as a historical one, focusing on the main trends and movements that have marked Colombian theater throughout its history. In 2012, the Ministry of Culture sponsored an encompassing study about the work that contemporary theater is doing to recover traumatic memories of the conflict in Colombia. The resulting book is a wonderful work of reference for anyone interested in a global perspective on the work of dramaturges of different generations in relation to the war. However, in this instance as in all others referenced, the scholarship about theater and violence has focused primarily on the textual analysis of the scripts. I believe that the essence of theater rests in its involvement of human bodies on a stage and that only by studying the actual performances one can give an accurate account of what these plays are doing. The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the potential of a theater that strives to re-elaborate narratives of violence in novel and creative ways, specifically in the ways in which it is staged.

Moreover, none of the plays that I present in this dissertation constitutes the representation of a previously written text. The plays were all constructed in performance, very much in the fashion of the so-called *creación colectiva* (collective creation), which became the signature of Latin American theater since the 1970s. There are no scripts available, so the analysis of each of them has been made entirely through the observation of rehearsals and performances, as well as personal interviews with creators and producers. I am deeply grateful for the generosity with which each of these artists collaborated in this research.

Even though the research involved the review and observation of a large amount of theatrical productions, I chose to focus on three plays that, I believe, condense the most important aspects of the theater of violence in Colombia. This choice allowed me to make a closer reading of each play in order to establish a deeper theoretical analysis. The three plays share many aspects in common such as the incorporation of excess into their narratives and aesthetic mechanisms, the creation of a theatrical event comparable to a ritual space where something sacred is constructed and revealed, and the operation they perform on memory, constituting successful instances for the inscription of embodied memories. Further, each of these plays constitutes a new instance of violence on the stage, creating overwhelming experiences that leave the audiences touched rather than informed. I argue that this effect stands in contrast with the ways that spectators receive information every day and becomes a much more efficient than any other medium thanks to the presence of real bodies on the stage, that in turn force the audience to attend in undivided presence.

All these plays deal in one way or another with violent events of the recent history of Colombia, some in more explicit ways than others. Wherever possible, I will point at specific places where detailed information about the massacres that the plays refer to is available, but the purpose of this dissertation is not to elaborate an account of the killings and tortures that are referenced in the plays I analyze, but rather the ways in which the memories about them are processed and re-inscribed in the public realm through theater. Elaborating a detailed account of the conflict would have meant a completely different project, one that would have involved doing direct work with victims and their testimonies. I only use the parts of testimonies that are relevant to the understanding of the contexts that the plays respond to, which I take mostly from electronic archives of newspapers and the official reports of the GMH. All of these resources are available online for free access.⁵

The research and composition of the final document were faced with a set of challenges. The first and most important was the difficulty to find a language to present the material. Given the absence of texts and scripts, the plays had to be accounted for through the creation of a language that could effectively convey the elements that make part of each theatrical piece. Instead of elaborating a narrative about what happens in each of the productions, which would have eliminated in some way the theatrical effect, I had to look for a language that would, in a way, recreate the experience of the performance, without turning events whose essence

⁵ The site of the Centro de Memoria Histórica, the official institution in charge of the investigation of acts of violence is: <http://www.centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/>

is the theatrical into something narrative. In order to solve this problem, I chose to leave the description of each play as a separate section within each chapter, in hopes that the reader will be able to approach each of the plays in the way that a spectator would, without the filter of an analytic voice. Even though no written language could possibly replace the multi-sensorial experience that attending a performance provides, I hope that this choice serves the purpose of doing justice to each play as a document before setting it in dialogue with theoretical ideas about it.

The second challenge was to construct a theoretical framework to analyze the plays without imposing the theory on the pieces. For the purpose of this dissertation, I wanted the proposal that each piece brings to the debate to enter in a dialogue with the theoretical postulates that inform my reading, acting on the same level. Instead of bringing in the theory as an all-encompassing system to understand the “archive,” I wanted to explore how each of these plays actually informs and challenges different theoretical postulates about the aspects they work on. Just as I wanted to let the bodies speak within the text, I wanted the performances to present their own mechanisms of representation and by doing so, reveal themselves as new instances of not only theater-making, but also theory-making.

A third challenge, even if minor compared to the other two, was to find an effective style that would do justice to the kind of storytelling that this kind of work demands. Each of the plays presented here is a document in itself, but each of them is also a story of an investigative and creative process. I did not want to leave the creative process on the side because I believe that the craft of theater has a lot to say

about the ways in which human beings live and structure their relationship to the world around them. As I will show in each chapter, the creative process in each case followed the same path that the play it conducted to did. Actors and producers had to conduct a research that would turn historical facts into embodied memories and train themselves in order to effectively inscribe them on other bodies by means of the performance. Each process of creation consisted also on the elaboration of a kind of ritual that enabled the artists to create new instances of community. To me, these stories are inseparable from the final productions, and their continuity stands in contrast with the decision of all of the creators of these pieces to avoid narrative and present histories in fragmented ways.

The first chapter, “Festival and Massacre: Staging Excess in Mapa Teatro’s *Los Santos Inocentes*,” analyzes Mapa Teatro’s theatrical piece in order to understand how different registers of life and death can come together in a single event and be staged in a single theatrical piece. The play is named after the catholic holiday of the Holy Innocents, which is celebrated every year with a festival in the municipality of Guapi, Cauca, in the southwest of Colombia. Mapa Teatro takes some of the traditional aspects of the holiday and mixes them with the contemporary problems of Cauca in order to create a new historical narrative for the festival and the region. The production recreates the festival within the play, mixing it with the celebration of the birthday of one of the actresses and the story about the massacres of the Naya River, which hit the region in 2001. Under the pretext of making a “fake documentary” about the festival, the troupe attended the celebration in 2009 before creating the piece. In the play, the history of the region is mixed with that of the

massacres as well as the mythic elements of the catholic holiday. I analyze all of these elements from theories about the theater, the festival, violence and the sacred, in order to understand how *Los santos inocentes* can inform our understanding of these instances of excess in human life.

Even though *Los santos inocentes* is not a staging of the festival, I argue that the play functions *as* a festival, revealing the different elements essential to festivals that relate them to other experiences such as massacres. I explore how Mapa Teatro takes all these instances of excess and puts them together in order to construct a new space of excess in the theater. Further, I analyze the interventions that the play performs over the distinction between truth and fiction by presenting the work as a “fake documentary.” The question of how to deal with historical truths was central to the process of creation of the play, and I will show how Mapa Teatro opted to solve this problem through the exploitation of literality, which in the play works on the level of the image, the body and the text. Finally, I look at the way in which the play re-inscribes the memory of the massacre through different representational mechanisms, in order to argue that said inscription is made possible precisely by means of the performance: as an embodied memory that can only be passed on from one body to another. At the end, I read *Los santos inocentes* as an effective practice of what Artaud called the “Theater of Cruelty.”

The second chapter, “Bearing Witness from the Mass Grave: Ritual and Space of Death in Teatro de Occidente’s *Homo Sacer*,” is an exploration of the ways in which the company experimented with the creation of a language that could respond to the

fragmented nature of the conflict and everything left behind by it, from narratives to bodies to even the national territory. I analyze the ways in which fragmentation is apprehended and expressed through the images that the play constructs, as well as the work they perform in reversing fragmentation in order to restore a sense of integrity to the victims whose testimonies they used as the basis for the performance.

The play is constructed as a set of images with no linear connection to each other and almost no dialogues, rendering the actions of the bodies on the stage fundamental to the understanding of how the piece works. Each of those images, however, responds in part to the theoretical postulates of Giorgio Agamben about the sacredness of human life, so I include in this chapter a analysis of the contradictory yet complimentary ideas about the sacred that the play deals with. Since the piece works around the idea of the *homo sacer*—the sacred man—I explore how the play attempts to restore a lost sacredness to human life and death. The piece in many ways works then as a consecration, and I analyze the ritual elements it brings to the stage and the ways in which the entire performance works as a ritual. I argue that this ritual space constitutes an effective mechanism for an experience of the sacred for actors and spectators, and that by means of that ritual space and that consecration, the theatrical experience brings everyone present closer to the experience of the victims. I also argue that the space constructed by the piece recreates the experience of a mass grave, bringing the audience closer to the experience of a space of death.

The third chapter, “Ghostly Interpellations: Testimonial Encounters in *El deber de Fenster*” analyzes this piece of documentary theater under the light of John Beverley’s theory about testimonies. The story of the play is that of a German editor who has been commissioned to produce a documentary about the massacre that took place in Trujillo, Valle, and which reached its highest point during March of 1991. Fenster receives a box marked with the number of “the case” of the massacre, from which he extracts all the relevant documents that will enable him to construct a narrative about the events. As Fenster begins to study the material, the story that he is supposed to make clear becomes more and more complicated, making it hard for Fenster (and the audience) to fully grasp its evolution.

The central piece of the play is the testimony of Daniel Arcila Cardona, who became the key witness of the events after collaborating with the criminals by chance. The play presents the ways in which his testimony, along with the story it tells, was silenced at different moments by different institutions until its truth was finally revealed, after Arcila had already disappeared. The presence of the witness is first embodied by his testimony which, around the middle of the play, is replaced by an actor who performs the role of Daniel Arcila Cardona, almost as a ghost. I read this play from theories about testimonies and ghosts, in order to reveal how the two perform the same type of work. I argue that the play becomes an instance of testimony in itself, constructing a community of witnesses among all those present at the theater. Further, I analyze the role of the inscription of this memory on the theater, when it is accompanied by footage of the media that shows that those events have been part of the public since they were happening. Setting these two

spaces in contrast allows me to make claims about the ability of theater to present events with much more reality than any other mechanism. In this case, as in the other two, the theatrical production works as a ritual space in which something is *revealed*: an inescapable truth that cannot be kept in silence anymore. As in the other two plays, I argue that the communication of said truth is made possible only because it constitutes an embodied one, which becomes an inscription on the spectators' bodies by means of the event that the performance creates.

The fourth and last chapter sets the three plays in dialogue in order to show the common claims that they all make about theater and violence and presents some general conclusions about my work on them. In the first section I explore the excessive character of all these plays and the ways in which that excess can be seen as a response to the no less excessive character of the violent events they allude to. I argue that there is something in the essence of theater that allows for the presentation of these events on a stage to make a much stronger impact on the audience than any "real" account of them in the media. I analyze some theoretical postulates about the "unreality" effect that the media has over the population. Scholars have argued that there is something in the nature of the events as well as their signification in the public realm that makes them impossible to believe, apprehend and remember, resulting in a community of people without memory and completely indifferent to the horror of the ongoing conflict in Colombia. If massacres are profoundly theatrical both in their performance and the ways they are resignified in the media and scholarship, I argue that theater performs a reversal of this phenomenon, bringing the spectacle back to the bodies of actors and spectators.

This contrast allows me to assert the necessity of a theater of violence in order to bring awareness about the conflict. Moreover, by effectively bringing the excess to the stage, these plays become new instances of violence, constituting real experiences of the horrors they portray for the audiences, who normally have access to them through the “clean” and distant media.

The second section reads the three plays in what they have to say about memory. More precisely, I explore in this section how theater works as a powerful tool to communicate memories that are, in their very essence, embodied ones. I explore the different relations between theater as an art of memory. Embodied memory is an essential part of the actor’s training, as the theories and methods for theater show. Theater has the unique ability to show that the only real memory is that which is inscribed on the body, and the only way to transmit it is through transferring it from one body to another, in the space of the performance. In the case of these three plays, those memories are effectively inscribed due in great part to the recreation of the excess that I discuss in the first section. Given that not all theater is capable of performing this intervention on memory, I move on to understand these plays as events in the last section of the last chapter.

The last section analyzes the ritual aspects of the theater that occupies this dissertation, from the perspective of their creators as well as some theoreticians of religion and the sacred. If theater manages to effectively overwhelm the viewer through the creation of a space of excess on the stage, and by means of that excess inscribe a specific type of memory on the body of the spectator, it is in part because

it effectively operates as a ritual. I analyze the ritual aspects of each of these plays and the ways in which the work they do is comparable to that presented by general theories about the ritual. Moreover, if the ritual is the space *par excellence* for the creation and manifestation of the sacred, I analyze what are those *things* that this theater elaborates as sacred. In fact, all of the creators of these pieces have referred to their work as containing a ritual character that revolves around something sacred, so this section analyzes how the ritual functions in each play as well as the things that they present as sacred.

In sum, I argue that these theatrical pieces respond to violence through becoming immensely violent spaces in themselves. They force their audiences to live the experience of violence by putting them in the place of the victim or the witness alternately. The theater I study here breaks the barrier between actor and spectator, not just in the way that theoreticians like Artaud projected, but it involves everyone present in a different order of reality. I believe that these events that are produced in the theater are far more powerful than any theory of the theater, the ritual or the sacred can account for, since the effects they produce exceed the time and space of the performance and can, in fact produce permanent transformations in every individual that takes part in them. Further, I believe that it is only due to the extremely violent character of theatrical pieces that operate as real *experiences* that theater can be seen as something more than a space of representation and be understood as a space of transformation: for actors and spectators alike. Finally, I also argue that theater, as a craft and as an event, can bring light to different

phenomenological theories about experience and intersubjectivity, transforming phenomenology into a praxis. But this is perhaps an entirely new project.

1.

**FESTIVAL AND MASSACRE: STAGING EXCESS
IN MAPA TEATRO'S *LOS SANTOS INOCENTES***

A la luz de una lámpara de carburo cenamos en la plataforma, espiados por un centenar de vecinos rencorosos; jamás el lechón adobado nos pareció más exquisito, y más negro y dulce el nebiolo. Una brisa del norte balanceaba suavemente la cuerda de la horca; una o dos veces chirrió la rueda, como si ya los cuervos se hubieran posado para comer. Los mirones empezaron a irse, mascullando vagas amenazas; aferrados a la verja quedaron veinte o treinta que parecían esperar alguna cosa. Después del café apagamos la lámpara para dar paso a la luna que subía por los balaústres de la terraza, mis hermanas aullaron y mis primos y tíos recorrieron lentamente la plataforma, haciendo temblar los fundamentos con sus pasos. En el silencio que siguió, la luna vino a ponerse a la altura del nudo corredizo, y en la rueda pareció tenderse una nube de bordes plateados. Las mirábamos, tan felices que era un gusto, pero los vecinos murmuraban en la verja, como al borde de una decepción. Encendieron cigarrillos y se fueron yendo, unos en pijama y otros más despacio. Quedó la calle, una pitada de vigilante a lo lejos, y el colectivo 108 que pasaba cada tanto; nosotros ya nos habíamos ido a dormir y soñábamos con fiestas, elefantes y vestidos de seda.

Festivals constitute privileged spaces in which to understand the essence of a community. They present historical narratives in a unique way, bringing together past and present, myths and historical facts, in a single commemorative event. They unite entire communities that gather around shared symbols and experiences and materialize the otherwise immaterial essence of the sacred. Further, they constitute spaces where the sacred—which during regular time is separated from daily life—can be accessed by everyone (Caillois 1988). Paradoxical in both their nature and expression, festivals bring together joy and fear, peace and violence, happiness and sorrow. They are instances for the celebration of life while at the same time they can be spaces of mourning. A festival is an instance of absolute expenditure where even life is risked in the name of the event that takes place.

⁶ "We took supper on the platform by the light of a carbide lamp, spied upon by a crowd of around a hundred spiteful neighbors; never had the roast suckling pig tasted more exquisite, or the chianti been blacker and sweeter. A breeze from the north swung the gallows rope gently back and forth; the wheel of the rack creaked once or twice, as though the crows had already come to rest there and eat. The spectators began to go off, muttering vague threats; some twenty or thirty stayed on, hanging around the iron railing--they seemed to be waiting for something. After coffee we put out the lamp so that we could see the moon, which was rising over the balustrades of the terrace, my sisters howled, and my cousins and uncles loped slowly back and forth across the platform, their steps making the foundation shake underfoot. In the subsequent silence the moonlight came to fall at the height of the noose, and a cloud with silver borders seemed to stretch across the wheel. We looked at it all, so happy it was a pleasure, but the neighbors were murmuring at the filings as if they were disappointed or something. They were lighting cigarettes or were wandering off, some in pajamas and others more slowly. Only the street remained. The sound of the cop's nightstick on pavement in the distance, and the 108 bus which passed every once in a while; as for us, we had already gone to sleep, and were dreaming of fiestas, elephants, and silk suits." (Translated by Paul Blackburn)

Due to their power to bring together life and death, festivals also contain a sinister character that can sometimes be incarnated by devils, even though most of the time the presence of these are more implicit than explicit. However festive and even comic, carnivalesque devils are in many instances the incarnation of less tangible evils that afflict a society. In Colombia, particularly, festivals are deeply connected to massacres in ways that are not always straightforward for either the participants or their spectators. This chapter will analyze the complex relationship between festival and massacre around Mapa Teatro's production *Los santos inocentes*. I will analyze the formal and narrative aspects of the play under the light of theories of the sacred from Roger Caillois, Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille, in order to understand the specific ways in which a theatrical event can constitute an instance of the festive, the horror, the sacrifice and the sacred, all under the framework of real historical events re-presented and masked as fiction.

The analysis will start by showing the different historical and fictional elements that the theatrical piece brings together in order to understand the story it tells. Then I will present the play and its functioning within this larger framework. I will analyze this piece as a paradigmatic example of what Artaud imagined as the theater of cruelty, while showing the ways in which his theatrical project dialogues Bataille's and Caillois's philosophical ones. Finally, I will show how the play responds to and challenges some of these theoretical notions, through analyzing the work it performs on actors and spectators by creating a very special kind of theatrical space and event that has the power to transform the minds and bodies of everyone who makes part of it, through the inscription of an embodied memory. I

argue that the specific transformation that takes place during this very special kind of event challenges all theories about rituals, festivals, and the sacred given its potential to become permanent. In other words, the inscription that results from this transformation exceeds the time and space of the performance returning it to the realm of everyday life.

“Representations” can be even more real and threatening than the actual events they are set to imitate. In the case of theater, Artaud had already asserted that there are uncontrollable forces in theater—at least what he considered good theater—“that make the incarnation of a crime committed on a stage much more disturbing for the spirit than the real crime when it is actually committed.” (Artaud n. d., 85) Mapa Teatro, very much in sync with Artaud’s precepts, is committed to make a theater that disturbs and moves every single fiber of a human being, and I will show how this mechanism works in this particularly festive production.

1. The myth and the facts

Every festival has its origin in one or several myths, Callois asserts in his 1939 lecture for the College of Sociology entitled “Festival” that would become chapter 4 of *Man and the Sacred*.⁷ The festival that occupies us here is no exception. The story behind the production of *Los santos inocentes* mixes myths and historical facts that spring from history books and oral traditions alike.

⁷ Roger Callois, “Festival”. Hollier, Denis (Ed), *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. (279-303)

The first myth is part of the tales about the origins of Christianity. The tradition asserts that king Herod of Judea ordered the execution of all the male newborns in Jerusalem after the birth of Jesus, in order to prevent the prophecies that he would steal his throne from coming true. This episode of biblical history has never been confirmed by evidence, but is remembered in Christianity as the Massacre of the Innocents and commemorated every year on the 28th of December as the holiday of the Holy Innocents. The victims of this massacre are considered to be the first Christian martyrs, even though Christianity did not even exist yet.

In Colombia, the holiday of the Holy Innocents is celebrated every year as a day in which people play pranks on each other. Usually very tough ones, they are all protected by the motto “pásela por inocente” (“let it pass as innocent”).⁸ Anything that takes place that day, from newspapers publishing fake news to more domestic and private examples of lying and mischief falls under the protection of the holiday and has to be, in fact, “passed as innocent”. The importance of this tradition makes it less surprising that an entire population of Colombia, in a municipality of Cauca, would take this day of unrestrained license to celebrate a festival of carnivalesque proportions, all in the name of the Holy Innocents, which takes us to the second story that frames our festival/play.

⁸ In Spanish, the expression “pásela por inocente” has two different meanings, both of which are implied in its nuance in the context of this holiday. The first one ascribes the innocence to the author of the mischief, and works as a command to let the offense go as in “let it pass as innocent”. The second attributes the innocence to the victim, and implies that the other person has fallen victim to the mischief because of a lack of awareness and now has to go through the humiliation as a punishment for not being clever enough, as in “take that for innocent” or “I fooled you”. This ambiguity in the meaning of the expression will become even more important as I get to the analysis of Mapa Teatro’s play.

The second story that frames this play is the never-ending process of foundation of that imagined nation called Colombia. It tells us about historically secluded regions in the country, some of which nobody, not even the government has ever tried to reach. It is the story of Guapi, a municipality of the department of Cauca, in the southwest of Colombia. The town, built on the border of the Guapi river and bordered by the Pacific Ocean, is unconnected with the rest of the country through roads, and accessible only through the rivers that run through the rainforest and a small airport to which no commercial airline flies. A town inhabited by about 30,000 people, Guapi has systematically been hit by the different types of conflicts in Colombian history. One of the richest gold deposits—in the world, some assert—the town was the setting for the African slave-based mining industry during the colonial period and for less officially colonial enterprises directed by multinationals ever since.

The twentieth century brought to the department of Cauca, all along the Naya river banks, a new product that would generate much conflict: the coca leaf. The department's rich soils, combined with the easiness with which the product can be packed and shipped across the Pacific Ocean from the nearby ports, have made Cauca one of the main centers of the ongoing conflict in Colombia. Given the lack of government presence, the land has been the object of dispute between guerilla and paramilitary groups trying to gain control over the territory along with the production and traffic of coca and cocaine.

I have to include within this story a very important episode in the conflict that afflicts this region. Between 2001 and 2004, a series of massacres took place in the region traversed by the Naya River. These massacres have come to be known as the “Naya massacres” in Colombia. The Calima block of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (the United Self-defense forces), the national centralized organization of the paramilitary groups, was responsible for all of these massacres. The leader of the Calima block, Hebert Veloza “Alias HH” (after Heil Hitler) confessed to around 2,000 crimes before being extradited to the United States for the crime of illegal drug trafficking in 2009.⁹ “Alias HH” will occupy a very important role in the development of Mapa Teatro’s “Los santos inocentes.”¹⁰

Despite the difficulties imposed by the ongoing violence, every year, on the 28th of December, the people of Guapi take to the streets to celebrate their traditional festival. The men dress up as women, put on random masks “made in china” and go

⁹ <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/nacional/articuloimpreso148899-masacres-del-naya>

¹⁰ Mapa Teatro’s *Los Santos Inocentes* is not, however, the first attempt to resignify the Naya Massacre through performance. In 2008, a new community formed by some of the displaced by the main massacre in April 2001, mainly members of the Nasa community, held an event intended to celebrate the 7th anniversary of the events. The commemorative acts included a small performance organized with the children of the community, in which they were directed to represent the process of re-accommodation, from the moment of the massacre until the establishment of a new community. What is most interesting about this experience is that the group of scholars that went to the region to accompany the processes of commemoration report that the children, after the performance, were put together in a sort of round table to discuss their views and experiences. Asked about what they wanted for their future, one of them replied that all he wanted was to grow up, join the guerrilla and kill all the paramilitaries that had done that to his people. For more information about the regrouping of the Nasa communities in Cauca and the involvement of indigenous communities in the conflict, see: Myriam Jimeno, Ángela Castillo and Daniel Varela. “A los siete años de la masacre del Naya: la perspectiva de las víctimas”. Vignolo, Paolo (ed.) *Ciudadanías en Escena. Performance y Derechos Culturales en Colombia*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2009. (171-189)

out to the streets with a whip in their hands, whipping anyone they come across, inflicting real pain and sometimes even serious wounds on each other, all covered under the motto “pass it as innocent”.

The third is the story of a journey that begins with the pretext of a real birthday and ends in the production of a “fictitious documentary,” which will provide most of the footage of the festival and daily life in Guapi used in the play. Heidi Abderhalden, co-director and actress of Mapa Teatro, was born on December 28th and, as her character explains us in the beginning of the play, decides to travel to Guapi in order to celebrate her birthday in the middle of the Holy Innocents festival. In the narrative of the play, this very real fact mingles with an alleged project of making a “fictitious documentary” about the festival, which brings the rest of the troupe to the municipality of Guapi to take part in the carnival.

2. The Protagonists

Mapa Teatro, Laboratorio de artistas was founded in Bogotá in 1984 by the siblings Rolf and Heidi Abderhalden. Over the course of their artistic career they have collaborated with numerous artists in Colombia and the world, positioning the group as one of the most widely recognized Colombian theater companies. The troupe that worked on *Los santos inocentes* is composed of Rolf, Heidi, José Ignacio Rincón, Santiago Sepúlveda, Claudia Torres, Julián Díaz, Andrés Castañeda and Genaro Torres. Ximena Vargas and Juan Ernesto Díaz collaborated with the video

and sound design, respectively; and Arno Truschinski and Pierre Henry Magnin were in charge of the light design and stage direction respectively.

I met the troupe at the Vienna airport in May 2011, in order to join them in a summer tour through Cracow, Vienna and Prague. The observations that inform my study of the play, as well as the interviews conducted with the members of the group took place between these stages and Bogotá. During this period, I had the chance to be part of their processes of stage mounting, rehearsals, performances and after-performance talks. I am deeply grateful to the members of Mapa Teatro for the incredible hospitality and generosity with which they received me as part of the “familia Mapa”. So now it is time to get to the festival/play.

3. Mapa Teatro's *Los santos inocentes*¹¹

The theater filled up quickly as the audience walked into a completely lit theater where the lights of the stage were on behind a transparent curtain covering the lower half of the stage, making it possible to see everything behind it. A screen occupied the upper half. As Heidi got ready behind the curtain, the theater was filled with music coming out of an old radio attached to a bicycle situated on the front left corner of the stage. On the other corner of the stage, a marimba hung from two

¹¹ The original production of this play was made in 2009 and it was presented for the first time at the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro (FITB) in Bogotá in 2010. Ever since, the play has been touring nationally and internationally, and has suffered several transformations in format. The original story, however, has remained identical. The following observations were made during the attendance to the performances in Cracow and Vienna, as well as their rehearsals, in the frame of the Festiwal Teatralny Boska Komedia and the Wiener Festwochen, respectively, during the summer of 2011.

ropes, as if it was floating in the air. As the curtains opened, the back stage lit up revealing Heidi sitting at a table among the many that compose the stage, drinking and smoking. At another table, close to her, Don Genaro was sitting peacefully. The setting resembled some kind of low-key bar from a small town in Colombia, decorated for the occasion with balloons and streamers that hung from the ceiling and were dispersed all around the red floor. In the background, clothes and masks covered the wall of the set. Camouflaged in the background thanks to the clothes and masks they were wearing, the rest of the actors stood against the wall, quiet and motionless. At moments, each of them would blow air into a balloon and then let it loose to fly.

At this point Heidi stood up, turned off the music and grabbed the microphone:

Nací el el 28 de diciembre, día de los Santos Inocentes. Desde que nací, ese día sólo he escuchado bromas pesadas, mentiras fantásticas, y cosas graves que no son ciertas. Hubo un tiempo en que festejar mi cumpleaños me era completamente indiferente, pero el 28 de diciembre del 2009 decidí festejar mi cumpleaños en Guapi, una población de la costa pacífica colombiana. Cada año se celebra allí, el 28 de diciembre, la fiesta de los Santos Inocentes. Por tierra, Guapi es una población aislada, no hay carreteras: hay ríos, selva, mar. El océano Pacífico.¹²

¹² Translation: "I was born on December 28th, the day of the Holy Innocents. Ever since, on that day I have only listened to bad pranks, fantastic lies and serious things that are not true. There was a time when I could not care less about my birthday, but on December 28th

The attention was then directed towards the screen at the top of the stage. An old black man appeared singing the national anthem. Heidi watched him too, before interrupting to tell the story of the journey that took her from Bogotá to Guapi: the first step was to take an airplane to an intermediate city, then a small plane of German fabrication. In the meantime, her story is illustrated by footage of the trip projected on the screen, mixed with the voice of a man describing how, while the country was getting ready to celebrate the bicentennial of its independence,¹³ his people were celebrating two hundred years of being under the yoke of marginalization, racial discrimination and complete neglect on the part of both the central and provincial governments. In the meantime, Heidi moved around the stage turning on the different table fans that were placed on top of the tables that filled the stage. The voice on the video kept narrating, describing the situation of Guapi and explaining that there are two main enemies for the farmers of his land: the first one is the fumigation of the coca crops, and the second are the armed rebels, who after chasing each other all around the country, come to Guapi to kill each other. Then he went on to describe the foreign companies that came to Guapi during the twentieth century to exploit the gold mines: first the French, then the Russians. At this point he began to laugh as he described how they had kicked out the Russians, “a garrote ventiao.”

of 2009 I decided to celebrate it in Guapi, a town on the Colombian pacific coast. Cada año se celebra allí, el 28 de diciembre, la fiesta de los Santos Inocentes. By land, Guapi is an isolated town. There are no roads: there are rivers, rainforest, and sea. The Pacific ocean.” [All translations are mine unless otherwise noted]

13 The footage is from 2009, the bicentennial was celebrated in 2010.

In the meantime, Heidi ripped off, one by one, the sheets of a huge calendar placed at the back of the stage, before placing them on the floor towards the front: December 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th. The numbers were marking the passing of time. The troupe arrived in Guapi. Julián appeared and introduced himself:

Me llamo Julián Díaz, no soy africano, no soy afroamericano, no soy indio, no soy “europeo black”. Nací en Candelaria, Valle, cerca de la costa pacífica colombiana. Vivo en Bogotá y soy un actor famoso. Viajé a Guapi para grabar unas escenas ficticias de un documental sobre la fiesta de los Santos Inocentes.¹⁴¹⁵

The audience laughed. Julián is, in fact, a famous *telenovela* actor.¹⁶ Up on the screen, the image switched to the actors arriving at the airport in Guapi and Heidi appeared responding to the questions of a policeman: “Reason for your visit? —Tourism. —Welcome to Guapi.” The party began. The actors that were camouflaged against the background left their places, took off their masks and gathered around Heidi, who was now holding a cake with a lit candle on it. Salsa music invaded the room as the actors danced around the stage, popping the balloons that were hanging from the

¹⁴ Translation: “My name is Julián Díaz, I am not African, I am not African-American, I am not Indian, I am not “black European.” I was born in Candelaria, Valle, close to the Colombian pacific coast. I live in Bogotá and I am a famous actor. I travelled to Guapi to record some fictitious scenes for a documentary about the festival of the Holy Innocents.”

¹⁵ Julián is a black actor from a province close to the setting of the festival and the play. This play with the definition of his ethnicity is not only a response and a challenge to racial tensions in Colombia, but also to those imposed by the normativity of the different international contexts where the play has been performed.

¹⁶ The group struggled to translate this joke to the central-European context where the audience, having no cultural references to understand it, rarely laughed. This difficulty has made bigger by the fact that his statements about his race made many members of the audience uncomfortable.

ceiling, from which more streamers fell, resembling piñatas. Actors threw cut paper and balloons to the audience, making them part of the party. "Everything passes as innocent, there is no crime," dictated a voice in the background.

The tone changed suddenly as Heidi proceeded with the details of the trip. She had decided to stay at the local hotel in the town, located on the main square. For some time, the police had been staying at the same hotel, occupying the entire third floor. She found this puzzling and wondered what the police were doing there, and why they would have chosen to stay at the town's hotel. The policemen never left their weapons, not even when they would go downstairs to have breakfast wearing only t-shirts and shorts. The receptionist at the hotel advised Heidi not to go out to take part in the festival, recommending her instead to stay in and watch it from her window, which offered a prime view. "But the party is on the streets," she thought to herself, and went back upstairs to wait in her room until it began. While waiting, she fell asleep and had a dream.

She saw herself in the dream celebrating her birthday, dancing and having fun with her friends, until a strange face appeared. She tried to figure out who he was while the top screen showed images of "alias HH". The images were accompanied by sinister sounds, while the subtitles on the screen read part of his confession in which he described the military strategy to take López de Micay, a small town to the north of Guapi, and the massacre that took place there. From this moment on, "HH" would be a constant ghostly presence in the party. His image would then move onto the screen on the jukebox located at the back right corner of the stage. "HH" is the

uninvited guest whose presence is, nonetheless, unavoidable, and in this particular staging will also be reminiscent of the fear that inevitably underlies the joy of the party and the festival.

Once Heidi finally managed to identify the man, she explained to the audience that he is Hebert Veloza, “Alias HH”, and said a little about his “military” career. The actors, who by then were wearing the icing of the birthday cake as masks, began a childish game in which they would steal the microphone from each other, each time giving him a different alias while laughing and pushing each other around. Hebert Veloza, too, had several different aliases during the time he was part of the paramilitary army of Colombia. Aliases are also like masks, and this little game was a eerie reminder of this.

The dream/nightmare ended. Heidi woke up afraid that she had missed the festival. She ran out with her camera only to find the streets empty. She found a man sitting at a café and asked him what was going on. “Corren rumores—me advierte. El 7 de diciembre, día de la purísima, lanzaron una granada en la calle principal, y la gente tiene miedo de salir a la calle a festejar.”¹⁷ Julián had also gone out to the market before he started recording the scenes for the documentary. At the market, a woman had offered him some fresh fish. The fish was wrapped in a piece of paper

¹⁷ Translation: “There are rumors—he tells me. On December the 7th, the day of the virgin, they tossed a grenade on the principal street and people are afraid to go out to the streets to celebrate.” December the 8th is, in the Christian calendar, the holiday of the Immaculate Conception, day that commemorates the conception of the Virgin Mary by her mother. In Colombia, the holiday is celebrated on the eve of the 7th as the “La noche de las velitas” (“the night of the candles”) with candles and fireworks. The day also marks the beginning of the Christmas season. While the holiday is celebrated all around the country, in Guapi it has an even more important meaning, since it also represents the festivity of their patronal Saint, “La virgen de la inmaculada”.

where Julián read “última advertencia” (“last notice”). “Aquí también se disfraza el diablo, aparece por la orilla” (“here the devil walks around in disguise, he shows up from the edge”)—he thought to himself out loud. At this point Genaro Torres made his first appearance. The master of the *marimba*, “the piano of the jungle”, Genaro appeared on stage playing a *currulao*, one of the traditional rhythms of the Colombian pacific coast. The *marimba* music was slowly replaced by the background music that accompanied the projection of images of the river and Julián sitting at the shore contemplating the water. Genaro was on them too, on his fishing canoe, followed by images of the instruments and practices of fishing. The screen showed a fish being cut and cleaned with a knife, revealing a piece of paper in his insides. The images of the butchery of the fish and the paper began get mixed with yet more warnings: “Good kids go to bed early. The bad ones, we make them lie down” (Mapa Teatro’s translation).

The birthday party and the festival went on, with the actors on stage playing with masks to the rhythm of another *currulao*, this playful scene in contrast with the images displayed on the upper screen, featuring newspaper headlines of different massacres. The curtain opened again. The scenery was half destroyed. The actors lied on the floor as Heidi began parodying an aggressive interrogation. The music, this time a reggaeton, started and stopped several times while the actors kept taking apart the scenery and putting on and taking off different masks. Balloons exploded, masks flew, boxes fell and so did the actors, still with their masks on. Were they asleep? Drunk? Dead? Genaro began to play the *marimba* again, while the screen displayed images of the paramilitaries, and of “HH”’s capture and final extradition.

Heidi got up, confused, and started walking around the stage, from body to body, examining them. Silence interrupted the play, the festival and the party. Once everything was in silence and Julián had become unrecognizable among the rest of the participants, Heidi reminded the audience: “la gente dice aquí que el enemigo se ha metido a la fiesta” [“the people here say that the enemy has sneaked into the party”]. Julián began riding his bike around the stage, this time with a *currulao* emanating from the radio attached to the bike. Dressed as a jester, he had become what a voice in the footage describes as “the mythical character who has come to disturb the tranquillity of the town.”

The party and the festival had come to an end and the audience can see images of the people of the town cleaning up the streets of Guapi. Among them were members of the military wearing their uniforms. A voice in the background reported:

Mire que a pesar de amenazas de bomba y de todo, las amenazas no fueron superiores al clamor y a las ganas de gozarse la fiesta. Si la bomba suena allá, allá el “pum” y acá... unos muriéndose y otros gozando... qué, qué, amenazas qué. No podíamos dejar de gozarnos semejante fiesta. Por la obra de la violencia se quería suspender. Nosotros dijimos: ah-ah.¹⁸

¹⁸ Translation: “You see that despite the bomb threats and all, the threats were not superior to the clamor and the desire to enjoy the party. If the bomb explodes there, there the ‘pum’ and here... some dying and some enjoying... So what? Threats so what? We couldn’t miss the opportunity to enjoy such a great party. They wanted to suspend it because of the violence. We said: ‘no way’.”

Salsa music invaded the stage again as the actors, too, cleaned the stage after having totally destroyed it. They built a structure resembling a barricade at the front of the stage and hid behind it, while the screens displayed images of the festival: masked men running around the streets beating each other up. Pain and joy combined within the remarkably violent character of this festival. But the images not only showed the masked participants: they also showed policemen all around the town, standing at corners, on sidewalks, watching the crowd in silence. The footage of the party was then mixed with that of the town people marching: “Váyanse de aquí los guerrillos, váyanse de aquí los paracos” [“Get out of here *guerrillos*, get out of here *paracos*.”]¹⁹ Heidi rose from the floor exhausted, in pain. As she did this, she began her testimony: “En este caso, la cámara no fue una máscara segura. Cuando terminó la fiesta, le pregunto a un célebre matachín por qué me dio tanto látigo, y tan duro; yo que había venido a celebrar mi fiesta de cumpleaños. Y me respondió: ‘por inocente, por inocente, por inocente.’”²⁰ Each repetition was accompanied by the sound of a whip against the wooden floor. Heidi left the stage and only Julián was left on it, still wearing a women’s dress, with a whip on his hand, whipping the floor over and over again. Each blow feeling like it was happening on his skin, as well as that of each member of the audience. His body and movements showing rage, frustration, and exhaustion in him. Slowly, the screen began to display a list of names, dates, and some information about these people’s

¹⁹ “Guerrillos” are the members of the guerrillas; “paracos” of the paramilitary groups.

²⁰ Translation: “In this case, the camera was not a safe mask. When the party was over, I asked a famous jester why he had beaten me up with his whip so much and so hard. He answered: for innocent, for innocent, for innocent.” (See previous note on the meanings of this phrase).

deaths and the location of their bodies. It was a very long list. The audience watched impatiently. The list corresponds to the confession of HH. Those were the crimes he openly confessed to. Some say that thousands more are still missing.

4. Paroxysm, Expenditure, Excess

Los santos inocentes is a remarkable example of how different narratives and registers can work together in a single theatrical piece, rendering them inseparable. It brings together history, myth, tradition and performance and combines all these elements in a single temporality within a single theatrical event. By bringing together the festival, the massacre and the theatre in one single space, the play constitutes a space of excess. While this excess is in part an effect of bringing to the stage a massacre within a festival within a birthday celebration, (all while making the play itself work as a festival) there is an excessive character intrinsic to each of these elements at play in the theatrical production. Now I will explore the ways in which the notion of excess has been articulated by different theoretical constructs. I will do these by setting in dialogue the postulates made by Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Antonin Artaud.

There are many connections between the projects of Bataille, Caillois and Artaud. Thinking in different terms and working through the methods of different disciplines, a careful reading of their works shows that they have more in common than the use of a similar terminology to refer to similar phenomena of human life. Bataille sought a language for philosophy that would take it beyond its limits and

would allow it to think of the unthinkable, while Artaud's search for a theatrical language that opposed modern western rationality made him reinvent gestural expression. Caillois explored the ways in which the sacred erupts into daily life through destabilizing order and rationality.

In his 1938 lecture for the College of Sociology entitled "Festival", Roger Caillois explored the ways in which festivals constitute an irruption of the sacred into everyday life, creating an experience that transports human beings to a different level of existence: "One can understand how festival, representing such a paroxysm of life and contrasting so violently with the petty concerns of daily existence, seems to the individual like another world, where he feels himself sustained and transformed by powers that are beyond him." (Hollier 1988, 282) Caillois further asserts that those uncontrollable powers that man is subjected to during festivals come from the manifestation of life and death as well as the erasure of the borders between the two. Festivals are celebrations of life but they also work as reminders of the existence of death, generating an ambiguous experience for everyone that participates in them: "If festival is the time of joy, it is also the time of anguish. Fasting and silence are enforced before the final release. Habitual prohibitions are enforced and new restrictions are imposed. Excesses and extremes of every sort, ritual solemnity, and the prerequisite harshness of restrictions combine also to make the atmosphere of the festival into a special world." (Hollier 1988, 282)

Caillois believed that the revelation and irruption of death into life gives festivals a violent character that transforms them into spaces of excess: "Excess,

consequently, is not just a constant accompaniment to the festival. It is not a simple epiphenomenon of the excitement growing out of the festival. It is necessary to the success of the ceremonies celebrated and participates in their holy powers, contributing as they do to revitalizing nature or society.” (Hollier 1988, 284)

As a consequence of this revelation of the supreme powers that dominate existence as well as the creation of a space of excess, festivals contain a transformative power that affects human beings on both individual and collective levels: “In its most complete form, in fact, the festival must be defined as the paroxysm of society, which it simultaneously purifies and renews.” (Hollier 1988, 301) This idea of the festival generating a paroxysm of society and its relation to a certain notion of cure of a social disease is very important if we think about the festival of the Holy Innocents in Guapi and the way in which Mapa Teatro stages it in conjunction with the massacre that took place in the region. The massacre is present in the festival both as an event through the appearance of “Alias HH” and his confession at the end of the play, and as a sort of social disease which needs to be expelled by the joy of the festival, as the voice at the end of the play reminds the audience.

But if the notion of paroxysm is key to understand the work that festivals perform, it is also a very important aspect of theater, at least in the way in which Antonin Artaud conceived it. Artaud begins his book on the Theater of Cruelty with the plague. This attempt to relate both instances of human life— theater and the plague—became a re-writing of the history of theater as originating from the tragic

spectacle of death and destruction that the plague brings about. Artaud rewrites at the same time the history of the plague itself, portraying it as a psychic condition instead of an isolatable microorganism. The author observes that when a victim dies of the plague, his body does not show any damage of the vital organs or the body except for the lungs and brain: both organs connected to consciousness, and both organs playing a major role in the actor's training to perform in the theater.

Among the events that the plague produces, there is a rupture of social order along with all its rules. The plague opens a space comparable to the festival, and sometimes it actually produces a festival among the survivors that need to celebrate life after the danger has passed. Moreover, the plague keeps individuals at their limits at all times; it makes them face their own death even while not dying from it. But it is perhaps the instance of the death of the other that makes the theater come to be: "The dregs of the population, apparently immunized by their frenzied greed, enter the open houses and pillage riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. And at that moment the theater is born. The theater, i.e., an immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit." (Artaud n. d., 24)

So theater and plague are related to one another at different levels: first, one gives birth to the other; second, theater and the plague, according to Artaud, have the same effect over the population: "this similarity between the action of the plague which kills without destroying the organs and the theater which, without killing, provokes the most mysterious alterations in the mind of not only an individual but an entire populace." (Artaud n. d., 26) And on a third level, the body of the actor is

like that of the victim of the plague: “everything in the physical aspect of the actor, as in that of the victim of the plague, shows that life has reacted to the paroxysm, and yet nothing has happened.” (Artaud n. d., 24)

However, the total liquidation that the plague—as well as theater—produces, is not exactly a complete destruction, but reminds us of the instance of the sacrifice, where the destruction of the victim consists in nothing but its re-creation as something new:

The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or extreme purification. Similarly the theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction. It invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of the theater, like that of the plague, is beneficial, for impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world.... (Artaud n. d., 31)

The massacre of the Naya river in *Los santos inocentes* can be, in fact, read as a social plague, which has the power to kill individuals and social groups in literal and symbolic ways and which somehow has to be expelled through the festival. The massacre is the event that brings real destruction to the world and the society of Guapi. Moreover, it also implies a destruction of the notions of truth and the

language to express them, and this destruction is transferred, by means of the theater, to the entire community of spectators through an effective theater of cruelty.

Destruction in both theater and the plague, for Artaud, consists of a purification. In the case of *Los santos inocentes*, however, the result of the play is more a contagion than a cure: the violence intrinsic to the massacre and the festival is transferred onto the audience by forcing the spectators to experience the power of both. Moreover, Artaud asserts that there is the need to destroy in order to reveal the truth behind the mask, which acquires an entirely new meaning when we think about masks through Mapa Teatro's production. But what is that truth about man that theater uncovers? What is that human essence that both the plague and the theater bring us close to, and that appears through the image of pillage, of total destruction and mindless consumption? Artaud makes it very clear: "If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized." (Artaud n.d., 30)

So the plague and theater both make us face cruelty, the cruelty that is an essential component of human life and relationships. The cruelty that is at the root of the violent acts of conquest and that gave birth to civilization. Cruelty means for Artaud total action, the transgression of the limits, and once the limits have been pushed forward and trespassed, there is still a longer way to go: "And when we tell

ourselves we have reached the paroxysm of horror, blood, and flouted laws, of poetry which consecrates revolt, we are obliged to advance still further into an endless vertigo.” (29) For Artaud, theater had to create an instance of vertigo, one that would force actors and spectators to experience death without dying in the process. To succumb to the paroxysm and return to life purified, transformed and consecrated.

A theater that is born out of the plague demands a specific method that keeps it working at the limits of life. Artaud called this method “The Theater of Cruelty,” and described it carefully in several of his writings as well as his two manifestos. Theater is connected to cruelty in its very essence: “Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt.” (Artaud n. d. 85) The extreme action is related to the idea of a total spectacle, one that should destroy even the stage for the sake of its taking place. And in this, Mapa Teatro’s production is very much an instance of this type of theater. Even further, a massacre can be interpreted in itself as an instance of theater of cruelty. The entire process that begins with the capture of the victims and continues through their torture and death is a highly scripted one: there is no space for improvisation and the risk of leaving any detail unattended can result in the failure of the entire operation.²¹

But cruelty means not only horror and bloodshed, even though it has elements of these. Cruelty acquires a new meaning when it becomes a method:

²¹ Elsa Blair explores the theatrical aspects of massacres in her book *Muertes violentas: La teatralización del exceso*, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 4.

Cruelty is not synonymous with bloodshed, martyred flesh, crucified enemies. This identification of cruelty with tortured victims is a very minor aspect of the question. In the practice of cruelty there is a kind of higher determinism, to which the executioner-tormenter himself is subjected and which he must be *determined* to endure when the time comes. Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death. (Artaud n. d. 102)

And in the context that frames *Los santos inocentes*, death is always someone else's life, as the male voice at the end of the play reminds the audience when he says that in spite of the previous violent events and the new threats, no actual or threatened violence would keep the people of Guapi from celebrating the party. Dying and celebrating are just two aspects of life which are not necessarily opposed to each other, but become complementary and even interchangeable in some instances.

So far I have presented some ideas about the celebration of life in the face of death as it is incarnated in a festival, in dialogue with Artaud's project of creating a theater that forces everyone involved in it to experience death without dying from it. From these perspectives, theater and festival constitute instances of excess. Both

Caillois's and Artaud's contributions bring up the question of death as sacrifice and theater as a ritual space in which said sacrifice takes place. Now I want to look at the ways in which Georges Bataille's postulates about sacrifice can inform some of these notions, and analyze how his definition of "expenditure" can help us understand better the idea of "paroxysm" introduced by Caillois and Artaud.

In the first volume of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille investigates the role that sacrifice plays in maintaining an economy of consumption and production. His analysis of this economy shows that every productive system leaves an excess that must be destroyed for the sake of the safety of the economy itself. Sacrifice is listed among other instances of consumption that deal with these excessive products of labor. Moreover, the constant accumulation that the world of production brings about produces in itself circumstances in which that extra energy must be destroyed, such as wars.

Bataille reminds us that this type of destruction, which is necessary for any economic system, is something different from a complete and mindless one. In the instance of sacrifice, both the sacrificer and the sacrificed object are removed from the world of utility. This separation opens up a space for freedom:

The meaning of this profound freedom is given in destruction, whose essence is to consume *profitlessly* whatever might remain in the progression of useful works. Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates. It does not have to destroy as fire does; only the tie that connected the offering to the world of profitable activity is severed,

but this separation has the sense of a definitive consumption; the consecrated offering cannot be restored to the *real* order. This principle opens the way to passionate release; it liberates violence while marking off the domain in which violence reigns absolutely. (Bataille 1989, 58)

Destruction plays, in the context of sacrifice, a role very similar to the one it plays in the plague and the theater that comes from it. It is a process by which an object changes in essence, in which its old being is destroyed in order to give birth to a new one that belongs to a different realm, that of the sacred. Bataille reminds us constantly of the violence that is needed in order for the sacrifice to take place. There is violence in the moment of separation, and violence in destruction. There is even violence at the moment of rebirth and its consequent transportation into a new realm. But sacrifice is especially important when it occurs as self-sacrifice, which Bataille saw as the voluntary surrender of a subject to self-destruction through a complete experience that brings him or her close to death. The author believed that eroticism and the festival are two paradigmatic instances in which that experience can take place.

This idea of experience is comparable to Artaud's idea of life: "Furthermore, when we speak the word 'life', it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to a fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling

through the flames.” (Artaud n. d., 13) Although in different terms, one could argue that both Bataille and Artaud are searching for the same type of experience in the different spaces they deal with. While Artaud wants to recover life through the exercise of a total theater, Bataille wants to recover the sense of experience that has been denied to human life by the construction of the economy of production, consumption and conservation (the sacred), through sacrifice. By means of the irruption of this notion of experience and self-sacrifice into the theater, the latter becomes a limit experience not only for the actor, who renders his body to it like a victim to the plague, but for the audience that is touched and transformed by the experience of cruelty as total action. But, as we have seen, the transformation can only take place by a certain type of destruction, which Caillois located at the center of the festival and Artaud at the center of the theater. Where these authors saw destruction, Bataille saw “expenditure”, so now let us explore how this new notion can inform the postulates I have made so far about festivals and theater.

In his essay “The Notion of Expenditure”, Bataille makes an effort to explain the differences between the quotidian idea of consumption and that of expenditure. First of all, one has to keep in mind that in order to approach the notion of consumption, Bataille introduced to French the neologism of *consumation*, as opposed to *consummation*, or consumption. His neologism makes reference to the etymology of consuming as something that is destroyed by fire. This word allows Bataille to make a distinction between the “normal” consumption, inscribed in the logic of production and conservation, and an unrestricted consumption that destroys everything it consumes.

In his essay on Expenditure, then, Bataille takes this distinction as a starting point to identify two different kinds of consumption. While the first part corresponds to the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life,

The second part is represented by the so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (...) all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves. Now it is necessary to reserve the use of the word *expenditure* for the designation of these unproductive forms, and not for the designation of all the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production (...) in each case the accent is placed on a *loss* that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning. (Hollier 1988, 118)

Expenditure is a mode of consumption that destroys that which is consumed, just like the Theater of Cruelty must destroy the theater in its action. Moreover, it is a mode consumption without profit, a consumption for its own sake. While theater is presented as an instance of “symbolic expenditure”, Bataille goes on to describe the ways in which poetry becomes pure expenditure: “The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most

precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of *sacrifice*." (Hollier 1988, 120)

It is this idea of poetry that echoes Artaud's conception of it: theater as poetry, as that poetry which destroys everything, even the language that constitutes its medium, in order to create something without profit. And not just any poetry, but that which is in intimate relation to cruelty:

The Theater of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theater a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood.

This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (Artaud n. d., 122)

A theater of expenditure then brings life back in touch with the sacred. It constitutes a space comparable to that of the festival as presented by Caillois, and a sacrifice, in the extensive meaning that Bataille gave to it. Even the massacre, the destruction of human beings without any purpose or profit, can be read as an instance of expenditure. Artaud's project was to take theater beyond its limits, and he admitted that the time had not come then for the audiences to be prepared to face this theater. Taking theater beyond its limits would require its transformation into a space of excess. I believe that Mapa Teatro does successfully accomplish this

task and takes it to an entirely new level, transforming the stage into the place where the sacred is constructed, and the complete theater as the possibility for a true encounter, the one that creates community. Three instances of the excessive—the festival, the theater and the massacre—are brought together under one theatrical production in *Los santos inocentes*. However, this theatrical production also challenges these postulates about paroxysm, expenditure and excess through creating an experience that does not hold the promise of any kind of restoration or purification. On the contrary, I believe that what the play accomplishes is a transference of the pain, the sorrow, the fear, and even the joy to every individual that attends to it.

5. Mapa Teatro's Theater of Cruelty

I have already shown how festival and massacre are deeply related to each other in the ways in which they are perceived by Caillois and Bataille. However, festival and massacre are deeply tied together in Colombia in ways that go beyond any theoretical postulate. On the one hand, we are used to hearing stories about the ways in which both paramilitaries and guerrillas ritualize their massacres. Some of the most (in)famous cases involve the display of pieces of bodies around the streets of a town in order to intimidate the survivors, or playing soccer with the heads of the victims in front of the rest of the inhabitants of the town. Most of these rituals also include the filming of the event, with the subsequent circulation of the footage serving as proof that the crimes in fact took place.

In fact, it is very hard to separate the different histories of violence and the pain inflicted by them from the festival of the Holy Innocents in Guapi. Not only has the paramilitary violence left an imprint in the celebration of the holiday, but even the festival itself is a highly violent one: taking part in the celebration requires that everyone must be willing to inflict and receive considerable amounts of physical pain.²² However, it is not the festival itself that occupies us here, but rather the way in which it is brought to the stage by Mapa Teatro: the festival within the play. Just like the community of Guapi is formed in great part around memories of violence, the theatrical experience produced by *Los santos inocentes* creates a new instance of community built around traumatic memories that extends from the producers and actors to the spectators. In fact, by means of the theatrical production, Mapa Teatro manages to erase even the border between victims and spectators and create a new instance of violence in which everyone who presences it takes part.

Bataille imagined that festive instance in which a community comes together around a corpse as well as shared ideas about death as a paradigmatic example of the joy in the face of death. This very specific type of joy is, paradoxically, an affirmation of life, comparable to the reaffirmation of life in the carnival: “I have introduced a representation of joy in the face of death by means of which the

²² Let us not forget that the entire region of Cauca, the department where Guapi is located, is inhabited principally by descendants of black slaves that came to Colombia with the Spaniards in order to exploit the golden mines, and it is no secret that the slave economy included much physical punishment within its disciplining strategies. Even though it would be difficult to demonstrate through evidence, and the lack of scholarship about this festival makes it even harder to find reliable sources for it, it is not too inappropriate to ask whether the whipping in this festivity is not a parodic, festive reminder of those times where physical punishment against the black communities was a widely used practice.

intimate harmony of life with its violent destruction is affirmed.”(Hollier 1988, 328)

The community that comes to existence through the experience of death, in the case of this particular play, can be understood in at least two different levels: first, the community in Guapi, the one that is constantly being re-presented and brought to the stage through images, voices, narrations and music, and that is built upon this common feeling and this common facing of death; second, on the level of the theater company itself. Heidi Abderhalden affirmed that after being part of the festival and coming back to the hotel from recording it, the whole team cried for several hours, each for different reasons. Hers, she said, was the discovery that only the body can carry memories, one can only learn through the body (and its pain, I would add).

On yet another level, one can think of the community that is built through the actual performance, in which those two experiences are shared, one through the footage and the other through the display of the community built in the group itself. In addition, the members of the audience become part of all those communities through becoming witnesses and accomplices to the deeds: they feel they have been made part of some truth that has been revealed, and that from then on they share some kind of responsibility toward that reality that has been shown/shared with them. The shared space opens the possibility of an encounter, as Rolf Abderhalden likes to remind his listeners every time he talks about the project of Mapa Teatro. On their construction of a theatricality that completely involves—sometimes even overwhelms—the audience, Rolf states:

Es lo que nos interesa a nosotros con la producción de las obras: generar experiencia. No discurso, no retórica, sino una experiencia y que esa experiencia sea una experiencia corporal. Que la gente pueda estar un poquito avasallada por el sonido, avasallada por la experiencia de los objetos tan encima, como que de alguna manera tocar al espectador y ponerlo muy activo también en la construcción de esa narrativa, a ver esto de qué se trata, yo no entiendo esta obra, la tengo que armar yo mismo.²³

Generating a theatrical experience that overwhelms means that the play has to be able to touch not only the minds but also the bodies of the spectators, break their comfort zone and force them to take part in the construction of the narrative of the play. But Rolf believes that the level of involvement has to exceed the common place of assuming that the every spectator makes sense of what he sees in his own terms, and impose an obligation to construct the story as he experiences it:

devolverle al espectador un poquito su tarea y su rol de creador dentro del proceso de construcción, porque pues nosotros obviamente construimos una dramaturgia pero esa dramaturgia en gran parte la termina de construir el espectador. Y no de una manera convencional como uno siempre dice que la obra la termina siempre

²³ Translation: "That is what we want with the production of the plays: to generate experience; not discourse, not rhetoric, but an experience, and that that experience becomes a corporal one. That the people can be a little overwhelmed by the sound, by the experience of the objects so close to them, in a way to touch the spectator and make him very active in the construction of that narrative 'let's see what this is all about, I don't understand this play, I have to put it together myself'."

el espectador en su casa sino que cuando está ahí pues él tiene que ver qué hace, si mira pa' arriba o mira pa' abajo. A veces nos reprochan que es que hay demasiada información en nuestras obras y que uno no sabe dónde mirar, si el televisor, o la pantalla de arriba, o el señor que está tocando guitarra abajo, o tocando marimba... como que dónde está el foco... pues no, el foco lo tiene que construir usted, nosotros damos unas líneas, y obviamente hay unos focos que vamos trazando pero también hay un estímulo a que el espectador tenga que escoger y tenga que ir como tejiendo él mismo su... de acuerdo a una historia personal, de acuerdo a lo que lo va tocando.²⁴

And in fact, Mapa Teatro's performances can become so overwhelming for some audiences, that the organizers of the *Wiener Festwochen* gave away earplugs to the spectators as they walked into the theater, because the "noise" of the play exceeded the local safety laws (and some members of the audience actually wore them during the show). So overwhelming that, after the first performance, in which an old lady on the first row was accidentally hit on her face by a flying mask, the group was forbidden to throw objects toward the audience during the following performances,

²⁴ "We want to return to the spectator his creative role within the process of construction, because we obviously construct a dramaturgy, but that dramaturgy is for the most part completed by the spectator. And not in a conventional way like one always says that the spectator always completes the play in his house, but when he is there, he has to figure out what to do, if he is going to look up or down. Sometimes people complain that there is too much information in our plays and that one doesn't know where to look: whether at the TV, the screen on the top, or the guy who is playing the guitar or the marimba. Where is the focus? —they ask. Well, you have to construct the focus, we give some guidelines, and there are obviously some foci that we trace as we go, but there is a stimulus for the spectator so that he has to choose and plot his own... according to a personal story, according to whatever touches him."

limiting considerably the amount of “experience” they could get from it. After all, the audience cannot partake in the experience that is brought to being if it does not partake in the risk that the endeavor represents as well.

However, the “cruelty” of this play moves in other levels aside from the “extreme” levels of sensorial stimulation. And here I would like to get back to the problem of the “fictitious documentary” that Mapa Teatro sets as the frame for telling their story. Even though it contains footage of scenes recorded *in situ*, the play mixes facts and fiction in a way that makes it almost impossible for the spectator to tell the difference between them, even having enough background knowledge about the context. And this is perhaps the point that Rolf and his group wanted to make. According to him, that is the most important part, because it displaces the questions about reality, document and fiction, and inscribes the play in a problematic zone that they find most interesting:

nos parece que el texto o los textos, las posibles teatralidades o performatividades están justamente allí: como en un territorio donde no hay verdad, no hay mentira, la ficción es tan verdadera como mentirosa y la verdad es tan ficcional como... y la memoria también, la memoria no es una construcción objetiva, la memoria también es una ficción, la memoria también se construye, es subjetiva, la memoria

colectiva es una memoria ficcional, está llena de mitologías que a su vez generan nuevas mitologías.²⁵

The proliferation of mythologies in the play is part of the strategy that Mapa Teatro uses in order to force every member of the audience to build an individual narrative. By exploring different levels of storytelling, the play produces both an inscription of established narratives and a creation of new ones, which are transferred to the spectators who in turn reconstruct them and make new ones. The result is a transformation, a contagion, by which everyone leaves the theater with a new set of stories accompanied by a new awareness of the reality that the play presents. This idea of the theater as a space where myths are at the same time communicated and created also echoes Caillois's description of festivals and other ritual spaces as places where myths are created and re-created in each event.

But the confusion between truth and fiction also intensifies the overwhelming and destabilizing character of the play. By challenging even the audience's previous knowledge of the context that is presented, everything that was familiar becomes strange. This phenomenon forces the audience to maintain an enhanced level of awareness of what is presented as historical facts, and to question the very narratives that they previously had about them. As Rolf puts it,

²⁵ Translation: "We think that the text or texts, the possible theatricalities or performativities lie precisely there: in a territory where there is no truth, no lie. Fiction is as truthful as lying, and truth is fictional as well. And memory too, memory is not an objective construction, it is constructed, it is subjective, and collective memory is a fictional one, full of mythologies that in turn generate new mythologies."

[Queríamos explorar] cómo un registro puede al mismo tiempo empezar a entrar en una zona de preguntas sobre si eso es verdad o es mentira, hasta tal punto que al final mucha gente nos pregunta si la fiesta es de verdad, o sea si nosotros no fuimos quienes pusimos en escena la celebración de los Santos Inocentes en Guapi, y que nosotros filmamos a toda esa población y los vestimos y les llevamos vestidos y máscaras.²⁶

Everything in the play becomes subject to questioning on the part of the spectator who, in a way, at some point has to make a conscious decision about what he or she is going to believe is true about what is presented. Generating doubts becomes a very effective invitation to think critically about any kind of information that an individual is exposed to. Further, I would add that once the audience is forced to doubt the existence of the very festival, it becomes an invitation to elaborate further research and get informed. An invitation to memory.

But Mapa Teatro's strategy goes beyond presenting historic facts as fantastic. Let us remember the scenes of the play where the festival is arriving at its highest point and the audience sees bodies and masks falling all around the stage while the scenography is being destroyed. One wonders whether they are dead or alive, whether what just took place was the festival or the massacre. Even Heidi seems confused by the situation, when she wakes up and examines the bodies of the rest of

²⁶ Translation: "[We wanted to explore] how a register can enter a zone of questions about its veracity or falsehood, to the point where many people ask us whether the festival is true or it was us who staged the celebration of the Holy Innocents in Guapi, and that we gathered them to record them, dressed them up and put the masks on them."

the actors on the stage. This is a very confusing moment for the audience and I remember people leaving the theater at that moment. And that is Mapa Teatro's poetics. Their exploration of the relationships between festival and massacre takes them beyond discourse to an exploration of the sounds, the images, the bodies left by both. Probably that is what the spectators that leave the theater perceive: it is an unbearable moment of violence that takes place in front of their eyes, and that somehow blocks any kind of reaction or elaboration precisely because it is experienced by the people on the chairs as well.

Masks represent aliases, but they also represent bodies without names. Further, they can even be seen as heads detached from bodies, as a reminder of the generalized practices of quartering and dismemberment that make part of every massacre. In a war that has left more disappeared buried in mass graves than actual registers of individuals with death certificates and marked tombs, masks also represent the interchangeability of identities, their dissolution in the middle of a war that distinguishes no individuals, only ciphers. This is why, at the end of the play, when HH's testimony is shown to the audience, they decided to leave it just the way it is: a simple, cold list. Rolf emphasizes that this was a challenge: on the one hand, representing the festival or the massacre, which according to him would have been ridiculous. Constructing characters for the victims would have been problematic in itself. The problem lies, for him, more on the side of literality than of representation: "No vamos a representar la fiesta de los Santos Inocentes, cosa que sería ridícula, pero al mismo tiempo hay una literalidad que cuando se lleva a un extremo, cuando se lleva al límite, la literalidad también funciona como un

mecanismo de poetización y de sentido muy eficaz”.²⁷ Between the re-presentation of reality and the elaboration of a fictional character, Mapa Teatro opts for the exploitation of literality, which becomes so present at different points that it cannot be questioned, regardless of the doubts about what is true and what is fictional.

This literality is exactly what the audience cannot evade. Perhaps the most literal part of the play is when the list extracted from the confession of “Alias HH” is displayed, and at that moment nobody can doubt whether or not Mapa Teatro made that up. It probably is the only moment of the play where there is no ambiguity and no place left for interpretation or reconstruction on the side of the spectator. It is as if the only reality that cannot be questioned is the massacre, perhaps because dead is the ultimate aspect of life that cannot be avoided or denied. I asked Rolf about the reactions of different audiences to the poetic devices they employ. To me, the very “festive” decoration of the stage had a very sinister aspect to it: pieces of clothing and masks reminded me of fragmented bodies, just like those that the perpetrators of the massacres leave in order to make the bodies unrecognizable and easier to dispose of. Masks are pieces of bodies. A fake moustache, a wig, a fake smile are prostheses of bodies that constantly remind the spectator of the butcheries that take place. But usually the audience is more touched by the list of names. Probably, as he asserts, that is the moment when something clicks in their minds and makes them face the fact that massacres are something very real, that the ultimate reality is a list of dead people, and that it is even more sinister precisely because it is just that: just

²⁷ Translation: “We won’t represent the festival of the Holy Innocents. That would be ridiculous, but at the same time there is a literality that, taken to its extreme, works as a mechanism for poetization, and a very effective one.”

a list. At the end, it does not matter whether the audience is most affected by the objects or the list. *Los santos inocentes* manages to stage that literality that Rolf talks about in different registers at the same time, and each member of the audience relates to them from their own experiences and sensitivities. After all, every individual that attends a play has a different background that makes him or her more sensitive to some stimuli than others, and the role of this kind of theater is to construct as many possibilities of perception as it is possible in order for every spectator to leave the theater with a personal notion of what happened.

Still, the list reminds the audience that the Holy Innocents are everywhere. The nameless, innocent victims of Herod's massacre are replaced in this festival by the nameless, faceless victims of the massacres of the Naya River. In the same fashion, this is also a massacre of innocents under the pretext of purging some kind of guilt that may or may not be incarnated by the victims themselves.

But nobody dares to wonder if Mapa Teatro made up the list and the confession of HH, even if *Los santos inocentes* is in great part a fictional story. It begins, however, from a real birthday used as a pretext, a real festival used as the background, and a real massacre incarnated by a real character of Colombian history that haunts the entire production almost as a ghost. However, the mechanisms of the real operate in a different format in this production. On a basic level, the festival is brought to the stage, and even though it is brought through footage of the original event mixed with the group's poetical devices, it is no longer the festival of the Holy Innocents in Guapi, but the festival within the play. On a second level, the festival operates within

the frame of Heidi's birthday, on December the 28th. The festival that is set on stage is framed by these two events, one of which is immediate (the play) and another one that is brought through narrative (the birthday). On a more global level, the play, I argue, works as a festival itself. It introduces the myths of origin (the Christian Holiday, Heidi's birthday, the festival in Guapi, the massacre and the journey to record the scenes for the documentary), recreates the characters that incarnate these myths (Heidi, Genaro, HH and Julián), and then proceeds to its own celebration of the festival/play, creating a completely new event that involves making the audience part of it. Past and present come together in the single event of the performance that inscribes itself in a new space and temporality and imposes itself on the spectator through images, sounds, objects and bodies. Past and present come together, too, with the juxtaposition of the legendary and the recent "Holy Innocents." Two massacres, two festivals, one event.

This, for Rolf, was a way to attain the experiential character that they wanted to give to the play. First, the members of the group had to travel to Guapi in order to live the experience that, for them, one can only get through actually being there. Then, they had to make sense of this experience in relation to one that they could not (nor did they want to) live: that of the massacre. And these two experiences had to be embodied: they had to be felt and then translated into gestures and movement. The actors had to find out how the war touches them, who like the rest of us are used to watching the war on TV. It is important to highlight here a very important aspect of this individual and group involvement with the events that frame the play: every actor and actress plays him and herself in the play. All of them use their real

names, share their real stories, and frame their actions within their own regular practices:

porque la fiesta y la masacre son también unos estamentos internos, psíquicamente también son dos planos en que una pulsión de vida y una pulsión más de muerte están trabajando en uno. Algo pasa y eso es humano y eso está en nosotros. Eso es lo que llamamos nosotros lo micropolítico, buscar en el *bios*, en el *ethos* más personal. Después de haber observado eso en un colectivo cómo también nosotros inscribimos o hayamos esas conexiones, para que eso no sea un estudio de caso, sino que es una experiencia que nos conecta a todos, a nosotros de manera particular además porque estuvimos allá y también nos dieron latigazos, pero además porque todos hemos tenido de alguna forma latigazos en la vida...²⁸

This assertion, as well as its consequences for the production of *Los santos inocentes*, in many ways challenges the theoretical postulates about the festival, the massacre and the theater presented earlier in this chapter. While the play becomes instrumental as an example of these instances, by bringing them together and understanding them as structures that every individual has in his or her own mind,

²⁸ Translation: "because the festival and the massacre are also internal estates. Psychically they are also two planes in which a life drive and a death drive are working within oneself. Something happens, and that is human and it is within us. This is what we call the micropolitical, to search inside the *bios*, the *ethos*, the most personal. After having observed that in a collective, how we, too, inscribe ourselves in it or find those connections, so that it does not become a case study but an experience that connects us all. Us in a particular way given that we were there and we also received the blows of the whips, but we all have received those blows in life."

it also challenges any static definition of what either of these events could be and mean. Moreover, I also believe that theatrical events such as this one challenge all ideas about those events as static entities, limited in time and space. In a way, all theoretical constructions about excess, paroxysm and expenditure assume that once the event is over everything returns to its normal order. In fact, they all assume that the moments of excess are a necessary escape in the name of the maintenance of the statu quo. However, after analyzing the different effects it has on the audience, it is easy to see the transformative power of a theater that shakes all the members of the audience, invites them to build their own narratives, and forces them to assume some level of responsibility towards the violent events it stages.

And nowhere during the play is that transformative power more evident and effective than in the last scene, where Julián is left alone on the stage hitting the floor with his whip. This is a moment in which the audience's bodies can finally connect with the force and the pain of the blows of the whip through Julián's body, which appears as an overwhelming presence on the stage. The sound of each blow feels like a blow on your own skin, bringing to your body the fear, the rage, the excessive strength. This, to me, is the moment when the audience becomes part of the expenditure. It assists to a sacrifice. There is an aura of unnamable sacredness to this moment, and nobody makes a single movement, a single noise. And his blows are accompanied by the proof of the actual sacrifice, the confession of HH. I believe this is where the sacred is born on the stage, where a body is being sacrificed and by its own sacrifice the rest of the bodies of the community are brought together through common feelings of joy and fear, attraction and repulsion. "Esa es la zona

[Rolf asserts] que para nosotros es lo innombrable y lo irrerepresentable y que uno nunca sabe cómo tratar.”²⁹ A zone that exposes the limits of language, be it poetic or philosophical. A zone of pure experience. In Bataille’s words, “It is not a question of dying at all but of being transported ‘to the level of death.’ Vertigo and laughter with no bitterness, a sort of power that grows but is painfully swallowed up in itself to arrive at a suppliant fierceness, that is something accomplished in great silence.” (Hollier 1988, 325) It is then a zone that reminds us of what Heidi affirms: “One can only remember through the body.” And a memory that is inscribed on a body can only be effectively communicated through an embodied experience such as the one that theater creates. In this case, it is a memory that manifests itself alternately through joy and pain, and always through an overwhelming of perception. One that transforms the bodies of every individual present through a new embodied inscription that takes place in each of them. The rest is silence.

²⁹ Translation: “That is the zone that for us constitutes the unnamable and the unrepresentable and that one never knows how to deal with”

2.

BEARING WITNESS FROM THE MASS GRAVE**RITUAL AND SPACE OF DEATH IN TEATRO DE OCCIDENTE'S *HOMO SACER***

Touch is a limited sense. Unlike sight, it does not embrace the entire person. Touch is invariably fragmentary; it decomposes.

A body experienced through touch is never an entity;

it is just a sum of fragments that exist side by side. (...)

The body seems then to be dissected, as it were, reduced to atoms, pervaded, touched from within. It has stickiness and dryness,

moisture, roughness, and temperature. (...)

Touch becomes a life-giving dissection.

Jan Kott

Massacres in Colombia usually include cutting up the bodies of the victims before, during, and after death. Especially in the context of paramilitary violence, dismemberment constitutes a major part of torture and has become a symbol for it. A highly skilled and elaborate task, quartering is performed only by those individuals that have been specifically trained for that purpose and the technique has been perfected over the years. In fact, over the past decade, there have been more and more paramilitaries willing to confess and describe the ways in which the “escuelas de descuartizamiento” (quartering academies) operate, where 5 to 10

young men go through intensive training until they learn how to effectively quarter a body while it is still alive (Vignolo 2009, 191).

Dismemberment has different uses. The first is to deface and dehumanize the victim so that the killing can be made easier on the executioner; the second is to transform an individual into an unrecognizable pile of body parts, which helps in keeping the crime unpunished due to the complete disappearance of the victim, and the third is to make the disposal of the dead body easier:

El cadáver mutilado o fragmentado condensa las intencionalidades del victimario que van desde la impunidad hasta la producción de terror. Un cuerpo mutilado o descuartizado impide la identificación de la víctima, y de esa forma cumple con la exigencia del victimario de que sin cuerpo o sin identificación no hay delito.³⁰ (GMH 2008, 73)

This chapter will explore these three different aspects of dismembering and will focus specifically on how they are elaborated in *Homo Sacer*, a theatrical piece by Teatro de Occidente. Unlike *Los Santos Inocentes* and *El Deber de Fenster*, *Homo Sacer* does not focus on a single event or massacre, but rather on the incommensurable and overwhelming character of mass murders, mass violence, the masses of victims-become-numbers and the general aura of terror, fear, pain and loss left behind by these deeds. In its formal aspects, the piece can be read as an allegory of the confusion with which the majority of the population apprehends (or,

³⁰ Translation: "The mutilated or fragmented corpse condenses the intentions of the killer that range from impunity to the production of terror. A mutilated or quartered body prevents the identification of the victim, and so it enforces the claim of the killer that without a body or an identification there is no crime."

in most cases, does not even notice) the accumulation of violent events that have marked the recent history of Colombia.

Homo Sacer can be placed half-way between theater and performance; what Ileana Diéguez identifies as the space where performativity and theatricality emerge into the theater as a practice, constructing images and situations through the bodies of the actors. She argues that when this emergence takes place, the audience becomes part of an event of gestural writing, an embodied practice, different from a theatrical representation of a previously written text. This phenomenon, which she identifies as one of the main characteristics of contemporary theater in Latin America, brings the notion of experience—both for the performer and the viewer—back to the theatrical event (Diéguez 2007, 23). I argue that *Homo Sacer* is one example of this theater as practice.

Homo Sacer reflects on the fragmented bodies and testimonies left by the war by constructing a fragmented narrative, weaving together individual memories and histories of human beings that have been reduced to pieces through violence. More than a story, the piece consists of a collection of images that portray different aspects of embodied experience before, during and after torture, murder and disappearance. Inspired by Giorgio Agamben's project, the play is the result of an inquiry about what constitutes life and which aspects of it can still be rendered sacred nowadays in Colombia. In this chapter I will explore the theoretical resonances between Teatro de Occidente's *Homo Sacer* and Agamben's work of the same title that served as its inspiration. Then I will move on to analyze the

formal and aesthetic aspects of the theatrical piece to show how it restores the sacredness of life through recreating the experience of a mass grave in the space of performance, and how this experience is created and shared through the bodies of the actors.

In order to understand the difficulty imposed by the generalized practice of dismemberment for a reconstruction of memories inside and outside of the stage, it is important to take a look at the history of violence in Colombia and see how these practices came to constitute the norm. In *Antropología de la inhumanidad*, María Victoria Uribe Alarcón embarks on an exploration of the terror that has characterized Colombian history since the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing from official and unofficial reports about thousands of massacres, Uribe Alarcón analyses the elements, methodologies and symbols that relate all these massacres to each other beyond their specific historical contexts and actors. Her study begins with what has come to be known in Colombia as “La Violencia” (“the Violence,” with a capital “V” to distinguish it from others): the war between conservatives and liberals that took place during the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s.

The first part of the study consists of the analysis of two hundred and fifty massacres of “La Violencia” as sacrificial acts. Uribe Alarcón asserts that massacres have traits similar to those of sacrifices, particularly in three aspects: first, the use of a specific dress worn by the perpetrators for the bloody acts; second, the use of a specific language directed towards the victims which operates, in the context of

torture and massacre, as a means to degrade them; and third, the use of aliases or nicknames that the criminals assign to themselves and each other in order to conceal their true identities.

Moving on to the new violence that began in the 1990s with the rise of armed groups fighting over the control of the production and distribution of illegal substances—principally cocaine— her study focuses on different practices of dehumanization that have played a pivotal role in eliminating the enemy through torture, murder and disappearance. One of the ways in which this dehumanization occurs, according to Uribe Alarcón, is through the animalization of the self and the other. On the “self” side, it is common to find groups and individuals that name themselves after animals, appropriating symbolically some of their attributes as strengths for warfare. On the side of the victims, comparing those who have to be eliminated with animals and pests enables perpetrators to justify violence as a hunt or a cleanse. On the level of the subject, using animal language to refer to the bodies of the victims constitutes a basic aspect of the slaughter to which said bodies are subjected: it all becomes a pile of meat. Given that most of the actual combatants of the war belong to rural communities armed with quotidian weapons (machetes, hatchets, chainsaws) that are normally used to hunt and butcher animals, it is no surprise that the practice of killing and quartering human bodies follows the same rules as those applied to animals.³¹ Therefore, it is common to find criminals that

³¹ Jacques Semelin, in *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, uses a similar line of analysis to compare massacres in Poland, Yugoslavia and Rwanda and reaches similar conclusions about the animalization of the enemy that is both a prerequisite

base their aliases on names of animals, as well as descriptions of specific cuts performed on bodies that borrow terms and techniques from meat butchery. In Uribe Alarcón's words:

El tratamiento que se le dio a los cuerpos masacrados constituye todo un inventario de cortes y técnicas de manipulación, provenientes del mundo de la cacería. La carnicería familiarizaba a los campesinos con la carne de los animales, con sus partes vulnerables, las vísceras y el olor de la sangre... las identidades individuales también se apropiaban de ciertos atributos animales mediante la utilización de determinados nombres. Sorprende el empleo de ciertos verbos para referirse indistintamente a los seres humanos y a los animales que podían ser cazados.³² (Uribe Alarcón 2004, 93)

Uribe Alarcón argues that those ritual aspects that characterized the massacres of the mid-twentieth century have disappeared from the war of the past thirty years, when the practices of war have become so brutal that they resist any effort of symbolization. However, I argue that some of those ritual and sacred aspects of life and death can be restored on the stage through performance and that Teatro de Occidente's *Homo Sacer* is one example of this. While the piece originated from the

and a result of the use of quotidian weapons and practices that would otherwise be used in daily practices such as pest control and hunting.

³² Translation: "The treatment that was given to the massacred bodies constitutes a whole inventory of cuts and manipulation techniques that come from the world of hunting. Hunting familiarized peasants with the meat of animals, with their vulnerable parts, their viscera and the smell of blood... individual identities also appropriated some animal attributes through the use of specific names. It is surprising to find the use of certain verbs to refer indistinctly to human beings and animals that could be hunted."

necessity to create a language to respond to the horrible events that have marked Colombian history over the past few decades, it also reflects a theoretical exploration, on the part of the company director Carlos Sepúlveda, of a theoretical framework that could make it possible to think about life as sacred in a context of dehumanization. This exploration led Sepúlveda to read and interpret Giorgio Agamben's work, where he found two different—even contradictory—concepts for the sacredness of life. The first one is that of *homo sacer* and the second is the “whatever” (*qualunque* in Italian). Now I will explore the ways in which they are appropriated, reinterpreted and put in practice in the piece.

1. Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer

Giorgio Agamben explored the problem of life subjected to death through the category of *Homo Sacer*: a Roman figure that means literally “sacred man” and denotes an individual who has been convicted on account of a crime and who cannot be killed either as a sacrifice or a homicide. In other words, his murder cannot constitute a sacrificial act, and his murderer cannot be judged under the law (Agamben 1998, 81). Agamben uses this enigmatic figure of the “sacred man” to reveal essential aspects of the sacred and its ties to sovereignty: “The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere.” (Agamben

1998, 83) Agamben calls this sacred life bare life,³³ and asserts that its production is the originary activity of sovereignty: “The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment.”(Agamben 1998, 83)

Despite the apparent contradiction implicit in this notion of a life that is sacred only insofar as it can be eliminated on account of its being outside of both the religious and the legal system, Agamben reminds us that the appearance of this concept is precisely the moment in which life enters the realm of politics. *Homo Sacer* is the individual that has been condemned for a crime and set to live at the limits of the law, revealing the violence that constitutes the very foundation of the law:

What defines the status of *homo sacer* is therefore not the originary ambivalence of the sacredness that is assumed to belong to him, but rather both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed. This violence—the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege. Subtracting

³³ Agamben’s original phrasing is “nuda vida”, which literally means “naked life”. Keeping in mind the notion of nakedness is helpful to understand the different dimensions of the vulnerability and exposure that Agamben writes about. One of them is that of shame, which as I already explained, occupies a pivotal place in the violence that concerns this study. Further, in Teatro de Occidente’s piece, nakedness operates as a literal representation of said exposure, revealing all these dimensions in the experience of being close to a naked body.

itself from the sanctioned forms of both human and divine law, this violence opens a sphere of human action that is neither the sphere of *sacrum facere* nor that of profane action. (Agamben 1998, 82-83)

What is this sphere and where is its space of existence? Agamben tells us that this figure represents the inclusion of life into the realm of politics. But life erupts in the system through a very particular type of human violence: the right and power to kill another human being without a religious motivation that would render it meaningful or productive, or a legal restriction that would make it prohibited. I believe this sphere that erupts at the limits of human and divine law can also be extrapolated to the creation of a parallel institutional structure that contains and supports itself and has no duty to report to any external structure. I see the para-institutional sphere created by paramilitarism in Colombia as the perfect materialization of this idea of sovereignty: by placing themselves beyond any human or divine limits, by covering themselves with a sort of divine aura and by asserting their power through the control over life and death of those subjected to them, the “state” that paramilitaries have established in different regions of the country constitutes the perfect materialization of the sovereign project based on the exercise of unbounded violence. These groups elaborate their own unwritten laws according to which, in a very Kafkaesque manner, they judge and condemn citizens to death. Their power inscribes itself on the population through fear, making the population vulnerable at both physical and psychological levels.

Once the violence of this originary subtraction (that of the *homo sacer*) is understood, the vulnerability and fragility of the self are revealed in all their crudeness. Agamben points out that bare life is not just simple natural life, but also life exposed to death. In the following pages I will show what kind of poetic mechanisms Teatro de Occidente uses in order to convey this vulnerability of life in the face of a power over life and death, but for now I would like to make one more reflection about Carlos Sepúlveda's take on Agamben as inspiration for his production.

When I asked Carlos Sepúlveda, director of the company and creator of the piece, about its relation to Agamben's book of the same title, he said that he was attracted by the notion of the *qualunque* (in English "whatever," in Spanish "cualquiera") that the philosopher used in order to restore meaning and sacredness to the life of an individual human being. Sepúlveda ties the notion of the "whatever" to that of the *homo sacer*, assuming both concepts to point at the same idea of "sacred man." These two concepts, however, derive from two different books and projects and are even contradictory. Despite this confusion in Sepúlveda's understanding of Agamben's project, the two concepts become complementary in his play.

Agamben introduced the "whatever"—as Michael Hardt has translated it into English—in his 1990 book *The Coming Community*. It designates the "being such that it always matters" (Agamben 2003, 5), the "being such as it is" (5). This whatever being is that which is neither dependent on its belonging to any particular group or category, nor is it recognized on account of its specific attributes. It is universal

singularity: “Thus being-*such*, which remains constantly hidden in the condition of belonging (“there is an *x such that* it belongs to *y*”) and which is in no way a real predicate, comes to light itself: The singularity exposed as *such* is whatever you *want*, that is, lovable.” (Agamben 2003, 6)

Here Agamben introduces an ethical problem, that of love and desire for the other “being *such as it is*,” not only independent of its particular attributes, but also in its undividable wholeness:

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being *such as it is*. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such-this* is the lover's particular fetishism. Thus, whatever singularity (the Lovable) is never the intelligence of some thing, of this or that quality or essence, but only the intelligence of an intelligibility. (Agamben 2003, 6)

Rescuing the being as *such* in its undeniable singularity and with no divisions, through love, is what Carlos Sepúlveda sees as the purpose of rescuing the sacredness of life, of human individual life:

de Agamben me interesaba mucho la idea de defender la vida de un ser humano sea cual sea, me interesaba mucho el concepto del “cualsea”, lo que él denomina el “cualsea” y que en este caso es cómo

poder pensar el problema de la víctima, es decir, es la víctima. Igual es que el solo hecho de nombrarlos, el solo hecho de evocarlos es una manera de traerlos a la vida, de recuperar su vida, de recuperar su memoria y de decir “de todas maneras, así estés muerto, tu vida de todas maneras es sagrada” por eso es lo de la idea de pedir permiso, por eso era como la idea de hacer también inclusive una cosa ritual.³⁴

Thus, in the face of massacre and disappearance, of the fragmentation of the body and the transformation of human beings into pieces of meat, the project of rescuing the sacredness of the victims’ lives—their embodied lives in all their wholeness—acquires, for Sepúlveda, a great importance both as an act of love and as a sacrifice—that is, as a consecration—. Sepúlveda’s aesthetics of fragmentation works both as mechanism to reinforce the feeling of dismemberment and as a means to re-establish, through the individual bodies and voices of the actors, the wholeness and individuality of the victims. Both the naming and the embodiment of the absent and disappeared constitute a homage to the victims that have become nothing more than numbers and statistics, an effort to bring them back to the present, and a restitution of their basic humanity. And this restitution, of course, could not be made in a way that would escape the contradictory nature of the notion of sacred life. By restituting the sacredness of the lives of the victims that have been

³⁴ Translation: “From Agamben, I was very interested in the idea of defending the life of a human being, any human being, I was very interested in the concept of “whatever” and that in this case implies how to think about the problem of the victim, in other words, it is the victim. The very act of naming them, of evoking them, is a way to bring them to life, of recovering their lives, recovering their memory and saying ‘in any event, even though you are dead, your life is still sacred.’ This is where the whole idea of asking for permission arises, and also of making something with a ritual character.”

deprived of their basic humanity, the task also puts in evidence, once more, their fragility, which Agamben assumes to be the essence of political life: “a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed.” (Agamben 1998, 89): *Homo Sacer*. The play is therefore exposing two contradictory while complimentary notions of the sacred in regards to human life: the first is the product of a deprivation (*homo sacer*), the second of a restitution (*qualunque*). The first one operates through the experience of vulnerability and exposure for audience and actors alike, while the second is attained through the homage to the victims whose individual testimonies are presented on stage.

2. Teatro de Occidente’s Homo Sacer

Teatro de Occidente was born as a result of an artistic/academic exploration on the part of its director, Carlos Sepúlveda. Trained as an actor and director, but with some background in literary and aesthetic criticism, Sepúlveda embarked on an exploration of the history of western theater since the Greeks up to our time. He formed his group with young theater students from the Academia Superior de Artes de Bogotá (ASAB) and together they began to explore the possibilities of inventing a new dramaturgy that would draw from different traditions but would be appropriate for the particular context of the history of Colombia. After 5 years of research and exploration, the group began to create a piece that was not based on a previously written text, but rather constituted a theatricality built by and from the actors and put on stage in its “pure” form, without becoming a script. At the time

their work started, around 2004-2005, the Colombian government began its negotiations with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the centralized national paramilitary group. As a result, the testimonies and confessions of victims and executioners began to spread through the media. The information contained in these testimonies offered a look into a violence without precedents in Colombia, one that everyone suspected was taking place but that so far had not been corroborated by factual evidence. These sinister acts, along with the generalization of the phenomenon of disappearance, served as the raw materials from which the piece was built.

I had the opportunity to meet Carlos Sepúlveda and the Teatro de Occidente in Bogotá on November 13th of 2010, after the performance of “Homo Sacer” for the Festival Distrital de Teatro. The venue was the L’explose theater, a small space in midtown Bogotá that was acquired by the district for this purpose but that is by no means a theater as such: it looks more like a warehouse, and the fact that its architecture was not reformed gives the feeling that during the day the space is still used for something completely different. When I walked into the place to see the play, I found a big open space with no divisions between the stage and the audience section, no curtain and no backstage. As soon as the audience walked in, we all entered a space in which we were all as exposed as the actors and without realizing it we had all become part of the performance. There were plastic chairs aligned on both sides of the room, but they filled quickly, so those who entered later had to sit on the cold tiled floor, in an indeterminate zone bordering the diffuse limits of the stage.

As we all entered the room in dim light, the first thing we could see was a half-naked woman wrapped in vinyl wrap up to her head standing behind a microphone. She resembled a piece of meat packed for sale on a supermarket, the plastic impeding her from breathing or moving. On the floor of the stage, there were fishbowls filled with water, some of them containing objects that at this point were unrecognizable. The wall at the back of the room was a huge screen where images of water were being projected. After looking at it for a while, it became evident that the images were of a river in its endless flowing. Towards the front, on the opposite side to the woman wrapped in vinyl, there was another microphone and some bricks set up in a line that resembled a road. Music began to play. Six actors (four women and two men) entered the stage stepping carefully through the brick road and counting their steps "1, 2, 3, 4..." They picked up the fishbowls and began to distribute them around the stage while showing them to the audience sitting on both sides of it. Their contents became visible and at this point the audience was invited to identify the objects inside of them: some of them resembled human organs (brains, intestines), another one contained a map of Colombia, others had school supplies inside and yet another one had a cassette.

The actress wrapped in vinyl wrap began to breathe harder and harder on the microphone, until the sound of her breathing filled up the room. She moved her body slowly, trying to free herself. Her movements became more and more violent as the microphone reproduced and magnified the sound of the vinyl tearing, squishing, breaking apart until she was finally able to free herself and run to the back of the stage where the actors were waiting for her. Each of them held in front of

her a big bowl covered with pieces of mirrors on the inside, which projected her fragmented image onto the entire room. Looking at herself on these broken mirrors, she began to comb her hair while another actress narrated this action on the microphone “muevo la peinilla en mi cabello, de la raiz a las puntas, de un lado al otro...”³⁵ At this point another actress came close to her and helped her pick up her clothes from the floor and get dressed. There was also a cassette on the floor, which she picked up too, only to pull out the tape and dance with it in front of the mirrors, looking at her own image all through the process. After this, the rest of the actors left their places at the back of the room and started moving all around the stage showing the mirrors to the audience, making it possible for each of us, the spectators, to see our own image projected onto them, transformed into fragments. After this, they all left the stage, leaving only the dancer and an actor behind.

After this short pause, in which the audience was left in silence to collect thoughts, the actors re-entered the stage, picking up the bricks from the beginning and making a new road with them. Behind them, an actress entered the stage through this road, while the other actors moved the bricks forward as she advanced, making the road move along with her.

After reaching the microphone, she began to jump while counting jumps. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5...” then the actors began to give her the bricks, which she received one by one while still jumping and counting. As the load became progressively heavier, her jumps got slower, and her breathing harder... “41” ... she could hardly hold them

³⁵ “I move the comb through my hair, from the roots to the tips, from one side to the other...”

anymore... “43” ... the last brick was placed on top of the others, “44” ... one last jump. The sound machine reproduced the sound of the counting, and she finally placed them on the floor.

Another actress walked forward from the back of the stage (all actresses were wearing black dresses, the actors black pants and white shirts). While she walked to the front, a man walked in the opposite direction towards her. When they finally met, they stood close in front of each other, just a few inches apart, and began to recognize each other, affectionately. They smelled each other, rubbed their bodies against each other's. Then they began to touch: with their hands they traced each other's faces and bodies until they embraced and began to dance while leaning against each other. They slowly turned until they were standing back to back before slowly separating their bodies, holding hands until the last moment. Another actress came in from the back and faced the actress whose back was now towards the front of the stage. At this point the actor left. As the first actress fell on the floor, the other one helped her get back up, while all the remaining actors and actresses followed the man, leaving the woman alone on the stage. The other five went on to begin the same process of recognition among themselves, but this time in a scrutinizing way, like an examination and a dissection: getting close to each other, touching, looking at each others' bodies.

At this point an actress went to the microphone: “brazo derecho, 1990, 10 años, un hermano, ojos pequeños, piel morena, pies, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, y 10. Paola

Andrea Ospina, 22 de noviembre de 1981, Bogotá.”³⁶ Then she pulled down her dress, uncovered her right breast and began to describe: “seno derecho, 1.60, 57 kilos, 52’ 898,004 de Bogotá. Mi cuerpo soy yo y por este lunar, que parece un segundo pezón, me pueden reconocer”³⁷ while showing her breast to the audience and pointing at the mole. In the meantime, the other actors had been examining each others’ bodies: “un diente desportillado, una cicatriz, un lunar, una mancha...” (a chipped tooth, a scar, a mole, a dark spot) describing specific markers of their bodily identities: “por esta señal me pueden reconocer” (“you can recognize me by this sign”). Then they all began to dance, jumping on each other and hugging each other. The dance was playful and affectionate, but also very violent. There was a woman at the center, jumping from one actor to the other trying to hug them, as if she were begging from them, while the rest pulled and pushed, making her fall down to the floor after each embrace.

Then she stood up with her head covered by a black veil, fell back down on the floor, and kept dancing on the floor while the others, standing around her, watched. As she finally managed to stand up, pulling herself up from her own hair, she began to walk to the back of the stage, while the others held the bowls with the broken mirrors to her. Midway she stopped and screamed. The sound machine multiplied her scream and the rest joined in her scream. They held the broken mirrors once more in front of the audience’s faces and then dropped them while running around

³⁶ “right arm, 1990, 10 years old, one brother, small eyes, medium-dark skin, feet, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. Paola Andrea Ospina, November 22 of 1981, Bogotá.”

³⁷ “right breast, 1,60 meters, 57 kilos, 52’898,004 of Bogota. I am my body, and by this mole, that looks like a second nipple, you will be able to recognize me.”

the stage, bumping into each other. It looked like they were running away from something, running with no direction, back and forth across the stage. Some falling on the floor, others finding each other in the middle of the run and hugging and comforting each other only to separate again and keep running. One actress picked up an actor from the floor and kept moving, carrying him on her back.

Two women found each other and one undressed the other. Once she had taken off all of her clothes leaving only her underwear, she began to attach newspaper clippings all over her body with clothespins. Then she moved the second actress towards the microphone where she began to speak in a language that nobody could understand and that was reminiscent of indigenous languages.³⁸ Once she was done, she pulled the pins off her body and walked to the back of the stage.

In the meantime, two actors had met at the front of the stage. One of them was on his knees, whistling while wrapping duct tape around his neck. With the help of the other, they attached a plastic bag to his head and left it hanging from his neck. Once they were done, the man with the plastic bag pulled it up, covering his entire head, whistling all along the process. Kneeling down in front of the other actor, he was in a position of subjection, yet his attitude was playful: he only stopped whistling to blow into the bag and inflate it around his head. After this, he held it open on the top so that the other man could start pouring water into it from a big fish tank. As the water filled the bag, immersing his head, we could still hear him trying to whistle

³⁸ When Asked about this text and language, Carlos Sepúlveda told me that they did want to bring the sound of indigenous language onto the stage, but because none of them could speak any, they decided that the actress would recite a piece of text backwards instead.

through the water and his whistle created bubbles inside of the bag. Once it was full, the standing man, holding the other end of the plastic bag, moved it, showing the other man's head inside to the audience. Then he took out a penknife and, holding it in his hand from behind the man, made one big, fast cut at the level of his throat, letting all the water out and into a bowl placed on the floor in front of the kneeling man. This entire image evoked a beheading, like the type of cut that is performed on an animal that is to be sacrificed and whose body has to be bled. Then he cut off the duct tape, taking both plastic and tape off. The kneeling man got on his feet, wet and scared and humiliated. His entire body was shaking. Slowly he began to walk towards the back of the stage and stopped in front of the microphone where, with a broken voice, he began to speak: "ingredientes: maiz, cebolla, aceite [has to catch his breath, he can hardly speak] sal, huevo [now he is crying]. Preparación: se muele el maiz, y se le agrega sal y cebolla y huevo. Se vierte la mezcla..."³⁹ It was a recipe to make *arepas*, a type of cornbread typical from Colombia. The other actors reached him and pulled him away from the microphone. They held him from his hair and pushed him all around the stage. Every time he tried to free himself the others would throw him and hit him against the floor. Once he had run out of strength and was completely submitted to them, they lifted him up and began to strip him of his clothes. They left him on the floor, lying on his back, naked and exposed.

An actress entered the stage holding a bowl full of water, black rubber gloves and a towel with some instruments in it. She proceeded to pick him up, made him stand

³⁹ "ingredients: corn, onion, oil [has to catch his breath, he can hardly speak], salt, eggs, [now he is crying]. Preparation: grind the corn and add the salt, the onion and the egg. Pour the mixture..."

inside the bowl and then started to wash his body with a sponge. The man didn't move, he still looked scared and confused. From time to time he would look around him, at the audience, as if trying to find an answer for what was going on. From time to time he wept. When she was done washing him, she picked a razor from the towel and began to shave his body starting with his legs and going up. The actor cried while she was doing this. A mournful song began to play in the background:

“quisiera haber atado mis pies a la tierra antes de despegar. Ya no puedo volver”⁴⁰

When she was done shaving him she dried him with the towel and marked his body with a black ink marker, drawing lines on his skin in the fashion that animals are marked for cutting at butcher houses. The actors and actresses came back to the stage from the back, this time wearing red dresses, and each carrying a fish tank. Once he was dry she took him again to the back of the stage. The song was still playing. They all held plates as he danced, still naked, on top of these plates, as if floating above them. As he moved, the rest of the actors moved the plates around, resembling the action that had already taken place at the beginning of the play with the bricks.

Finally he descended back to the floor and someone handed him a fish tank and a brick that he put down on the floor. In the background, a voice recited:⁴¹

To scream is the natural expression of bodily pain.

Homer's wounded warriors not unfrequently fall

⁴⁰ “I wish I had tied my feet down to the earth before taking off. Now I can't go back anymore.”

⁴¹ In the play, it is the Spanish translation of this fragment of Lessing's text that is recited. I decided to quote the English version instead of the Spanish and then translating it.

with a scream to the earth. The wounded Venus screams loudly, — not in order that by this scream she may appear as the soft goddess of pleasure, but rather to give her a right to a suffering nature. For even the brazen Mars, when he felt the lance of Diomedes, shrieks as dreadfully as ten thousand raging warriors would shriek at once — so dreadfully that both armies were terrified .

High as Homer exalts his heroes above human nature, yet they remain true to it whenever there is a question of the feeling of anguish or suffering, or of the expression of that feeling by screams or tears or invectives. In their deeds they are creatures of a higher kind ; in their feelings they are true men.

I am aware that we, the refined Europeans of a wiser posterity, know how to command better our mouths and our eyes. High breeding and decency forbid screams and tears. The active courage of the first rough ages of the world has been changed, in our day, into the courage of suffering. Yet even

our forefathers were greater in the latter than in the former. But our forefathers were barbarians. To suppress all expression of pain, to meet the stroke of death with unchanged eye, to die smiling under the asp's bite, to abstain from bewailing our sins or the loss of our dearest friend, are traits of the old hero courage of the Northmen. Talnatako laid down a law to his Gomsburgers that they should fear nothing, and that the word fear should not once be named amongst them.⁴²

The actor got dressed while an actress gave a brick to each of the others. They stood at the limits of the stage with the bricks in their hands so that the audience could see that each of the bricks had something written on it. Each actor read their contents out loud: they were facts about different massacres; each containing a place, a date and a number of victims. Among the cases were the mothers of Soacha and the “falsos positivos.”⁴³ Then they walked around the stage with the fish bowls containing the objects that resembled organs.

⁴² http://www.archive.org/stream/laocoongott00lessuoft/laocoongott00lessuoft_djvu.txt

⁴³ The “falsos positivos” (“false positives”) case refers to the scandal that arose in October of 2008 when it was found out and proven with evidence that the Colombian army had been kidnapping young men from popular neighborhoods in the principal cities of Colombia, killed them, and later presented them as guerrilla soldiers dead in combat. The scandal began with the public denunciation presented to the national government for the disappearance of 19 men from Soacha, a municipality close to Bogotá, who later appeared dead in Norte del Santander, wearing military uniforms. The mothers of Soacha is the association organized by the mothers of these young men in order to see that justice was made. After this first discovery in 2008, numerous cases have made public and some

One of the women walked in again with a big fish tank with a cranium inside. With a *totumo*, she picked water from the tank and poured it on her body, while telling the story of how her little daughter was killed and her body thrown into a river. The authorities asked her to draw a map for them to help them find her daughter, to which she responded that if she knew which river she was thrown into, she would go and empty it out herself until she could find her daughter. Lights went off. Actors exited. The director stood up, walked to the microphone and said out loud: “a nuestros muertos, ni perdón ni olvido” (“To our dead, neither forgiving nor forgetting”).

3. The Theater of Fragmentation

How to make a theater of and for the disappeared? How to make sense of the experience of disappearance for both the victims and their loved ones through performance? These questions have led to a considerable amount of theatrical productions in the region over the past 30 years. As Ileana Diéguez puts it,

Las llamadas ‘culturas de la violencia’ han sido durante las últimas décadas los escenarios casi ‘naturales’ de buena parte del arte latinoamericano. Más allá de sus complejidades y estigmas, las problematizaciones simbólicas de la violencia también constituyen

members of the military have been processed by the Colombian system of justice for extrajudicial executions and violations of human rights. For a full account of the different moments of this process, see the *El Tiempo* archives at: <http://www.eltiempo.com/noticias/falsos-positivos>.

estrategias que visibilizan y conjuran las prácticas sistémicas de aniquilación. (Diéguez 2007, 149)⁴⁴

Latin America became a sort of factory of the disappeared ever since the 1970s and Colombia has been no exception. The problem of disappearance has been studied from multiple perspectives in an attempt to both understand the experience and to design mechanisms of coping with it. The most remarkable aspect of a disappeared subject is precisely the fact that nothing about his or her status can be determined with certainty. After a while and in specific contexts it is the norm to assume the death of the loved one, which in many cases is followed by the celebration of some kind of ritual or a symbolic funeral; but the erasure of the individual and the absence of recognizable remains become a source of constant haunting and unfinished processes of mourning. Here I would like to highlight one of the main problems of disappearance: impunity.

The war that has been going on in Colombia over the past 60 years—acknowledging the specificities of each period that have brought different actors to it—has established a few constants that are specific to this particular conflict. In the beginning of this chapter I discussed the different elements of massacre as a common technique of execution that has remained present over the years. But none of this, or at least not a big part of it, would have been possible if the committed crimes had not been constantly covered by a curtain of impunity; and this impunity

⁴⁴ Translation: “The so-called ‘cultures of violence’ have been, over the past decades, the almost ‘natural’ stages of a good part of Latin American arts. Beyond their complexities and stigmas, the symbolic elaborations of violence also constitute strategies that render visible the systematic practices of annihilation.”

has been made possible not just by a weak system of justice or the complicity of areas of the government with some of the illegal armed groups, but by the fact that there are very few instances where enough proof of a crime can be found. In other words, where to put the blame for the disappeared? And what kind of blame to put on said accused if at the end there is no concrete information—even when there are traces—about what happened to the victim?

The scarcity of government funds to invest in forensic technologies has made the identification of bodies and pieces of bodies found in mass graves a fantasy that may or may not come true in the future of Colombia. In the absence of the unequivocal identification of bodies that have already decomposed, and where no survivors were left behind to tell the story of the disappeared, the erasure is complete. The bodies, voices, gestures, stories of the victims have been eliminated permanently and their past existences become nothing but numbers in the endless lists elaborated for statistical purposes. This is why it becomes so urgent to bring the disappeared to the stage. It is also why this recovery becomes so important and why rescuing bodies, marks and voices of the disappeared can become such a hard job. In the face of generalized impunity, theater must make a claim for justice. The task is then, as Carlos Sepúlveda puts it, to deal with decomposing bodies:

Si todos los cuerpos se descomponen y se hacen irreconocibles, la memoria—que en Benjamin es también la historia—vendría a ser el único reducto que nos permite soñar que esos cuerpos descompuestos o desaparecidos de la Guerra en Colombia, alguna vez

fueron humanos y que nosotros en algún momento dejaremos de serlo por la misma vía de la descomposición.⁴⁵

Decomposition becomes, then, the ultimate materialization of dehumanization, and bringing whole bodies on the stage, lending the bodies of the actors to the disappeared constitutes at the same time a restoration and a reminder that we, like them, will one day disappear for good. And this is both a creative and a theoretical undertaking:

Para la realización del proyecto *Homo Sacer*, la víctima, el desaparecido, se convierte en una categoría ontológica, una categoría teórica que nos permite pensar el ser desde las orillas, desde los márgenes y desde lo excepcional, que poco a poco se ha convertido—en el caso de la colombianidad—en lo regular.

La víctima: el desaparecido, no la tomamos como categoría histórico-sociológica, sino como categoría ontológica que nos permite acceder a una teoría del ser en la contemporaneidad como una ontología de la ausencia, de la ausencia del cual sea.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Carlos Sepúlveda. *Homo Sacer: Un proyecto de investigación-creación*. Unpublished. Translation: “If all bodies decompose and become unrecognizable, memory—which in Benjamin is also history—becomes the only resource that would allow us to dream that those decomposed or disappeared bodies from the war in Colombia were once human and that we will, at some point, stop being such through the same means of decomposition.”

⁴⁶ Carlos Sepúlveda. *Homo Sacer*. Translation: “For the development of the project *Homo Sacer*, the victim, the disappeared, becomes an ontological category, a theoretical category that allows us to think about the being from the margins and the exceptional, which has progressively become—in the case of Colombia—the regularity. The victim: the disappeared, is not assumed as a historical or sociological category, but as an ontological

The notion of absence is more than the literal one of those who have disappeared. For Sepúlveda, absence becomes a category in itself that determines the way in which life is understood. It is also the absence of the “whatever” which, in turn, brings us back to the original notion of *homo sacer*: when life has lost all sense of sacredness (*qualunque*) it is constantly exposed to meaningless death (*homo sacer*). And this absence, this disappearance had to be portrayed through different representational mechanisms, the first of which determined the director’s choice to make a piece without characters. The challenge was then to bring those individuals back to life as well as their private stories, without making characters that would represent them on the stage. The different beings portrayed in the piece, the different voices, come from real testimonies that the group gathered during the process of creation of the play, but even the presentation of the testimonies as such did not seem to render true homage to their existence. After all, a testimony in itself is nothing but a piece of text as objective and impersonal as a number in a list of victims. The purpose was to recover the lives behind the testimonies:

En un momento en la obra decíamos los testimonios, es decir, cada uno de los actores se paraba y decía el testimonio. Decía el testimonio que trabajó, que fue como la fuente de su trabajo. Después nos dimos cuenta que ni siquiera era necesario, pues que realmente de lo que se

one that allows us to approach a theory of being in the present as an ontology of absence, the absence of the whatever.”

trataba era de otro asunto y era como tratar de revivir su memoria y la sacralidad de su presencia en ese evento.⁴⁷

The task was then to create an aesthetic space for these events and subjects, and the group developed a system based on five main points. The first is a *Dramaturgia del descuartizamiento* (dramaturgy of dismemberment): in the face of the dismemberment of the social, political, territorial and individual bodies, the group elaborates a dismembered theater, without an ordered dramatic structure. Instead, the proposal is a collage, a superposition, a fragmentation and a repetition. The second is to use the poetic nuance as testimony: instead of using the text as a dialogue between characters on stage, the poetic word is brought through screams, blows and embodied language that render visible, even tangible, the original spoken words of the testimonies that are in essence fragmented and incomplete but that, after all, are the only thing that is left of the subject who once articulated them. The third point is the de-characterization of dramaturgy: a theater without characters and without heroes; one that restores the human condition to the absent through lending him or her a body and a voice; not through re-presentation, but through evocation. The fourth element is the re-construction of the geographies of the body. The exploration is made through the bodies of the actors, in response to a situation that has turned human bodies into pieces of meat. The fifth and last is the mis-en-scène as a spatial and temporal event. This is achieved through the combination of

⁴⁷ Carlos Sepúlveda. Personal interview. Translation: "At some point we recited the testimonies in the play, each actor came on stage and told the testimony he or she worked with as the source for their work for the play. Later we realized that wasn't even necessary, since the purpose was to bring back to life their memory and the sacredness of their presence in that particular event."

the bodies on stage with the sound and the images that are projected during the performance. On the video side, the images that are constantly projected on the screen are images of the Magdalena river. The sound is constructed during the performance, by processing, mixing, and returning the sounds from the stage, in a sonorous structure that would resemble, or at least evoke, the sound of a mass grave.⁴⁸

The resulting system is, in Sepúlveda's own terms, a non-hegemonic political dramaturgy. Non-hegemonic in the sense that it contests both traditional representational systems and official historical narratives. Let us examine now how this system operates in the piece.

Let us begin by looking at the set. When I asked Sepúlveda about the space they had to use on the night of the first performance I saw, and the fact that having no backstage that day made the actors even more exposed since "entering" and "exiting" the stage implied just moving to a different space within the open room, he told me that that was the way the piece had been planned from the beginning. Further, the play was originally planned to be presented in front of small groups of people—he said they were not waiting for such a big crowd that night—in order to keep the feeling of "intimacy" that the piece creates. This contributes to creating a somehow intentional discomfort in the audience. Everyone who walks into the performance space has to become a witness: first, to the exposure of the actors which in turn exposes the viewers as well; and then to the actual spectacle. The

⁴⁸ Carlos Sepúlveda. *Homo Sacer*. Unpublished manuscript.

performative space resembles, in many ways, entering a mass grave. It is important to highlight the fact that even if the events that are brought onto the stage by the company are known to everyone through the news, the performative space creates a new event and experience where the un-cut and un-edited presence and closeness of real bodies, their movements, their nakedness, their sweat, their tears, their scent cannot be just turned off and avoided. The audience becomes as exposed and vulnerable as the actors in front of it. It is a space of awareness, recognition and, ultimately, torture.

Aside from the actors, the stage is mostly empty during most of the performance, except for the appearance of a few key objects. First are the fishbowls and the objects inside of them. When I asked Sepúlveda about the choice of specific objects to put on the stage, he told me that most of them—except for those that resemble pieces of organs, whose meaning will appear obvious later—were taken from pieces of testimonies of victims. The idea was then to bring to the stage not just the death and disappearance but also a part of their quotidian lives. The mundane character of these objects enters in contrast with the haunting aspects of the contexts they are inscribed in, and in a way restores some of the individuality to the masses of victims. These objects are in close relation to the body marks that the play also emphasizes when the actors gather together and examine each others' bodies looking for specific descriptors that make one body different from another, and to the scene where the actress offers her demographic information while uncovering her breast and showing her mole announcing “por este lunar me pueden reconocer” (“by this

mole you can recognize me”).⁴⁹ When a mass grave is discovered and opened, the bodies that are found inside are usually unrecognizable, not only because, as is the case in Colombia, they are in pieces, but also because even those pieces have already decomposed or are in advanced stages of decomposition. When visible, the marks render them recognizable, but in many other instances, the identification of the victims has been made possible by the objects that accompany their remains: “Los objetos se sacan ahí como en una suerte de galería de la memoria, que es como sacarlos del río.” (“The objects are presented in a sort of gallery of memory, which is like taking them out of the river”). The idea of a “gallery of memory” also brings to light the dual aspect of the objects on stage: they appear as remains of people’s daily lives, in their use value, but at the same time are deprived of that use value and somehow enshrined on the stage. The deprivation of their use value renders them sacred and changes their meaning in the context of the ritual/play.⁵⁰

The objects, and the fact that they are in fishbowls, are in close relation to the images of the river that create the atmosphere for the entire piece through images projected on the wall at the end of the stage. The testimony that we hear at the end

⁴⁹ While most of the testimonies that make part of the piece have been gathered by different governmental and non-governmental organizations, this is the only place in the play where the actual identity of the actress is transformed into a testimony. Her name, height, weight, age, id number, etc are her personal data. This part is perhaps where it becomes most effective the mechanism that Sepúlveda wanted to create, in which we all can put ourselves in the place of the victims, where we face our own mortality and the fact that our bodies, too, will decompose one day.

⁵⁰ The removal of a use value marks the moment of separation of a regular object from the social world and its introduction into the sacred realm. This idea is part of the core beliefs on which theories of the sacred are based. For more on this, see Hollier, Denis (Ed.). *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988; Caillois, Roger. *Man and the Sacred*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001; Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press, 1995; Agamben, Giorgio. *Profanations*. New York: Zone Books, 2008.

of the play, of the woman searching for the body of her daughter in the river, summarizes the experience of thousands of relatives looking for bodies or pieces of them in the rivers. Throwing bodies into rivers is a preferred technique for their disposal in the Colombian context. On the one hand, it is easier to throw them into the river than to dig graves to bury them, and on the other, it scatters the bodies and makes them harder to find; and even when they are found, it is really hard to identify where they come from, since by the time they appear they have already traveled hundreds of kilometers. This type of disposal of the corpse has also required the development of specific operations on the bodies, which in addition to being cut into pieces, need to get their viscera taken out so that they will sink and make them harder to find. A large amount of them are never found again.

The other set of objects that keeps reappearing through the play are the bricks that, as we learn at the end, contain facts about different massacres written on their surface. Sepúlveda told me that the choice was inspired by Primo Levi's image of the bricks that were found in the concentration camps marked by the prisoners that were later executed. The bricks carry out, then, a double function regarding the relation of individuals with objects: if on the one hand they bring up the personalization of a piece of a building as a mark of that which was once there, on the other the bricks in the play also appear in reference to counting in different occasions. Let us remember the opening scene where the steps on the bricks are counted, and the one in which the actress holds them in her hands while jumping. The bricks are here, too, a symbol of a journey—displacement—but also of the

weight that survivors carry on their shoulders: emotional and physical pain.⁵¹ But I would like to highlight the constant counting within the play, which is even more important given that there are hardly any dialogues in it. The numbers serve to evoke the massiveness of the death that is brought about by the violence that the play examines, and are an eerie reminder of how, even at the level of “justice” the names, faces and identities of the victims are erased yet once more by becoming visible only as numbers that add up to total counts.

The part where the ritual space is actually established and where the act of bearing witness is finally accomplished is in the scene that resembles the torture and sacrifice of the victim. I am referring here to the scene of the actor with the plastic bag around his head. The water appears again here but in a completely different way. If in the other scenes it reminds us of the rivers, here we are offered a glimpse into the uses of water in torture. Many testimonies of survivors and defectors narrate how the executors introduce hoses into the mouths of the victims pushing in water under pressure until the victims choke, after which they are given a break and then the procedure starts all over again. To me, the cruelty of the scene is intensified by the fact that the actor who plays the victim resembles a child in his attitude—and his appearance—and that the action crosses the border of “representation,” making the actor literally choke on stage. There is a certain

⁵¹ While this will appear in more depth in the following chapter, I would like to point at the fact that the official statistics of the victims of massacres that are elaborated by the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (CVR) as well as the different specific committees designated for individual massacres, include now those individuals who dies of “pena moral” or intense emotional pain following the disappearance of a loved one. These are the cases of relatives who, through negligence or disease or both, “let themselves die” after their loved ones.

tenderness to the scene, one that is impossible to render in this description but that is definitely felt during the performance. There is sympathy, there is the necessity to make it stop, to look away, to leave the performance. But given the distribution of the room nobody can leave in the middle of the play.⁵² Nobody would dare to leave, also, as an act of a certain respect, a sense of being part of the ritual that is taking place. Even without the water, the image is also reminiscent of the fact that the victims' heads are usually covered with sacks when they are taken to the places designated for their tortures and executions, perhaps as yet another mechanism of dehumanization that could render the task easier for the executioner.

The "liberation" is, however, not less tortuous: in an action that resembles the cutting of the throat of a chicken that is bled while still alive and fluttering its wings, when the penknife cuts the plastic the water comes out in a burst and somehow stops being water. The image is striking enough without the coloring of the water or the use of fake blood. There is something in the actor, the man on stage, beyond or beneath the "character", that cries and trembles and hides like a scared child. The humiliation, but also the ritual space, is only increased by the continuation of the execution-become-sacrifice. The stumbling, undressing, bathing, shaving and marking for cutting renders him more and more like an animal that is being killed, not for sacrifice anymore, but in order to be consumed, and his dance on the dishes after this only reinforces the feeling. This was, to me, the hardest part to watch of the entire play. It is the part where the spectacle becomes more like a real event and

⁵² While in the other two plays I examine members of the audience abandon the theater in the middle of the performance when they cannot take it anymore.

where the actions are more tangible. The animalization that I discussed in the beginning of the chapter acquires a new tint when we see a human body marked like those of the cows and pigs that one can still see in butcher houses in small towns and villages in Colombia, hanging from the ceilings and spreading their raw meat scent over entire blocks and neighborhoods.⁵³ A big part of the strength of this scene comes from the fact that it is not intended to be a representation of torture, not even a symbolization of it. It rather insinuates, through a beautiful image, the occurrence of other actions off-stage.

An interesting aspect of this scene also came out in my conversation with Sepúlveda about the play. When I asked him about the references to Oswaldo de Andrade's *Manifiesto Antropófago* in the text that supports the production, new elements were brought to the discussion about paramilitarism, the rivers and mass graves. There have been numerous instances in which "rumors" about cannibalistic practices among the paramilitaries have spread. The most notorious scandal occurred in 2007 when *Semana*, a very important magazine of political analysis in Colombia, published a story about the confessions of some of the paramilitaries that were undergoing a process of negotiation with the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez. Alias "Robinson," a member of the faction of the AUC operating in Putumayo declared, as part of his testimony in compliance with the government regulations for

⁵³ Not coincidentally, in one of the most notorious massacres in Colombia, the one that took place in 1997 in Mapiripán, most of the victims were taken to the slaughterhouse of the town, where the tortures and executions were performed. The testimonies of the survivors tell how they would see the paramilitaries walking towards this space of the town pushing along with them the men that were going to be executed, with their hands tied to their backs and their heads covered by sacks. (Quoted in Uribe-Alarcón).

the peace process, that part of the training that he received from paramilitary leaders included drinking the blood and eating the flesh of other human beings.⁵⁴ In addition, Sepúlveda made me realize another, very sinister aspect of cannibalism that I had never thought about: most of the fish that is consumed in Colombia come from the main rivers of the country, rivers that are, one could affirm without exaggerating too much, filled with human bodies:

Lo del río para nosotros es super importante porque eso también pasa por ahí, es decir, es impresionante cómo el río Magdalena, el Cauca, bueno como los ríos se convierten realmente en las fosas comunes más enormes... y esa también es una forma de antropofagia, fíjate porque, por ejemplo la mayoría del pescado que se come en Bogotá, aunque hay mucho pescado de criadero, también hay muchísimo pescado que viene del Magdalena y del Cauca ¿ves?^{55 56}

Cannibalism becomes then more than a metaphor or the modernist project that Andrade had envisioned when he wrote his manifesto in 1928. In Colombia it is a very real practice that in many ways summarizes the savagery and dehumanization

⁵⁴ "Canibalismo Paramilitar" *Revista Semana*, sábado 4 de agosto de 2007.

<http://www.semana.com/enfoque/canibalismo-paramilitar/105375-3.aspx>

⁵⁵ Translation: "The issue of the river is very important to us because it also crosses that. I mean, it is striking how the Magdalena, the Cauca, and in general the rivers become some of the largest common graves... and that is also a form of anthropophagi, you see, because, for instance, most of the fish that is consumed in Bogotá, even though there is some that is farmed, there is a lot of fish that comes from the Magdalena and the Cauca, see?"

⁵⁶ I would like to point out here the economics of consumption of the conflict. The fish that comes from these rivers is cheaper than the farmed one, among other reasons, because gold mining has contaminated the water of the main rivers with mercury, making the consumption of this fish highly dangerous. The result of this is that only those who have the economic means to buy farmed, certified "clean" fish, can escape the consumption of the other, contaminated one.

brought about by of the conflict. In this case, the de-humanization is reinforced by the image of consumption, yet consumption is brought up again right after as a mark of individuality. The recipe for *arepas* that is cited afterwards is a reference to the testimony of the mother of one of the victims of the massacre of Trujillo who tells how, after her son disappeared, she continued to make, every morning, the *arepas* and coffee for her son's breakfast.

4. The Space of Death

In Luigi Pirandello's play from 1921, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the father engages in an argument with his son about some "expression" that the first uses in order to excuse himself. The son claims that they are only phrases, to which the father replies: "Phrases! Phrases! As if they were not a comfort to everyone: in the face of some unexplained fact, in the face of an evil that eats into us, to find a word that says nothing but at least quiets us down!" (Pirandello 1998, 78) after which he is accused by the step-daughter of using phrases to deal with his remorse. As we saw in the first chapter, speech can be part of the torture itself but, in many ways, finding the right "phrases" to express something can bring about relief. Teatro de Occidente's *Homo Sacer* transports the viewers to a space of absolute dissolution, a space of death. The fragmented nature of the testimonies, which in turn reflects the fragmented condition of the bodies of the subjects they come from constitute, most importantly, a place of dissolution of language. Not just the narrative that would render a story presentable and re-presentable, but the very material of a

discourse and a narrative. *Homo Sacer* has barely any dialogues: it relies on images to convey something inexpressible by language. There are, however, cries and screams, and there is, in addition, a discourse on the scream that reminds us that the scream is the basic expression of human—and perhaps animal, too—pain. In the absence of words, in the limits of language, and in the impossibility of finding phrases that could serve as a consolation, language as a system disintegrates and all we are left with is the basic expression of pain.

In response, Teatro de Occidente creates a ritual space in an attempt, as I showed earlier, to restore the sacredness to the lives of the victims of the crimes it is based on. In order to do this, the company went through a preparatory process of gathering the testimonies and combining them with some of their own experiences or those of people close to them. The process of embodiment, of finding a body language to express them without words, required that the actors developed exercises through which they could position themselves in the place of the victims, which they all argue was the hardest part of the work. Working on testimonies on a daily basis and searching for ways of embodying them became a haunting experience for the actors, some of whom entered states of deep depression, while others lost their sleep and their appetite for meat. This personal involvement with the “material” was what led the group to design a mechanism to cope: before every performance, they execute a ritual in which they ask for “permission” from the spirits of those who will be brought to the stage during the piece. The ritual consists on filling some glasses with water, just like some people do next to relatives’ graves in case they get thirsty, and leaving them full during the entire performance.

But let us return to the notion of the space of death. In *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig argues that spaces where torture, death and constant fear are the norm, what emerges is a “culture of terror” that in turn institutionalizes a space of death, which becomes the referent for the construction of all the orders that have vanished as a consequence of said terror: “The space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes.” (Taussig 1991, 4)

The culture of terror is further reinforced by the belief in a threat to one’s life by a real or imaginary enemy that has to be eliminated before it eliminates oneself. In the case of these massacres, performed mostly by paramilitary groups, it is important to highlight that the name they give themselves is “autodefensas” (self-defense groups) and that they were created as counter-insurgency organizations in order to combat the guerrilla threat. In none of these massacres, however, has proof been found that any of the victims was part of a guerrilla group and most of the dead are common citizens whose only crime was, in most cases, to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Beyond the elimination of the threat, let us not forget that the terror is also, as has been shown, a way to establish a particular power system and affirm sovereignty over a territory, a group of people, and even an illicit market:

What distinguishes cultures of terror is that the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problem of representation—reality and illusion, certainty and doubt—becomes infinitely more

than a 'merely' philosophical problem of epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. It becomes a high-powered medium of domination. (Taussig 1991, 121)

What is a mass grave if not a space of death? In literal and metaphorical terms, facing a mass grave is facing absolute death and erasure. There is the literal death of the bodies that it contains; the symbolic disappearance of the identities of those who have now become pieces of flesh and bones; the death of a system of justice that could and should have prevented the deaths of the people that now lie in piles one on top of the other; the death of the hopes that some of those victims would eventually reappear alive; the death of god, the state, the law and all other human creations to prevent cruelty; the death of speech and expression in the face of something that is impossible to articulate in language.

The space of death is the death of the social, while the figure of the *homo sacer* constitutes the social death of an individual. Furthermore, a space of death constitutes the perfect setting for the creation of *homines sacri*. It reduces every individual to a life that can be eliminated at any given point, without his death constituting a crime or a sacrifice. The space of death sets every individual into a constant exposure and vulnerability to be humiliated, dehumanized, tortured and ultimately disappeared. It opens up the possibility of killing without purpose or punishment; it places everyone in the position of *homo sacer*, someone who, ultimately, has stopped being human. The proliferation of the mass grave as a space

of death is ultimately what the play does, extending it to the very space of the theater, which stops being a safe space of passive spectatorship.

Una cosa muy triste de las mujeres como a las 4 o 5 de la tarde esperando, no sé, o sea, mirando el río. Sí, están lavando, están lavando, efectivamente están lavando, pero hay como una nostalgia y como una cosa ahí que identificábamos con Patricia [una de las actrices] de estas mujeres mirando al río a ver si el río trae algo, no sé, y obviamente el río en muchas zonas de Colombia lo que traía era cadáveres.⁵⁷

The river, the mass grave. The same river whose images are projected on the wall during the entire performance, the river that is brought back to the stage over and over again during the performance through water in fishbowls. The river full of debris, of pieces of bodies and objects that belonged once to the daily life of an individual now lost for good. The river whose sounds are sometimes brought to the stage through the amplifiers connected to Carlos Sepúlveda's computer, everything in the performance event happens as if inside a river, as if in front of it. When asked about the sound design for the play, Sepúlveda answered that he just records the sounds produced by the bodies of the actors, mixes them and then reproduces them as echoes on the stage. The idea of doing this, he asserts, was to resemble the sound

⁵⁷ Translation: "A very sad thing are the women at about 4 or 5 pm waiting, I don't now, I mean looking at the river. Yes, they are washing clothes, they are evidently washing the clothes, but there is a nostalgia and something there that Patricia [one of the actresses] and I identified in these women looking to see if the river would bring something, and in many instances, un many areas of Colombia, what the river brought were corpses."

of a mass grave. But what is the sound of a mass grave if not an unbreakable silence? The mass grave, in this case, sounds like agitated breathing, like objects falling, like cries, like water flowing, like steps on a wooden floor, like the occasional coughing of a member in the audience, sometimes like the testimony of a disappeared person explaining how to make *arepas*, at others like the almost inaudible touch between two bodies.

The ritual space created by *Homo Sacer* constitutes then something very close to the experience of being in a mass grave, and this is perhaps where the origin of the unutterable discomfort of the viewers (myself included) lies. There is too much closeness to other bodies (those of the other members of the audience as well as those of the actors). There is too much exposure and no place to hide, to which one would have to add the inescapability imposed by the space itself. The mass grave reinstates the sacredness of life through the establishment of a sacred aura to death. The moment where the effectiveness of the mechanism is revealed is at the end of the play when, even after the actors have left the stage and the director has come forward and said “A nuestros muertos, ni perdón ni olvido,” (to our dead, neither forgiveness nor forgetting) even after the lights have been turned back on, nobody in the audience dared to get up and move to leave the room. Sometimes, Sepúlveda told me, they open a space for conversation after the play so that the audience can share their thoughts and feelings in reaction to what they just saw, but mostly it seemed to me that everyone needed a closure, a transition from the space of the theatrical event back into the “normal” space of daily life.

Beyond re-presentation, beyond even performance, the piece constructs an event that brings about the inversion of the spaces and the referents. In this mass grave the bodies are complete, they dance, they touch, they breath, they love and hate and caress and hurt, while the objects around them are broken. Even the dim light reminds the viewers of the darkness, and the closeness of other bodies of the loneliness. The fragments of testimonies remind us of the wholeness of those individuals' suffering and deaths, but also of their daily lives and moments of happiness. The "whatever" that served as inspiration for the creation of this piece is that being which is loveable in its entirety, by the very fact of being. The act of lending the victims voices and bodies constitutes an act of love that renders homage to their lives and—it could not be otherwise—deaths. An exercise of memory. If *Homo Sacer* treats testimonies as non-verbal expressions that have to be rendered in ways different from speech, *El deber de Fenster* will offer an example of a completely opposite exercise and treatment of the testimony.

3.

GHOSTLY INTERPELLATIONS:**TESTIMONIAL ENCOUNTERS IN *EL DEBER DE FENSTER***

“El drama que desató la violencia es una herida abierta.

Cada vez que se vuelve sobre ella vuelve a sangrar.”⁵⁸

(Taller de memoria, GMH 2008, 205)

“El dolor de la masacre se prolonga con el dolor de la injusticia.”⁵⁹

(GMH 2008, 23)

This dissertation has so far set into dialogue two very different productions that, nonetheless, deal with very similar events. Their differences, mostly regarding their means and aesthetic mechanisms, have shown two opposite aspects of both the violence in Colombia and the theatrical productions about it. While *Los santos inocentes* focuses mainly on the spectacular aspects of massacres and brings them to the stage through a performance that reproduces the excess, *Homo Sacer* focuses rather on the silences left by no less spectacular events. While individual characters are of great importance in *Los santos inocentes*, anonymity is central to *Homo Sacer*'s

⁵⁸ Translation: “The drama unleashed by the violence is like an open wound. Every time one goes back to it, it starts bleeding again.”

⁵⁹ Translation: “The pain of the massacre is prolonged by the pain of injustice.”

attempt to rescue individuality and subjectivity. This chapter will bring into this study a very different play that nonetheless shares many aspects with the other two.

Like *Los Santos Inocentes*, *El Deber de Fenster* is focused on violent events that took place in the southwest of Colombia, this time in the neighboring department of Valle del Cauca. Despite the distance in time and space, both massacres are framed by the same regional problems, namely, the constitution of an entire region of the country that has become one of the main centers for the production and distribution of illegal drugs, combined with the fact that the geography of the place, described in much detail in *Los santos inocentes*, renders the entire region almost inaccessible to the State forces. *El deber de Fenster*, however, will show the contradictions implicit in this assertion through revealing the involvement of members of the police and the military in the massacre that constitutes the center of the play.

Unlike the other two pieces, which one could categorize as independent theater, *El deber de Fenster* constitutes an unlikely part of the “mainstream” theater that is produced today in Colombia. It owes part of its visibility to the different prizes it has won, but most of its influence among audiences that don’t usually attend plays of this type comes from the fact that during the two years that the play has been showing, it has been staged at the Teatro Nacional Fanny Mickey, a theater located in one of the trendiest neighborhoods in Bogotá, administered by the biggest theater organization in the country. In addition to having been presented in two consecutive editions of the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro de Bogotá, during the last one, in

March 2012, president Juan Manuel Santos posted a video on his official blog, inviting the public to attend the play.

The media visibility that this play has had also comes from the events it is based on: *Trujillo: Una tragedia que no cesa* was the first report published by the Grupo de Memoria Histórica of the Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación. The massacre itself was also one of the very few instances in which a president—Ernesto Samper—publicly admitted the responsibility of the State in the deeds, apologized, and promised reparation to the victims.

In this chapter, I will present some of the documents concerning the Trujillo massacre and the way in which they are brought to the stage under the direction of Nicolás Montero. Then I will analyze the play from the perspective of theories about testimony and ghosts, in order to understand how the relation between the two operates on the stage, in order to conclude that ghosts and testimonies perform the same type of work. Finally, I will look at the structure of the play itself, to demonstrate how a theatrical piece can become a new instance of testimony, an interpellation. The implications of this phenomenon will be studied through the particular embodied character that theater adds to the testimony, constituting in many ways a paradigmatic example of what it means to give testimony and to become a witness.

1. The Trujillo Massacre: Facts and Documents

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. The official reports registered a total of 342 victims of homicide, torture and forced disappearance in a series of events that, despite their isolation in time and space, are now framed under the same criminal project. The main events that marked the climax of the massacre are the disappearances at La Sonora, the abduction of the *ebanistas*, the murder of father Tiberio Fernández and the disappearance of his companions, which took place between March and April of 1991. Even though the aforementioned number is the official amount of victims recognized by the final report, the government only admitted responsibility for 34 of them, which is still, today, the object of strong controversies in the country.

In 1995, the Colombian government assigned the Comisión de Investigación de los Sucesos Violentos de Trujillo (CISVT) to investigate the events, under the approval of the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH). In this first phase, the events were not yet classified as a massacre. However, the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH) decided to use the term “massacre” to refer to this chain of events given the systematic character of them and the involvement of the same personages in all of the crimes. Another important actor in the process of uncovering the truth about these events was the Comisión Intergregacional de

Justicia y Paz (CIJP), led by father Gabriel Giraldo, SJ, who makes several appearances during the play.

The events were initially brought to the attention of the Colombian justice system thanks to the declarations made by Daniel Arcila Cardona, who operated as the “testigo de excepción.” Cardona’s role as a witness has been seen with suspicion by different individuals and groups during the process of investigation, due to his participation in the events, first as an accomplice and later as an informer. This is why *El deber de Fenster* puts such a strong emphasis on showing the details of how Arcila got involved in the events, first by chance and later by pressure, at different moments.

A few elements of this massacre make it “special” in relation to others that have taken place in the recent history of Colombia: the first one is the character of the witness. It brought to light the reality of how any random citizen can get involved with armed groups by chance. The second and most important element was the fact that the testimony of Daniel Arcila Cardona proved that areas of the army and the police were collaborating with criminal organizations, in this concrete case the paramilitaries, a fact that was suspected by many but had not been confirmed by evidence. A third element involves the final official report of the massacre, that for the first time admitted, as part of the total counts of victims, those deaths produced indirectly by the violent events, namely those who died of “pena moral,” or deep sorrow.

The events also took place during very difficult years in the political history of Colombia: three presidential candidates were assassinated during these years. The first and most notable was Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento, from the Partido Liberal, in August 18th of 1998. His popularity as a leader of the new liberalism in Colombia transcended his death and has to be credited for the victory of César Gaviria, who adopted his fight and discourse after Galán's son publicly asked him to continue his father's work during his funeral. If this assassination took place right before the beginning of the massacre as such, the other two happened right in the middle of it. The second killed candidate was Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, from the Unión Patriótica, who was assassinated in March 22nd of 1990; and the third was Carlos Pizarro Leongómez, of the Alianza Democrática M-19 (the former M-19 guerrilla), on April 26th of 1990.

After the investigations were completed and the first versions of the official reports appeared, the association of victims, along with the local government and with the support of the different commissions and some NGOs that aided in the process of investigation, built a memorial to the victims of the massacre in Trujillo. Since its construction in 2003, the monument has been subject to four attacks, the last of which was the profanation of Father Tiberio's grave, which made up part of the structure.

2. El Deber de Fenster

El Deber de Fenster premiered in 2010 at the Teatro Nacional thanks to the sponsorship it received after winning the Premio Fanny Mickey in 2009. The dramaturgy was under the charge of Humberto Dorado and Matías Maldonado, and the play was directed by Nicolás Montero and Laura Villegas, with Jairo Camargo and Daniel Castaño in the cast. Two years later, in 2012, the play was staged again at the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro in Bogotá. Over the past years the play has received much attention from the media, toured around different countries, and gained praise from critics, who have seen the project as a brave undertaking in the name of memory. The story only concerns the events that took place in Trujillo, Valle, between 1988 and 1991 and that are known as the Trujillo massacre. The storyline is that a German editor receives a package with all the archival information needed to make a documentary about the events. Therefore, the play itself is constructed as a documentary in which information is presented in a fragmentary way, chronologically disorganized, and introduced by a multiplicity of voices, including that of Daniel Arcila Cardona, main witness, whose manuscript constitutes the main document on which the “documentary” is based.

The set resembled a domestic space, like a living studio. To the left there was an open closet, with no walls, that exposed shirts and other pieces of clothing on hangers. Under it was a small refrigerator from which Fenster pulled out different articles during the play. At the center, towards the back of the stage, there was a wooden box marked “fragile” with the number 11007 (number assigned to the

process of the Trujillo massacre) written on it. A spotlight illuminated this box all throughout the play. To the right of the stage, there was a desk with a chair and a series of electronic devices that Fenster used to play the audio and videotapes that the box contained, and that constituted “the material” he had been asked to work on. The set also contained a telephone through which Fenster would communicate on different occasions with “el ingeniero” (the engineer), whose face and voice were never present on the stage, but whose presence was suggested all through the play as the person who commissioned on Fenster “el deber” (the task). Towards the front of the stage, there was a small coffee table with different objects on it, the most prominent of which are a sculpture of a hand and a huge dictionary that Fenster would consult throughout the play. On the right side, towards the back, there was a panel with small screens that showed broken images of a river and the end of the stage was covered by one large screen and two smaller ones on its sides, all hanging from the ceiling, where different images and news footage would be projected throughout the play. It was on these screens that the other witnesses rendered their testimonies throughout the play, some of which were told by real-life characters and some others by actors. Also to the right, exceeding the space of the stage over the first two thirds of the seating rows, there was a rope installed in the manner of a clothesline, which Fenster would use later to hang calendar days as the testimonies unraveled, in an effort to organize the events chronologically.

Fenster entered the stage wearing sweatpants, a t-shirt and a robe. He yawned and stretched, like he had just woken up. He grabbed a small microphone attached to the electronic devices set on the right side of the stage and began: “1, 2, 3

grabando. No acabo de editar un material cuando ya me llega otro nuevo. Todavía no sé de qué se trata. Lo trajeron mientras dormía.”⁶⁰ The machine repeated the recorded text. Then he proceeded to take out the contents of the box: some videotapes and documents, which he read aloud:

Declaración del testigo: Yo Daniel Arcila Cardona identificado con la cédula número 10' 122.019 de Pereira, RD, nacido el 10 de marzo de 1966 en Primavera, Valle con tarjeta de identidad militar número 10'122.019 expedida en Pereira, integrante del tercero contingente de 1984, batallón artillería... a continuación hago la siguiente denuncia por los atropellos que se cometieron y aún se siguen cometiendo por parte de las fuerzas militares y de policía, de grupos paramilitares al servicio del narcotráfico pagados por Diego Montoya y Henry Loaiza en Salónica, Valle.⁶¹

As Fenster continued to read, we learned that the judge in charge of the process had ordered a psychiatric exam of the witness, which had declared him “abnormal.” A woman appeared on one of the screens reading the report in detail. Fenster, foreseeing what was to follow, interrupted to call the “ingeniero” to complain: “yo había pedido que no me mandaran más de esas cosas porque ya estoy saturado: en

⁶⁰ Translation: “1, 2, 3 recording. I barely finish editing material when I receive new one. I still don't know what it's about. They brought it while I was sleeping.”

⁶¹ Translation: “Declaration of the witness: I, Daniel Arcila Cardona, ID no. 10'122.019 of Pereira, Risaralda, born on March 10, 1966 in Primavera, Valle with military ID no. 10'122.019 issued in Pereira, member of the third contingent of 1984, artillery battalion... make the following denunciation for the abuses that were committed and are still being committed by the military forces and the police, with the paramilitary groups in the service of drug trafficking paid by Diego Montoya and Henry Loaiza in Salónica, Valle.”

esos lugares siempre pasa lo mismo y siempre son los mismos temas. –No señor, todavía no he visto de qué se trata, y por lo que alcancé a leer el testigo que me mandan está loco.”⁶² Then he inserted another tape in the machine. At this point we could all see the president of the special commission designated by the Colombian government to investigate the events at Trujillo telling how, once the commission had exhausted all the national organs of justice, a report was presented to the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH) with detailed information about the massacre, under which the commission framed the violent events that took place between 1988 and 1991 in Trujillo, Valle. The ending date designates the disappearance of Daniel Arcila Cardona, principal witness.

Fenster continued to read from the report he received, where he found that the massacre is continuing, and not only in Trujillo but in numerous places all around the national territory. At this point Arcila’s voice became audible, and from then on he would read his testimony from the backstage. The manuscript was projected on the main screen. He described 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*. Despite being wounded himself, he escaped to Trujillo knowing that he would be killed next given that he was the only witness of the assassination of his brother. He arrived there on February 5th of 1990. At this point, Fenster hung this date from the clothesline. Arcila visited the Palacé artillery

⁶² Translation: “I asked you not to send me more of these things because I am sick of it: it is always the same old story that takes place in these places, and it’s always the same topics. – No, sir, I still don’t know what it’s all about, but for what I just read, the witness you sent me is crazy.”

battalion to talk to sergeant Urueña, who offered him money in exchange for turning in guerrilla soldiers. His testimony was interrupted to show a witness declaring that the judge in charge of the process in Bogotá hid the evidence, and another one reading the declaration of Urueña where he denied having met Arcila. In the middle of these images, we could see news footage about the assassination of Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, presidential Candidate of the Unión Patriótica. Fenster watched the images on the screen and screamed: “otro candidato presidencial muerto. Ya era el segundo, antes habían matado a Jaime Pardo Leal, del mismo partido político: Unión Patriótica. Dos candidatos presidenciales muertos: pueblo de salvajes.”⁶³

Arcila continued with his testimony, giving details of the events that had led him to cooperate with the guerrillas by chance. He was asked to drive a van to pick up blackberries for a friend of a relative, and on the way he was caught in the middle of a combat between the army and the ELN. One of his companions, friends with one of the guerrilla soldiers, asked Arcila to transport some of them on his way back to Trujillo. We also learned some details about the combat in La Sonora and how the army had opened fire against some civilians who were performing construction work on the road thinking that they were combatants. These events took place on March 29 of 1990, a date that Fenster added to the clothesline before reading the entire list of the victims of this attack.

⁶³ Translation: “another presidential candidate dead. He was the second: they had already killed Jaime Pardo Leal, from the same party, the Unión Patriótica. Two presidential candidates dead: savage people.”

The narration was interrupted by the appearance, on the screen, of Father Javier Giraldo S.J., the president of the Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz (CIJP) who appeared giving an account of the process by which the investigation about the massacre was made and presented to the different national and international authorities. Then we learned about the story of Father Tiberio Fernández Mafla, parish priest of Trujillo, who became a social leader during the years preceding the massacre, organizing the community around different projects for the advancement of small producers. Fenster read out loud the project presented by Father Tiberio in which he described the organisms he created and the efforts he made to find economic support from international NGOs to finance development in the town.

The screen switched to footage of the news reporting the first rally that took place in Trujillo in October of 1988, which triggered the events that were to take place over the following years. Someone placed flags from the ELN on the main square, after which the population of Trujillo became suspect of collaborating with the guerrilla. “Now we go back in time,” said Fenster, while pulling back the clothesline and placing the new date in chronological order. This protest was followed by another one in March of 1989. The population was demanding government funds to invest in infrastructure and education. The footage showed a woman telling how she was home listening to the voices of the participants in the march, when she heard the first shots. The army had taken over the march and attempted to impose order. Soldiers blocked the access to and from the square, forcing people to stay inside and risk their lives. In response, Father Tiberio opened

the doors of the church to allow people to protect themselves inside of it, which automatically added him to the black list of collaborators. In the middle of this we could see, on the screen, footage of the funeral of Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento, presidential candidate of the Partido Liberal, assassinated in August 18, 1989 in Bogotá.

At this point, Daniel Arcila, the witness, appeared on stage. He sat on the wooden box located in the middle of it and watched the news footage that was being projected on the screens. From this moment on, it was Arcila, now embodied by an actor, who continued to tell his story. He proceeded to recount how, through chance again, he ended up with the counter-guerrilla forces of the Colombian army, who gave him a military uniform and a balaclava. Fenster took these articles out of the box and showed them to the audience before placing them on the floor of the stage. The army had taken Arcila with them on a mission to find guerrilla soldiers, which he was able to identify after having helped them out a few weeks earlier. Thanks to Arcila's collaboration, the army detained one of the men that he had met before. All these events took place throughout different villages, haciendas and rural landscapes of Valle del Cauca, while Arcila was driving around with the soldiers. After detaining the suspect, the paramilitaries chipped in and proceeded to torture the detainee who ended up giving them a list of names, which the paramilitaries wrote down. Fenster: "Wilder Sandoval, forced to declare under torture."

Arcila described how the operation worked: soldiers and paramilitaries rode a truck around several districts in the middle of the night, taking people out of their

houses, some of which were written down in a list. Among the victims, they took the husband of Arcila's cousin, whom he did not dare to defend out of fear of sharing his destiny. Arcila was forced to drive the truck while the rest would load it with the people, some of them shirtless, their heads covered with sacks.

The narration was interrupted to show more footage of the witnesses who declared him incompetent and his testimony false. His father appeared on screen: "Me dijo que era informante del ejército. Yo naturalmente no le creí porque ese muchacho siempre ha sido un mentiroso. Mi hijo se ha caracterizado por recurrir siempre a las mentiras... es un buen muchacho, pero no se le puede creer nada."⁶⁴ After Arcila's escape to Bogotá and his declarations at the public prosecutor's office, Urueña called Arcila's father to his office and offered him money in exchange for convincing his son to take back his accusations against him, which identified him as responsible for the death of 18 people. The father responded that did not even know where to find him, so Urueña gave him money to go to Bogotá and talk to him. At his return, he was summoned again by Urueña who, after learning that Arcila had refused to take his accusations back, tried to bribe his father to change his own statements and affirm that he had seen his son in Trujillo on Saturday morning instead of Sunday afternoon, as he had originally declared. The father refused. A man appeared on screen highlighting the precision in the information provided by Arcila, which rendered his testimony believable despite accusations that he was lying.

⁶⁴ Translation: "He told me that he was an informant for the army. Naturally, I didn't believe him because that kid has always been a liar. My son has always been known to recur to lies... he is a good kid, but you can't believe a word he says."

Arcila continued with his report: In the middle of the road he almost had an accident, which made all the detainees cry. The soldiers yelled at him and asked him if he wanted to kill them all. Arcila had not slept in two nights and it was hard for him to focus on the road. The detainees, most of them peasants, were begging the soldiers and paramilitaries not to hurt them, asking them to remember that they, too, had families. At 4:30 am they finally reach the hacienda where the rest of the events were to take place. All this happened during the night between March 31st and April 1st, 1990. The sergeant ordered the prisoners to give him everything they have on them: watches, rings and cash, which he placed in a sack. After giving Arcila 40,000 pesos⁶⁵ “for his help.” The commander ordered his collaborators to go and eat some breakfast before proceeding: “desayunen primero porque si no después no van a ser capaces por lo que van a ver.”⁶⁶

He began to torture them with a hose. He placed it in their mouths and suffocated them with the water. Arcila continued with his description:

Les levantan las uñas con una navaja, con el cortaúñas les quitan pedazos de las plantas de los pies, los cortan y les echan sal, con el soplete los queman en diferentes partes del cuerpo hasta que la piel se rompe y se les levanta el cascarón. Les ponen el chorro de llama en la parte genital, les cortan el pene y los testículos y se lo meten en la boca a las mismas víctimas... finalmente los descuartizan.... [Fenster vomita en un platón] Yo me abrí para no ver eso... con el soplete

⁶⁵ Less than US \$20.

⁶⁶ Translation: “Eat breakfast first, or you won’t be able to bear what you’re about to see.”

calentaron una varilla y se la introdujeron por el ano al rojo vivo... Yo les pregunté que qué sería lo que les hacían con la motosierra, ellos me decían que era que partían la cabeza por la mitad para dejarlos desangrando de día para botarlos por la noche. Cuando terminaban de torturarlos, les mochaban la cabeza con la motosierra, les mochaban los dedos con las tenazas y el martillo, con el soplete los quemaban. Los capaban y los dejaban desangrando. A ellos los dejaron desangrando pa' botarlos por la noche en el río Cauca por ahí a las 7 de la noche. A ellos los dejaban desangrando en una cochera de marranos que queda en "La Peladora". Cuando les mochaban la cabeza, la cabeza quedaba a un lado y los ojos parpadeando, y el cuerpo quedaba retorciéndose también [llora, Fenster sigue vomitando]⁶⁷

At this point Fenster stopped the tape and Arcila fell silent, weeping. Fenster, appalled, called "el ingeniero" and yelled at him:

⁶⁷ Translation: "They lift their fingernails with a razor. With a nail clipper, they cut off pieces of the soles of their feet; they cut them and then they put salt on the wounds. With the gas torch, they burn them on different parts of the body until the skin breaks. They put the flame on their genitals, cut off their penis and testicles and then stick them inside their mouths... finally, they quarter them... [Fenster vomits] I walked out so that I didn't have to see any more of it... With the torch, they heated a rod and then put it in his anus... I asked them what they did with the chainsaw, they said they cut the head in half to leave them bleeding during the day so they could throw them to the river at night. When they were done torturing them, they chopped off their heads with the chainsaw, they cut off their fingers with the tongs and hammer, with the torch they burned them. They castrated them and then left them bleeding. These, they left there bleeding to throw them to the Cauca river around 7 pm. They left them bleeding in a pig barn located in "La Peladora". When they cut off their heads, the head would fall on one side and on the other the body still twisting [he cries, Fenster keeps vomiting]."

¡No más! ¡No más! ¿Qué sentido tiene hacer un documental sobre este horror? ¿Qué sentido tiene? ¡No quiero más! ¿Para qué estas memorias? –Sí, pero sólo sangre, dolor y muerte. No quiero más. No quiero más. –Cómo quiere que me calme, si me siento el portador de una epidemia, de una enfermedad, de la resaca, de la escoria humana. –¡No! El testigo no está loco, yo soy el que voy a terminar enloqueciéndome. ¿Para qué recordar esto ingeniero?... ¿Por qué?⁶⁸

A man appeared on screen, telling how the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (GMH) has established a provisional register of 2,505 massacres with a total of 14,660 victims. Colombia has lived a war of not only combats but also massacres, and the response of the population has been that of complete indifference. Fenster continued screaming that he could not believe these events are still going on. More footage showed how father Tiberio denounced these deeds on the part of the guerrilla and the military in his sermon of the following Sunday. The same day another man was killed in La Sonora, in front of the police station. Fenster read out loud the list of the disappeared with a broken voice. That same Sunday, April 3rd, Arcila realized he was going to be next. The paramilitaries, in conjunction with the army, had taken two more prisoners who provided them with a new list of victims, under torture. The list included father Tiberio. Arcila heard two paramilitaries talking about how it was time for them to get rid of him. He escaped, running

⁶⁸ Translation: “Enough! Enough! What’s the point in making a documentary about this horror? What’s the point? I can’t take this anymore! Yes, but only blood, pain and death. I don’t want any more of this. How can you ask me to calm down, when I feel like the carrier of an epidemic, a disease, the hangover, the human scum. No! The witness is not crazy, it’s me who will end up going crazy. Why remember this, engineer? Why?”

through a coffee plantation. He managed to get back to Trujillo, where he warned the people whose names he had heard earlier of what was coming up for them. None of them believed him, arguing that they were innocent and therefore nothing could happen to them. They gave him some money, which he used to go to Bogotá, where denounced the facts he had witnessed. On the following days, all the people contained in the list disappeared from Trujillo. On April 17th father Tiberio disappeared too, along with the people who accompanied him in his car, while returning to Trujillo after the funeral of another victim. On April 23rd, his body was found, in pieces, in the Cauca River. Despite the prohibition to rescue and bury bodies from the river, a fisherman took him out. The fisherman disappeared too. The bodies of those who were with him, including his niece, were never found. Father Tiberio's last sermon was read on screen: "Si mi sangre contribuye para que en Trujillo amanezca y florezca la paz que tanto estamos necesitando, gustosamente la derramaré."⁶⁹ Father Tiberio was aware of the danger he faced and had already received numerous threats from the paramilitaries, as this sermon, pronounced on good Friday as part of the "Seven Last Words from the Cross," put in evidence.

On April 19th, 1990, Daniel Arcila began to testify before the DAS in Bogotá. On the 26th, Carlos Pizarro Leongómez, presidential candidate of the Alianza Democrática, was assassinated. The screens displayed the news. After declaring, Arcila returned with the authorities to the scenes of the crimes, only to find that most of the signs he had given about the places had been changed: walls had been

⁶⁹ Translation: "If my blood will contribute to bring the much needed peace to Trujillo, I will gladly pour it."

repainted, cars had disappeared, people replaced, etc. Nonetheless, they managed to uncover the original aspect of the places, proving the veracity of Arcila's testimony.

Fenster: "La memoria para no olvidar; el sagrado deber de recordar. Ese es mi deber: recordar".⁷⁰ Arcila was subjected to a psychiatric examination on July 12th, 1990, which rendered his testimony invalid and exonerated all the people accused in his declaration from any guilt. He took refuge in Bogotá until the next year, when he decided to move back to Trujillo. A few days later, on May 5th, 1991, he was detained by the police. Arcila remains disappeared until today. His sister appeared on the screen; she was only 10 when all this happened:

¿Y quiénes son los responsables de su desaparición? Son tantos: médicos, jueces, psicólogos, militares, policía, hasta el gobierno colombiano que no lo escuchó, y haber llamado cómplice, delator, único testigo y hasta paramilitar, cuando solamente era un ingenuo que creyó en la justicia colombiana. Fueron 10 años de zozobra, de escondernos y de no saber de quién, de una inestabilidad emocional y económica, 10 años de no creer en nadie. Y ahora yo me pregunto qué fue de mi hermano. Lo último que recuerdo fueron sus historias, que le contaba a mi papá, que parecían sacadas de una película de horror y él esperando los consejos que mi papá le daba... sólo fue una semana por la memoria, pero nosotros llevamos 20 años teniendo en la

⁷⁰ Translation: "Memory to not forget; the sacred duty of remembering. That is my duty: to remember."

memoria el horror de la persecución y esperando a saber qué pasó con Daniel.⁷¹

The voice of another witness declared, apologetically, “yo compartí esto porque uno a veces necesita desahogarse.”⁷² Fenster said that after Arcila’s disappearance, his testimony was confirmed once further proof was gathered and his statements were compared with those of other witnesses. “Recordar para no olvidar; o recordar para saber qué olvidar. Recordar para perdonar; recordar para no repetir; recordar para saber qué perdonar. La sagrada memoria de la desgracia interpela. [gritando] ¿Qué pasó con los culpables?”⁷³ Fenster read the information about the final approval and closure of the investigation report, which was given to president Ernesto Samper, who admitted the responsibility of the State.

More footage provided an account of the events that followed the massacre. One of the paramilitary leaders was detained by the authorities and extradited to the United States on account of his businesses with drug trafficking, but not for the massacres. The members of the military who were involved in the crimes were

⁷¹ Translation: “Who are responsible for his disappearance? They are so many: doctors, judges, psychologists, members of the military and the police, even the Colombian government that never listened to him, and accused him of being an accomplice, an informer, only witness and even a member of the paramilitary, when he was just a naïve man who believed in the Colombian justice system. It was 10 years of anxiety, of hiding and not knowing from whom, of emotional and economic instability, 10 years of not believing in anyone. And now I wonder what happened to my brother. The last thing I remember are his stories, that he told my father, and that sounded like they were taken out of a horror movie; and him expecting my father’s advice... It was only one week for the memory, but we have spent 20 years keeping in our memory the horror of the persecution and waiting to find out what happened to Daniel.”

⁷² Translation: “I shared this because sometimes you just need to unburden yourself.”

⁷³ Translation: “To remember so as not to forget; or to know what to forget. To remember in order to forgive; to never repeat; to remember in order to know what to forgive. The sacred memory of disgrace calls us. [screaming] What happened to the responsables?”

detained and then left free for lack of proof against them. The audience was given a report on the conditions of the region, which is host to numerous plantations of coca and marihuana, in addition to having privileged access to the Pacific Ocean, where these products are shipped to the rest of the world. Despite the investigations that were developed, the accused are still free.

The play closed with a man telling the story of the father of the *ebanistas*, disappeared in Trujillo, who installed himself on a bench at the square where his sons disappeared. He just sat there all day and night, and every time somebody asked him what he was doing he would reply that he was waiting for his two sons and that he had the “feeling” that they would return. His sons never returned, and he died of sorrow a few months after the events: “That destroys the one who is living it as much as the one who is listening.”

3. Ghostly Testimonies

Of the three plays analyzed in this dissertation, *El Deber de Fenster* is the one that most closely complies with what one could call “documentary theater.” By assigning Fenster the *deber*, the task to make a documentary, the production becomes the documentary itself; even further, the play puts everyone in the place of Fenster himself, assigning us the same task of putting the pieces together and constructing the elusive documentary. However, by performing this dual operation, the play is itself already a documentary, one that reveals, in its own display, the very difficulty—if not 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.

Jairo Camargo, who plays Fenster, describes the play in the following terms:

‘El deber de Fenster’ es la historia del manuscrito de Daniel Arcila Cardona, principal testigo de graves sucesos violentos que ocurrieron en Trujillo en el año de 1990. Es la historia de un editor alemán llamado Eder Fenster quien tiene que editar un documental con este material, a partir del manuscrito de Daniel Arcila Cardona. Y pues a partir de esto se cuenta toda la historia de esta masacre y de estos hechos violentos en Trujillo.⁷⁴

In one of the most important contributions to the field of Latin American Cultural Studies, John Beverley undertook the task of studying the essence and role of a genre that he chooses to name, in Spanish, *testimonio*. The four essays that compose his book were written over a decade in which the author followed—and shaped—the debates about the epistemological place of such a genre in the larger canons of Latin American and World literature. The book follows the development of the genre around two major questions: What *is testimonio*? And what does it *do*?

Beverley argues that the importance of studying testimony as a genre in Latin America lies in its having become one of the most important forms of literature in

⁷⁴ Translation: “*El Deber de Fenster* is the story of the manuscript of Daniel Arcila Cardona, main witness of the very serious events that took place in Trujillo in 1990. It is the story of a German editor called Eder Fenster who has to edit a documentary based on this material and the manuscript of Daniel Arcila Cardona. So it is from that point of departure that we tell the whole story of that massacre and those violent events in Trujillo”.

the region after the 1950s and particularly after the publication, in 1968, of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this line of analysis, Beverley situates testimony under the field of subaltern literature and consequently reads it from the perspective of subaltern studies.

The importance of testimony, the author asserts, 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." (Beverley 2004, 1) And what is asked of us, the readers of it, 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." (Beverley 2004, 2-3). By situating it in these terms, Beverley is already implying that testimony is not just any story of a subaltern subject; it is, by definition, a story of violence, and that "something of the experience of the body in pain or hunger or danger inheres in testimonio." (Beverley 2004, 71). This presence of the body at the center of testimony is extremely important to think about the role that testimony place in *El deber de Fenster* and other theatrical plays that deal with memories of violence.

The strength of testimony, for Beverley, lies in its claim of truth: by addressing the other in a personal way, by telling a story, it establishes an implicit agreement to believe what will be told in it. However, and this distinction is one of the main

arguments in the 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 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.” (Beverley 2004, 7) Or 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.” (33) This idea of “experiencing” the speaker and the situations is of great importance when we look at productions like *El Deber de Fenster*, which recreate 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. (Beverley 2004, 32)

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 to which it is addressed, 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, of one collectivity in front of another.

John Beverley's effort to establish the reality and value of testimony in opposition to claims of objective truth come from two places. The first is his drive to establish an epistemological space for testimony within the canon of Latin American and Universal literature, as something that must be taught in regular curricula and that must be taken as belonging to the realm of "literature." This claim is aimed mostly at those who criticize testimonial writing from a literary perspective, and it is important to note here that Beverley is dealing in his book with the genre of written and published testimonies. The second is more complex, and derives from the specific case that Beverley uses as a paradigmatic example all through the four essays collected in the book. The particular testimony from which most of his claims derive is that of Guatemalan activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú. The debate about the credibility of the testimony and its value as a historic document began when David Stoll criticized Menchú's testimony for not telling the complete truth and misrepresenting some of the events that she portrays in the

name of her political purposes⁷⁵. By understanding the specific place of production, as well as the functions that the testimony performs, John Beverley restores its validity both as a document and as a literary text worthy of occupying an important place within the canon.

While I am inclined to side with John Beverley in his debate with Stoll, I believe that Beverley misses an important point about the value of truth in testimonies that are not necessarily meant to become literary texts or circulate in national and international circles as a means of advocacy for human rights. While it might be of little importance whether or not Rigoberta Menchú misrepresented or exaggerated some parts of her narrative, in legal contexts when the urgency of giving testimony arises from a necessity of justice, the acceptance of the narrative as truthful is key. The reader, the listener, needs to assume the facts presented in the testimony as *true* for everyone, beyond the defense that Beverly makes of testimonies as *real*. When Daniel Arcila Cardona gave his declarations in front of the authorities in Bogotá, he was denouncing acts that compromised the integrity of the government and its armed forces: he was accusing the national army of cooperating with paramilitary forces, and of being involved in acts of torture and murder that constitute violations of Human Rights. The first step taken, and that *El deber de*

⁷⁵ Concretely, Stoll claimed that Menchú's narration of the assassination of her brother could not be true because she could not have been witness to it. Later, Menchú said that it was true that she was not there, but that her mother had been, and that she had not made this precision in her narrative because she rendered it unnecessary to the general purpose of her telling the story. The claims about the "veracity" of Menchú's account, however, affected, within the academic community of the United States, its credibility and value, which compelled Beverley to defend the genre for what it does and make the statements that I have presented about the difference between truth and reality, as well as the value of the truth of a particular individual. For more on this debate, see John Beverley. *Testimonio: On The Politics of Truth*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Fenster puts a huge emphasis on, was to submit the witness to a psychiatric examination in order to prove that he was lying so none of the claims he had made could be taken seriously. It was only after a second examination was performed (and whose result, ironically, came out after the witness had already disappeared too) and after the appearance of further evidence, that Arcila Cardona's narrative was taken seriously and an exhaustive investigation began in consequence. After all, as Beverley himself admits, testimony is a "weapon of the weak" and the only recourse to visibility and justice that witnesses such as the one who occupies us here have.

There is no claim to be part of a cannon in the testimony that occupies us here, only a claim for justice, and perhaps the need to communicate and to "let out" something that, as the voice at the end of the play reminds us, "destroys the one who is living it as much as the one who is listening."

There are several things that testimonies *do* aside from the findings that Beverley presents in his book. I have already shown how the author calls our attention to the inscription of a particular body at the center 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 *Homo Sacer* and *El deber de Fenster*. Perhaps the former is the one that makes this inscription most evident, by leaving aside the textual part and focusing only on the embodied one. The latter, as we saw, brings the testimony to the stage through three main resources: the projection of the manuscript on the main screen of the stage, that shows it being written as the

audience listens to it, in a sort of repetition of the act of writing within the theatrical presentation of it; the voice that “reads” from it and operates as a narrator all through the play; and 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 some kind of truth that comes from the realm of the dead. In *El deber de Fenster*, it is the memory of a dead person, Daniel Arcila Cardona, which is brought on stage first through his manuscript, then through his voice, and finally through an actor that represents him or, rather, his ghost.

What is a ghost? Ghosts and specters seem to be linked to the past. As Jacques Derrida said in *Specters of Marx*, “a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.” (Derrida 2006, 11) But “coming back” from where? And what for? A ghost belongs to a temporality that is, by definition, not present. It is a sort of anachronism that presents itself to the living producing a complex exchange in vision: the ghost is *visible* to the living (or otherwise we wouldn’t speak of specters or apparitions at all), while it also *sees* the living (6). However, this other time that the specter 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” (48). This disruption of temporality is one of the most notable aspects of the appearance of a ghost, and in the particular case of *El Deber de Fenster* it is

important to highlight Fenster's effort to set the time right by trying to organize the events chronologically by setting the dates in the improvised calendar/clothesline.

The question about 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. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter (Derrida 2006, 5).

We are dealing, first, with a "thing" that does not belong completely either to the realm 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 that witness its return. In the particular case of *El Deber de Fenster*, the question about this paradoxical incorporation acquires a new meaning as we try to analyze the ways in which the play seeks to bring the absent body of the witness 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. Miguel Rubio Zapata, director of the Peruvian theater group Yuyachkani, describes this process as an inversion in the process of creation on the part of the actor, who is

usually trained to work with the notion of “presence” and who, in the face of making a theater of and about the disappeared, has to search within him or herself the absence, and then put his or her body at the service of making that absence present (Rubio 2008, 37).

Ghosts, in general, 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” (Derrida 2006, 50). The voice that conjures a ghost is, therefore, a performative one. By naming what is not present, it brings it to being, it constitutes a speech act. This definition of conjuration makes us think of any theatrical gesture and its relation to specters: 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*.” (Derrida 2006, 59) So there is a double, contradictory relationship of the living with the 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 anymore to haunt us, in an action that seeks to give rest and peace to both the living and the dead.

It is precisely this other face of conjuring, the one that seeks to send the specter 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 (...) One has to know (...) Now, to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies –for it must stay in its place. In a safe place (...)

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*.
(Derrida 9)

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 decided that the specter *is* that other being, one can give it a proper place and put it to rest. The second 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 specter performs a kind of work, and this becomes especially important when we look at the work that the ghost of Daniel Arcila Cardona performs on stage. One could say that the paradoxical incorporation that the apparition of a specter entails takes place through the appropriation 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 Hamlet’s father’s ghost, his recognition is also determined by the clothes he is wearing, which coincide with those of the testimony. And even those that appear as objects on the stage (when Fenster takes out of the box the military clothes that Arcila Cardona tells the soldiers gave him), become, too, markers of the ghosts’s body.

According to the previous definition, haunting can only take place in the context of mourning. As Derrida says, “one (the living) needs to know” where the body is and whose body it is in order to finally conjure (as in exorcize) the ghost and let it rest, which will stop its haunting us and ultimately let the living rest, which becomes

impossible in a context such as the Colombian one. So both ghosts and testimonies are important for what they *do*, and the function that they perform is very similar: that of inscribing something (a truth) from another temporality into the present, and leaving a trace in memory. And this action is a political one when what is at stake is a double erasure of an individual, his voice and his agency: first by the armed groups, and then by the justice system, as the sister of the witness reminds us in her testimony that appears in the play. 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.” (Avelar 2004, 86) Precisely the same claim that testimony does. While there is no evidence about what happened to Daniel Arcila Cardona, it seems reasonable to assume that he followed the same fate of those whose tortures and murders he described in his testimony. After all, he was caught in a compromising position serving as informant on both sides in conflict. A crime that, in the context of war, is unforgivable and punished in the most extreme ways. Read in this way, his testimony is also a claim for justice that comes to the living from the realm of the dead.

4. The “Sacred Duty to Remember”

Peggy Phelan asserts that “performance and theatre have a special relation to art as memorial” (Phelan 1997, 3). 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 *El deber de Fenster*. After all,

Fenster's duty is not to mourn, and his work definitely does not bring peace to anyone. Moreover, at the end of the play, Fenster reminds us that the individuals responsible for the crimes that have been denounced are still free, and even those who have been put to justice have been condemned on account of their involvement with illegal drug trafficking and not torture and murder. Fenster's duty is to remember, and bringing the specters to the stage brings them also back to society, resignified: "being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (Derrida 2006, xviii).

It is precisely the politics of memory that guides the production of *El deber de Fenster* as well as the other plays analyzed in this dissertation. One of the most striking elements of this play is the extensive use of media footage in parallel with the actions that take place on the stage. 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 newspapers headlines showed during the play have always been public. Most of the members of the audience have had the chance to see that information before; it has been on their televisions at their homes for over twenty years. None of that information is new; several generations have been witnesses to those events, and yet we all have, one way or another, willfully or accidentally, forgotten about them. 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 us 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 also creates—perhaps as a side-effect—another important effect in our perception of the news and the reality they portray. In contrast with the sobriety and simplicity of the stage and the actions that take place on it, the footage constitutes the real spectacle; a spectacle that is brought to our attention once more precisely because we seem to have missed it. As Ileana Diéguez puts it, “habría que pensar estos discursos y estrategias escénicas en diálogo con sus cronotopías, recordar que desde los noventa y críticamente hacia finales de esa década, los escenarios sociales, económicos y políticos de este continente [latinoamericano] comenzaron a ser más espectaculares y mediáticos.” (Diéguez 2007,19-20)⁷⁶ In response to the spectacularity of those stages of the “real world,” the theatrical productions have to reinvent a space for the bodies, one that brings theatricality back to the basics of life:

En una sociedad de discursos agotados, donde la población civil ha explorado recursos representacionales y ha usado su propio cuerpo como medio de expresión en un entorno que mediatiza todas las intervenciones, la teatralidad como la vida tiene que reinventarse cada día, asumiendo el mismo riesgo, la misma fragilidad y

⁷⁶ Translation: “it behooves us to think about these scenic discourses and strategies in dialogue with their chronotopies and remember that since the 1990s and especially towards the end of the decade, the political, social and economic stages of the [Latin American] continent became more spectacular and mediatic.”

sobrevivencia que marca los espacios donde se inserta⁷⁷ (Diéguez 2007, 20)

And this fragility is not exclusive of *El deber de Fenster*. We saw the insertion of bare life's vulnerability and simplicity in the other two productions analyzed in this dissertation, but the difference between this and the others is that it 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 who sits down to investigate these events from the comfort of his living room (Fenster), of which the space of the audience becomes an extension. Ileana Diéguez identifies this contrast as one of the aspects of liminality that she uses as the main descriptive category to study contemporary theater and performance in Latin America.

I believe that plays like *El deber de Fenster* 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 exorcises a ghost from the society. Rather, by bringing these stories back, they re-inscribe them in a public memory that has made every effort to efface them. Seen this way, their work is more comparable to that of commissions of truth and reconciliation, whose purpose, in many ways, is to not let important cases just be closed. But it is also comparable to these commissions in its process of creation and production. In other words, the production followed the

⁷⁷ Translation: "In a society of exhausted discourses, where the civil society has explored different representational resources and has used its own body as a means of expression in an environment that mediatizes every intervention, theatricality has to be reinvented every day, like life, assuming the same risk, the same fragility, and the same survival that marks the spaces in which it is inscribed."

same process of investigation and “discovery” necessary for the elaboration of the official report. And the play, on stage, re-creates the entire process once more, first for Fenster and then for the audience. Nicolás Montero, the director, describes the play as “putting together a puzzle”:

Esta es la reconstrucción de un caso, fundamentalmente, del caso que da cuenta de los eventos en Trujillo. Entonces para los escritores Humberto y Matías, para contar esta historia, para explicar qué fue lo que pasó, decidieron como armar, darle al público la posibilidad de que accediera a todas las piezas de un rompecabezas. Entonces para eso la mayor parte de la obra, el 90% está hecha de fuentes, de gente que estuvo investigando. Entonces todas esas fuentes y la pieza central, que es un manuscrito elaborado por el testigo que permitió que se esclarecieran los hechos, es un manuscrito que proyectamos en una pantalla y a partir de ese documento central, vamos comprendiendo qué fue lo que pasó con el caso.⁷⁸

The puzzle, however, had to be put together first by the dramaturges, whose work consisted in gathering all the information available about the case and figuring out a way to present it, without turning it into a clean narrative that would simply

⁷⁸ Translation: “This is the reconstruction of a case, specifically, the case that gives an account of the events in Trujillo. So the writers Humberto and Matías, in order to tell this story, to explain what happened, decided to assemble, to give the audience the possibility to access all of the pieces of a puzzle. In consequence, the majority of the play, 90% of it is made of sources, of the people who did the research. So all of those sources, along with the central piece, which is a manuscript made by the witness that allowed to bring light to the events, is a manuscript that we project on a screen and, parting from that central document, we begin to understand what happened with the case.”

tell the story. Most importantly, the production had to reflect the process that each of the creators went through during the production and that, not surprisingly, took a big toll on them. As Humberto Dorado puts it:

Yo creo que si ya escribir es difícil, convivir por tres años con un tema que es de nuestra realidad y que uno quisiera que no fuera... Pero como así es, siente uno como un compromiso y una lucha con uno mismo por no voltearle la espalda al tema y sobre todo por el terrible sentimiento de indignación con la justicia que hay con las víctimas, valorar los hechos que son verdaderamente importantes, preguntarnos por qué los quieren borrar y quiénes los quieren borrar (...) Yo creo que hay obras que por su tema en principio resultan imprescindibles y en este caso es mi generación la que le está contando a una nueva generación cómo fue nuestra historia y cómo la vivimos. Y seguramente los jóvenes de hoy van a tener más problemas de los que tuvimos nosotros, pero quizás les ayude que nosotros contemos la historia como fue.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Translation: "I think that if it is already difficult to write, to live for three years with a topic that is part of our reality and that one wishes it wasn't... But it is, and one feels like a commitment and a struggle with oneself that forces one to not turn the back to the topic, and especially for the terrible sentiment of indignation with the justice for the victims. One has to value the facts that are truly important, ask why some want to erase them and who are those who want to erase them. (...) I believe that there are plays that, because of their topic, are indispensable, and in this case it is my generation that is telling to a new generation how was our history and how we lived it. And certainly today's young people will have more problems than the ones we had, but perhaps it could help them that we tell the story just as it happened."

The play then became a necessity, an urgency to make public something that, for many, had passed unnoticed during the time it was taking place and after it was over; even after the official reports came out and the government acknowledged its responsibility in the events. In this way, the play also performs the work of the testimony, following the same motivations and the same goals. Nicolás Montero affirms that at some point in the production, what was at stake was to let the story out because it was consuming also the team that was working on it. Just as the witness at the end of the play states, these events destroy the one who listens to them as much as those who live them. Like testimony, too, it is an undertaking in the name of truth. Jairo Camargo, the actor who plays Fenster, says that the hardest part was “el reconocimiento de una historia del país, de Colombia, que yo desconocía en gran parte. Eso ha sido muy doloroso, ha sido muy fuerte para mí llegar a estas cosas, a estas verdades. Pero afortunadamente también he llegado a estas verdades.”⁸⁰

Why remember? What is the purpose of telling these events once more? Fenster interpellates “el ingeniero” at the end of the play with these questions. Fenster is an outsider that nonetheless represents the average citizen that discovers these events once more, for the first time. And his questions are probably shared by the audience, his position is the same of those that, like him, argue that “it is always the same old story, the same horrors.” Unlike most of the political theater that has been produced in Colombia for the past fifty years, *El deber de Fenster* is not a representation of a

⁸⁰ Translation: “the acknowledgement of a history of the country, Colombia, that I ignored for the most part. It has been very painful, it’s been very hard for me to approach these things, these truths. But I am grateful for having arrived at those truths.”

fictional or true reality that is displayed on the stage in order to make a—not always explicit—denunciation. Unlike *Los santos inocentes*, it does not recreate an event under which the violent acts will be put on stage. It is also different from *Homo Sacer* in that it does not really create new images or symbols to convey some events without making them explicit. *El deber de Fenster* offers the raw material of which history is made: news, 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 recreates 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, taken seriously and gain the sympathy of the speaker. In this way, the play is a re-inscription of the testimony in the minds and bodies of the members of the audience. Dorado, Carmargo and Montero all agree that in the midst of the pain that the investigation caused on them, they found hope in the feeling of indignation. Their process of discovery is comparable to the one that the audience lives as they sit in the theater during the more than two hours that the play lasts. And perhaps the aim is to cause in them exactly the same feeling. Let us remember here the part of the play in which Fenster claims that he feels like the bearer of a disease, of an epidemic that he needs to wash out of himself. Fenster's repulsion in reaction to the events described by Arcila Cardona (when the former vomits as the latter describes the tortures he witnessed) should and in fact is, shared by all members of the audience, some of which actually left the theater at that point. Indignation and repulsion: the work of testimony.

As one of the voices in the play remarks, the response of the civil society to this and every other massacre that has taken place in Colombia is that of indifference. Before making a judgment on this attitude, one has to take into account the massiveness of the events and the overwhelming amount of information that circulates about them. Memory is elusive when an event is not even over before a new one arises. It is hard to keep track of specific events when they are all mixed, and this is something made evident by the footage that the play brings to the stage. Most of the massacres that have taken place in Colombia, including those of the Naya river that constitute the underlying text of *Los santos inocentes* and the list that *Homo Sacer* provides us with, have taken place in rural areas, mostly unconnected with the rest of the country, as the three plays make a big effort to highlight. Therefore, urban audiences have experienced most of the war in Colombia (except perhaps for the urban terrorism of the late 1980s and early 1990s) mostly through their televisions, as a spectacle. This makes it easier to understand the importance of bringing televisions and media footage to the stage. They are reminders of our own forgetfulness. Further, they make explicit the problems implicit in the presentation of these events as mediatic spectacles, as if they were not real.

Moreover, as a new testimonial piece based on a multiplicity of voices, the play collectivizes both the “I” and the “you” involved in the exchange of testimony. As the trailer of the play claims “el silencio hace cómplices” [silence makes accomplices] and voicing out the events, giving them presence within the public realm is the only way that the society can stop allowing these things to happen.

Finally, the play also attempts to perform the work of the commissions of truth by making a claim to justice. It constitutes a new narrative that draws from the official ones and constructs a new language for the communication of the historical memory. As the GMH report asserts,

Una nueva narrativa de los hechos es necesaria no sólo para las víctimas y sus comunidades, sino para la sociedad colombiana en general. La reconstrucción de la memoria histórica en escenarios como éste cumple una triple función: de esclarecimiento de los hechos, haciendo visibles las impunidades, las complicidades activas y los silencios; de reparación en el plano simbólico al constituirse como espacio de duelo y denuncia para las víctimas; y de reconocimiento del sufrimiento social y de afirmación de los límites éticos y morales que las colectividades deben imponer a la violencia.⁸¹ (GMH 2008, 14)

And this is, perhaps, the function that this and the other theatrical productions analyzed in this dissertation perform. However, there are important distinctions that one has to take into account at the time of reading the work of theater in relation to the work of a commission of truth and reconciliation. The first one is in

⁸¹ Translation: "A new narrative of the facts is necessary not only for the victims and their communities, but for the entire Colombian society in general. The reconstruction of historical memory in settings like this performs a triple function: of clarifying the facts, rendering visible the impunities, the active complicities and the silences; of reparation in the symbolic realm by constituting a space for mourning and denunciation of the victims; and of recognition of the social suffering and the affirmation of the ethical and moral limits that the collectivities must impose on violence."

many ways obvious, and it has to do with the different levels of power that the two spaces represent. While the power of the commission automatically makes any claim for justice an official one and opens up a process for its solution, the theater in many ways does the opposite: the claim that is made on the stage is so strong precisely because it carries its own impotence within itself. In other words, while opening the space of the theater to make public a private claim for justice, the very absence of it becomes public by the same gesture that denounces the deeds.

This first distinction takes us to the second, which is the reparative power of the instance of giving testimony. While on the one hand one could argue that conjuring the voices and bodies of the victims to the stage already constitutes a restoration of their humanity and their lives—as in *Homo Sacer*—I believe that it is important to take distance from the postulates that affirm that making a theater of violence is already an effort to make a symbolic reparation. We have seen in all 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 of something that affects the mind and the body just like a disease. There is no promise of reparation, and it is important here to highlight that at the end of each performance, Nicolás Montero, director of the play, comes out to the stage and presents the latest developments in “the case.” I will analyze further the problem of contagion and the absence of a promise of reparation in the following chapter, but for now let us emphasize that *El deber de Fenster* works to put in evidence the phrase that already makes part of the official report about the massacre. Trujillo is, in effect, “una tragedia que no cesa” (a tragedy that does not stop).

4.

RITUAL INSCRIPTIONS OF EXCESSIVE MEMORIES

Estáis muertos.

Qué extraña manera de estarse muertos. Quienquiera diría no lo estáis. Pero, en verdad, estáis muertos, muertos.

Flotáis nadamente detrás de aquesa membrana que, péndula del zenit al nadir, viene y va de crepúsculo a crepúsculo, vibrando ante la sonora caja de una herida que a vosotros no os duele. Os digo, pues, que la vida está en el espejo, y que vosotros sois el original, la muerte.

Mientras la onda va, mientras la onda viene, cuán impunemente se está uno muerto. Sólo cuando las aguas se quebrantan en los bordes enfrentados y se doblan y doblan, entonces os transfiguráis y creyendo morir, percibís la sexta cuerda que ya no es vuestra.

Estáis muertos, no habiendo antes vivido jamás. Quienquiera diría que, no siendo ahora, en otro tiempo fuisteis. Pero, en verdad, vosotros sois los cadáveres de una vida que nunca fue. Triste destino el no haber sido sino muertos siempre. El ser hoja seca sin haber sido verde jamás. Orfandad de orfandades.

Y sin embargo, los muertos no son, no pueden ser cadáveres de una vida que todavía no han vivido. Ellos murieron siempre de vida.

Estáis muertos.

This dissertation has so far presented three examples of the ways in which contemporary theater is responding to the ongoing history of violence in Colombia. As different as these plays are in their purposes, motivations and aesthetic mechanisms, they share a few aspects in common. First, they all draw from historical events and facts around which they weave their stories. However, in all cases these events are only portrayed tangentially within the *mis-en-scène*, even in the case of *El deber de Fenster* where it is not exactly the case but the documents and testimonies derived from it that occupy the center of the piece. Second, none of the plays analyzed here constitutes the representation of a written text. They inscribe a different type of dramaturgy that in many ways is the inheritor of the Latin American “signature” tradition started in the 1970s and commonly known as *creación colectiva* (collective creation) (Lamus Obregón 2010). Third, each of the pieces presented is the result of an experimentation in ways to portray violence on the stage and communicate said violence to the audience. Each of them creates a

⁸² “You are dead./ What a strange way to be dead. Anyone would say you are/not. But, in fact, you are dead./ You float nothingly behind that membrane that, pendulous/ from zenith to nadir, comes and goes from twilight to twilight,/ throbbing before the sonorous box of a wound that does not pain/ you. I tell you, then, that life is in the mirror, and that you are the/ original, death./ While the wave goes, while the wave comes, with what/ impunity is one dead. Only when the waters crash on the/ opposing borders and they fold and refold themselves, then you/ are transformed and, thinking you are dead, perceive the sixth/ string no longer yours./ You are dead, not ever having lived before. Anyone would say/ that not being now, in another time you were. But, in fact, you/ are the corpses of a life that never was. A sad fate. Not having/ been but dead always. Being a dry leaf without ever having been/ green. Orphanhood of orphanhoods./ And yet, the dead are not, cannot be corpses of a life they still/ have not lived. They always died from life./ You are dead.” (Translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi).

new instance of violence through imposing an experience of it in the theatrical event.

This chapter will analyze the claims that are made by theater, specifically these three plays, regarding these common aspects. I will do this analysis around three main categories: excess, memory and ritual. All of these determine specific interventions on the language, the body, and the time and place of the performance, giving these productions their special character. I will analyze the operations that the plays I have presented here perform on those objects and spaces in order to show how performance can inform some theoretical postulates about theater, violence, excess, memory and the ritual. Based on this analysis, I will try to elaborate a common framework under which these and other productions can be analyzed in what they *are*, but most importantly, what they *do*.

1. An excessive Theater for an Excessive Reality

If there is a common feeling that the three plays presented here produce on their spectator, it is that of excess. There is in each of them something that exceeds articulation, not only within the realm of the performance but also at the moment when one tries to give an account of it. In different ways, in each of them, the audience is left with the feeling that something has just happened that exceeds reason and language. It even exceeds the space and time of the performance. In all three cases I have documented members of the audience leaving the theater in the middle of the play or refusing to leave at the end of it. The plays become too intense

to bear, too much to see, too complex to process, too much to experience, too much to take home. I see this “toomuchness” as the product of an effective theater of cruelty, that which Artaud had imagined as the true theatrical experience, but it is also an effect of the events they deal with: collective death, social death, disappearance, and the stage where all of these erasures takes place: the massacre.

While the execution of massacres is not exclusive to the Colombian context, it has become a kind of “signature” of the way that violence is lived everyday in Colombia. Aside from the massiveness that massacres represent, this type of practice has imposed numerous challenges for scholars trying to understand the national conflict. Massacres represent an unbounded violence that is also completely asymmetrical in its exercise: one group of armed people killing a defenseless, innocent, unarmed one (Blair 2005; Sofsky 1997; Uribe Alarcón 2004). Therefore, massacres do not fall completely within the modern definitions of war as a confrontation between two or more factions. There is a clear executioner and a clear victim in a massacre, which makes it even harder to understand how and why these events take place. Moreover, massacres are excessive in their very nature, as Wolfgang Sofsky puts it: “In excesses and massacres, absolute power was transformed into absolute power in action. Cruelty exceeded all boundaries and inhibitions.” (Sofsky 1997, 204) It is perhaps this understanding of *action* in its absoluteness that best expresses the relation between massacre and theater that I want to explore here.

As I have shown, the proliferation of massacres in Colombia is incommensurable, despite the many efforts undertaken by the government, NGOs and other organizations in order to elaborate a systematized account of them. Death has been inscribed into every-day routine, with devastating consequences for the political, social and cultural life of the citizens. Elsa Blair has analyzed the excessive aspect of violence in Colombian society and culture in her book *Muertes violentas: La teatralización del exceso*. Blair argues that:

La muerte en Colombia es excesiva, no sólo por la cantidad de muertos producidos por esta sociedad, sino por lo *excesivo* de la carga simbólica inscrita en las maneras utilizadas para ejecutarla, y de las formas simbólicas (el lenguaje, el arte, la imagen) para nombrarla y para narrarla. Y es, finalmente excesiva, en los ritos funerarios que utiliza para tramitarla, ritos que terminan por agotar la eficacia simbólica que los asiste al volverse cotidianos, esto es, al hacer de algo extraordinario una práctica rutinaria.⁸³ (Blair 2005, xix)

Blair's objective is to understand the particular culture of violence that allows the endless repetition of these events in Colombian history. One of the main claims in her book is that not only death but also the mechanisms for dealing with it have become so widespread and "natural" that they lose most of their power to impact

⁸³ Translation: "In Colombia, death is excessive, not only due to the amount of dead people produced by this society, but because of the *excessive* character of the symbolic inscribed in the ways to execute it, and of the symbolic means (language, arts, image) to name it and narrate it. Finally, it is also excessive in the funerary rites that society uses to process it, rites that end up exhausting the symbolic efficacy that they contain by becoming quotidian, by turning something extraordinary into a routine practice."

the minds and hearts of the citizens, who have grown accustomed to hearing and watching the horror in every day news. What I find most important about Blair's study is the fact that she takes these deaths and massacres as complete events; her own definition of massacre includes every single aspect from the killing to its consequent elaboration in the symbolic realm, two aspects that up to now have been studied separately in most of the scholarship about violence in Colombia.

While Both Elsa Blair and María Victoria Uribe coincide in their assertions that massacres operate as *rituales de muerte* (rituals of death), Uribe's study is mostly centered in the actual performance of killing, as was shown in chapter 2. Elsa Blair takes a step forward and divides the act of killing into two big moments that she designates as "acts": the first act corresponds to the execution of the crime and the second to the symbolization of said crime as well as its becoming spectacle through the media and other means of signification (Blair 2005, xxv). This second act she subdivides into three moments: first the interpretation, second the divulgation and third the ritualization of the death. It is important to highlight Blair's choice of words to refer to these events as "acts": her book analyzes massacres and homicides as events comparable to theater in that they are deeply theatricalized in their practice and understanding: "El acto violento permea otros espacios de la vida social y asume no pocas veces el carácter de espectáculo. La muerte violenta es, pues,

desde su ejecución hasta su divulgación, dramatizada y teatralizada hasta el exceso.”⁸⁴ (Blair 2005, xxvii)

As a consequence of the proliferation of these actions, they end up losing their meaning for the citizens that become accustomed to being their spectators on a daily basis. Even the rites of burial and mourning are submitted to this effect: “El rito aparece excesivo por el número de entierros, con una grave consecuencia respecto de los procesos de elaboración de estas muertes: se vuelve rutina lo que como rito debería ser del orden de lo extraordinario, perdiendo así su eficacia simbólica.”⁸⁵ (Blair 2005, xxvii) But the effects of this naturalization, Blair asserts, go beyond the problem of symbolization: the excessive character and amount of these actions renders them improbable and situates them in the realm of the unreal and the imaginary (Blair 2005, 5). This, according to Blair, is the answer to the claims about Colombians’ indifference and indolence regarding the horror that is lived every day in the country. Ironically, it is precisely the proliferation and availability of information that, in a way, render these events banal and unreal and end up anesthetizing the citizenship against their effects.

Now, there are two very interesting points about Blair’s choice to compare massacres with theater in order to explain the impossibility to apprehend them: the first, which has been shown throughout this dissertation, is the ritual character that

⁸⁴ Translation: “The violent act touches other spaces of social life and in many instances assumes the character of spectacle. The violent death is, from its execution to its divulgation, dramatized and theatricalized to excess.”

⁸⁵ Translation: “The rite appears excessive due to the number of burials, with a serious consequence regarding the elaboration of these deaths: the becoming-routine of that which, as a rite, should belong to the order of the extraordinary, losing its symbolic efficacy.”

these deeds acquire, and in response to which, I believe, a very special kind of ritual theater is constructed. The second is the fact that she links the theatrical aspects of massacres and their dissemination with the unreality effect that they have on the general population of spectators. Blair believes that massacres operate as theaters if only to assert that this operation renders them incredible or fantastic. I believe that it is precisely because of the way in which the media portrays these events that a different kind of theater, like the one that this dissertation presents, is necessary in order to bring these spectacles back to the realm of the real and palpable world. In other words, where Blair sees the relation between violence and theater as the main cause for the loss of reality, I see the return of violence to the theater as a restitution of that reality.

In opposition to the highly scripted and spectacular way in which massacres are constructed, there is something in the very essence of these actions that eliminates the distance effect that their spectacular character could have for the participants: let us not forget that the preferred weapons for torture and assassination in this context are knives, machetes and other instruments that have to be handled manually, in close contact with the body that is being cut and killed. The executioner has, at all times during the execution, direct contact with the victim's body: his blood, his flesh, his bones, his skin. At all times he has to feel his warmth, the life extinguishing from his gaze, the scent of his body, the humidity of his sweat, the sound of his cries of horror and his begging for mercy.

I believe that nothing can bring this almost-unreal event back to reality like theater. Theater has the unique, remarkable capacity to bring the body back to the center of the action, to render the portrayed actions real again, to create an entirely new event that involves the spectator in a way that he cannot escape it anymore. If massacre operates as a theater, then theater—at least the theater that interests us here—operates just like a massacre. A doubly mirroring act, an imitation of an imitation that in its ultimate act of symbolization returns death and life, pain and pleasure, sorrow and joy, back to the realm of the real.

The question about how to represent a massacre has been the object of numerous investigations on the part of artists and scholars. Visual artist José Alejandro Restrepo claims that a massacre represents the ultimate end of representation and becomes a presentation of the act of destroying a body, as opposed to the mythic and affirmative action of constructing a body (Restrepo 2011, 21). Restrepo sees the excess in visual arts and other artistic manifestations in Colombia as an inheritance of the baroque aesthetics and worldview (Restrepo 2006; 2011). While I believe that the baroque is an important influence in the aesthetics of excess, I think that in contemporary Colombia the reality of the conflict has exceeded any ideas about life, death and destruction instituted by the artistic/religious movement. The theater that interests us here displays a new way of understanding death and suffering that exceeds the instance of representation and extends the destruction of the body from the actor to the spectator. In this case, theater becomes an instance of that community that Bataille imagined gathering around a corpse; coming to existence in the face of death.

In *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics and Politics*, Brazilian scholar Idelber Avelar undertakes the task of understanding the place that violence occupies in the contemporary world as a theoretical category as well as some responses to it from the realm of literary productions from across Latin America. The first chapter of the book deals with torture as a practice and a spectacle, to conclude, with Elaine Scarry, that part of the essence of torture as an event lies in its spectacular character and its ability to be displayed, producing a surplus of cruelty. Avelar asserts that “this surplus of cruelty is a fundamental component of terror itself. That is to say, without being excessive, obscene, absurd, terror is simply not terror. Torture exists in that excess, the reason why all attempts to ‘measure’ different degrees of torture will by definition be obscene.” (Avelar 2004, 28) Continuing his reading of Scarry, Avelar also asserts that torture returns the tortured to his most basic corporeal existence through pain. The moment of torture is one of absolute certainty because pain appears as an undeniable reality through which existence is affirmed. Of the plays presented in this work, it is perhaps in *Homo Sacer* that we see this operation most evident, both in its display of vulnerable bodies and in its treatment and discourse about the scream as the basic unit of pain and its expression. *Homo Sacer* brings the reality of the body in pain back to the center of the stage without re-creating explicitly the moment of torture.

Now, there is a problem with trying to read the tortures that are being shown on these stages, as well as those that serve as their “inspiration,” from the point of view of the existing scholarship on torture. Torture, as a concept and as a practice, has traditionally been linked to interrogation and to the extraction of information

(which in the context of torture is assumed to be also *the truth* by those who perform the torture in order to obtain information). However, this is not always the case in the context in which the tortures that occupy us take place. In fact, the use of torture as a means for obtaining a declaration seems to be the exception. As María Victoria Uribe and Elsa Blair have shown, torture is just one more step in the process of killing. It is just a part of the larger process of a massacre and, most importantly, almost nobody survives it. Torture in these cases does not come with the promise of salvation; it does not even involve moments of relief for declaration. No words are capable of stopping the process that begins at the moment that the victim is abducted and ends with the disposal of the body.

In fact, one could even claim that interrogation and torture are two separate practices in the context of massacres in Colombia. Even though Scarry admits that interrogation in and of itself is a part of the torture—and here we are reminded of the moment in *Los santos inocentes* when Heidi parodies an interrogation—in most cases the victims of a massacre are not even interrogated. Usually the executioners already have previously written lists of victims and know very well from the beginning who they will go after next. Even in *El deber de Fenster*, where we are told about declarations given under torture, interrogations are not the center of any of the instances of torture described in Daniel Arcila Cardona's testimony.

So what we are facing here is not a system of "justice" that uses torture as a means to unveil some hidden information. In fact, as we have seen, in most cases it is the randomness of the victims that actually gives the massacres most of their

power as political tools: their efficacy comes from the institution of a state of constant fear where anyone could be next. Even the threat of death—like *Los santos inocentes* emphasizes with the display of different warnings throughout the play—is enough in many instances to displace the entire population of a village, leaving the territory and those who decide to stay in it at the mercy of the (in all the cases presented here) paramilitaries.⁸⁶ The torture that is performed on the bodies of the victims of all of these massacres is rather a type of pure indulgence in the infliction of pain over someone else. As Wolfgang Sofsky puts it, “Institutionalized terror produces habitual perpetrators who do without reasons for their actions.” (Sofsky 2005, 225) It does not even need to be “justified” as a means of inquiry, and this particular form of extreme cruelty is precisely what has prompted scholars such as Blair and Uribe Alarcón to try to make sense of the particular “culture of violence” prevalent in Colombia.

In those instances in which these theatrical productions present actual declarations and testimonies as inscriptions of “the truth” (HH’s confession in *Los santos inocentes* and Arcila Cardona’s and others’ testimonies in *El deber de Fenster*),

⁸⁶ Even though massacres are not exclusive to paramilitary violence (guerrillas have used them as a war practice too), I believe there is a political purpose in dealing only with this violence in most of the theater that is produced nowadays in Colombia. Given the links that have been shown between paramilitary organizations and the national government, paramilitary violence has had less representation on the official media and is less openly discussed in the social realm. Individuals who openly denounce these practices are commonly exposed to threats and sometimes even disappearance, which has made it imperative to create new spaces to expose these truths. Theater is only one of them, if not the safest: in August 2011 several theater companies of the Bogotá received death threats from extreme right-wing groups on account of their work on human rights, which lead to massive protests in the city. For more on this, see <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/banda-criminal-amenaza-muerte-grupos-teatro-bogota/245537-3>.

they are never tied to the tortures presented or alluded to in the plays. Torture appears in all the cases presented here rather as another mechanism through which excess is repeated on the stage. And I believe it is worth highlighting the way in which the chosen mechanisms (a written list, a simple image, a written and read testimony) reveal the very impossibility of re-presentation and narration of the events they sprang from. As Avelar points out:

Torture produces truth in order to produce silence. It produces language so as to manufacture the absence of language. Torturers know that as long as a subject does not tell that experience, its tyranny is perpetuated. The dilemma of the tortured subject, then, is always one of representability. How can one relate that which is by definition designed to be unnarratable? (Avelar 2004, 46)

The power of these productions, as I have pointed out before, lies precisely in the way in which, by becoming almost like new instances of the act of torture (true theaters of cruelty, for actors and spectators alike) they manage to 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 for which languages and dictionaries are the battlefields (Avelar 2004, 49). 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 theater *as* performance (as opposed to theater as a text or script) can accomplish. Theater 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.

Each of these plays displays the notion of excess in different ways. In *Los santos inocentes*, the excess is brought on stage through the spectacle itself. By becoming a new instance of the festival it is based on, Mapa Teatro's aesthetics reproduces excess through overwhelming the senses of the people in the audience. The performance re-creates the confusion that is essential to both the festival and the massacre and involves the audience in it. As Rolf asserts, they intentionally avoided the construction of a clean and linear narrative that would have made it easier for the audience to understand what was happening, and opted instead for the creation of an experience close to (or at least as close as it could get for anyone who has never been a participant or witness to either event) the instance of massacre and festival. Generating an instance of experience means for Mapa Teatro the creation of a theater that deeply disturbs the audience on both individual and collective levels. There are no cuts or breaks between acts or scenes, there are no spaces for distraction during the play and there are no moments in which one sees the audience peacefully and passively watching what is happening in front of them. The festival, the birthday party and the massacre exceed the space of the stage and involve the audience in the event. They even exceed it physically through the objects that are thrown to the audience during the play. The spectacle of *Los santos inocentes* actually *touches* everyone in the theater, from actors to spectators to crew, in literal and symbolic ways.

If the notion of excess is present in *Los santos inocentes* through the imposition of spectacularity, perhaps the experience of *Homo Sacer* is the complete opposite: while the attention of the audience is maintained in the first through constant, overwhelming stimuli, in the latter it is the subtlety of every gesture, every movement, every image and sound that forces the spectators to sharpen their senses in order to be able to *perceive* every action. *Homo Sacer* points to the excess inherent in the actions it attempts to portray by reinstating the simplicity of human experience on the basic unit of the body. In this play every movement has been carefully choreographed, every object has been carefully selected and displayed as if in a tiny gallery of memory: the objects contained in fishbowls remind us of those displayed in museums as fragments of complex private and public histories. Every element in this performance displays a piece of something that has to be reconstructed by the audience through careful attention to what happens on the stage. Here the discomfort of the audience comes from the experience of an inescapable closeness to the actors facilitated by the distribution of the space as well as the display of naked and almost-naked bodies. The feeling of excess comes from the identification with the human essence of those bodies and objects on the stage: the effect of the performance is that actors stop being actors, not in order to become characters but in order to reveal themselves as human beings, as *any* human being, revealing to the spectator his and her own humanity and vulnerability.

If spectacle and the body are the means for the transmission of excess in these two plays, in *El deber de Fenster* it is the narration that will serve as mechanism to attain the excess effect. It is reasonable to assume that the audience that goes to the

theater to watch this production has some knowledge of what the play is about. In any event, the opening of the play makes it clear for everyone that the “story” consists of the reconstruction, through different kinds of archival evidence, of “case number 11007,” namely, the Trujillo massacre. However, nobody could possibly be prepared for what actually takes place in this play. As in the other two cases, the producers of this play avoided the construction of a linear narrative that would present the events it is based on as a “clean” story. Instead, the audience is forced to occupy the place of the researcher, to be exposed to every single piece of raw material and to face every piece of evidence before it has been “cleaned” in order to be presented to wide audiences. Everything runs smoothly when Fenster begins to read the testimony of Daniel Arcila Cardona and the “case” is nothing but a wooden box in the middle of the stage. But the testimony goes on, and one can only wish for it to stop at some point, before getting to the dirtier details of the massacre. But instead of stopping, the narrative becomes more and more intense as the audience, along with the witness, gets more and more involved in the story, and at some point the spectators realize that they will *have* to listen to it, whether they wish to do so or not. In fact, the producers are so aware of the excessiveness of the testimony, that Fenster can only respond to the details of the tortures by throwing up into a bucket.

One can only leave the theater feeling sick as well. As a witness in the footage and even Fenster say towards the end of the play, learning about those acts becomes like a disease that one cannot recover from, and it destroys the one who is attending to it as much as the one who has to live it. Even though the testimony is just a piece of paper, as is shown on the screen during the play, one is reminded constantly that

most likely the author of it, Daniel Arcila Cardona, was a victim of the same atrocities. While language, words, should make it easier to swallow this information than actual images of the deeds, the words themselves become extremely powerful tools for the transmission of the horror that is experienced by the witness and his relatives during and after the events. No matter how hard Fenster tries to make it stop, how many times he screams “¡no más!”, the witness will not stop until he’s done. *El deber de Fenster* lasts a little over two and a half hours with no interruption. From the beginning to the end, the audience has to sit through it and listen to the entire story whether they wish to do so or not. Even those who decide to leave the theater have to take it home with them. Torture acquires a different meaning when it stops being just a word to designate some remote and improbable event and becomes a detailed description of how a body is transgressed and destroyed.

Spectacle, body, text. Three different means to produce the same excess-effect. Three different strategies to approach similar real-life excesses on a stage. Three different mediums to touch the spectator, to move his fibers, to make him experience something in the realm of the real. Three different ways of turning the theater into an *event*. Three different ways in which specific private, personal memories are re-inscribed in the public realm.

2. Embodied Memories

Now, let us return to Elsa Blair and her claim about the unreality effect produced by the massiveness of the acts of horror and the resources to document them. While

she does not address this problem directly in her book, it is inevitable to wonder about the place of memory in the apprehension (or lack of it) of violent events on the part of the audiences that are exposed to these spectacles on a daily basis. I have shown how the spectacular character of massacres in the way they are portrayed by the media (which is, after all, the only way through which most of the population learn about them) render them improbable and impossible to apprehend and assume as true. But Blair leaves out of her analysis a no less important effect of the massiveness of information: the impossibility, on the part of the majority of the population, to remember. Now I would like to address the question about memory and the way in which theater deals with it.

The lack of historic memory on the part of the Colombian citizenship has been the center of numerous debates inside and outside of academic spaces. The lack of visibility and memory of violent acts makes it harder for the victims to make claims for justice when nobody seems to pay attention to their claims. In response to this situation, different governmental and non-governmental organizations have developed strategies to maintain the public memory of violence in Colombia. One of these initiatives was the creation of the “Semana por la memoria” that takes place every October in Colombia and that reached its fifth version in 2012.⁸⁷ Another important step taken by the central government was the creation, in 2011, of the “Centro de memoria histórica”. Within this institution, the “Grupo de memoria histórica” has been responsible for the research and publication of different reports

⁸⁷ In fact, *El deber de Fenster* was part of the program of events scheduled for the last “Semana por la memoria”, in October of 2012.

about specific massacres and other aspects of the war in Colombia. The first official report was that of the massacre of Trujillo, which is the core of the material on which *El deber de Fenster* was based. Since 2008 the GMH has produced 18 official reports, all of which can be freely accessed in full text on their website.⁸⁸

Despite the numerous efforts undertaken by the government and independent organizations to elaborate systematic, complete accounts of different acts of violence and inscribe them in the public memory of the citizenship, independent theater companies from all the regions of the country have actively worked on filling the gap left by the lack of official narratives about the conflict. In this context, theater has become a powerful tool for sharing experiences and testimonies of war. Therefore, theater in Colombia has, in many ways, become a theater of memory. But beyond this evident link between artistic productions in general and a commitment to speak to what is going on in the country, the theater that I examine here performs specific operations on the way in which the specific memory of violence works in the public realm. And even though this work is done in different ways, all of them are connected through particular elements of memory that are exclusive to theater.

“One can only remember through the body,” were Heidi Abderhalden’s words to describe her experience of the festival of the Holy Innocents in Guapi in preparation for the production of *Los santos inocentes*. This discovery, for her, was expressed through tears, like an undeniable bodily reality that cannot be fully expressed in

⁸⁸ <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co>

language. It is also a discovery of an impossibility: the impotence of any means of expression to portray the essence of embodied memory.

There is no theater without embodied memory. Moreover, there is no acting without embodied memory. Konstantin Stanislavski, who is considered the father of modern acting, elaborated a method for actors that consisted of a rigorous training in order to remember emotions. The Russian dramaturge believed that there is no theater, no possibility of communication between the actor and the spectator, without the effective transmission of emotions, and actors had to train themselves in order to be able to recreate, on stage, every possible kind of human feeling. A few decades after Stanislavski's death, Jerzy Grotowski developed a "theater laboratory" in Poland dedicated to the research of theater and acting. Based on his readings of Stanislavski and his own observations, Grotowski developed a method called "poor theater" that responded to easy spectacular resources with a renovated emphasis on the work of actors and actresses on stage. He believed that even though in some cases theater is a literary genre, the essence of theater lied in the actual performance, rendering the text secondary. Grotowski believed that even though emotions were the core of the work of the actor like Stanislavski had proposed, these emotions could only be remembered and portrayed through the body, and he developed a series of exercises meant to help actors remember and perform emotions through physical movement and facial expressions (Grotowski 1968).

Latin American theater, which became a movement on its own during the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s (Lamus Obregón 2010), has been deeply influenced by

the schools of Stanislavski and Grotowski, along with the postulates made, in the 1960s, by Brazilian dramaturge, director and theorist Augusto Boal. Contemporary to Grotowski, Boal however had to respond to a different reality in his native Brazil and the rest of the Latin American region. Inspired by Paulo Freire's postulates about the pedagogy of the oppressed, Boal constructed a system called "Teatro do Oprimido," a theater of the oppressed, designed to operate as a tool for the liberation of the oppressed masses.⁸⁹ His method was based on the same premise as Grotowski's, that the human body has an array of capabilities and that human beings are only aware of about a 10% of them. Based on Stanislavski's and Grotowski's postulates about embodied memory of emotions, Boal worked to return this memory to its most basic unit: sensorial experience. In order to do this, Boal developed a complex system for the training of actors and non actors in acute sensorial perception. His exercises consisted in the recreation of sensorial experiences and their expression through bodily movements and reactions (Boal 1992).

Looking at the craft of theater and the methods under which actors are trained, makes it easier to understand how theater is essentially an art of memory that locates the body at the center of the accumulation and expression of it. Actors have to train their bodies to remember in order to repeat and re-create human emotions

⁸⁹ Boal developed a series of strategies to empower people through theater by enabling them to construct narratives about their own stories and create possible worlds. Some of his exercises included the recreation of news as portrayed in newspapers, from different points of view, or the recreation of conflicts and their solutions. For more about the theater of the oppressed see Boal, Augusto. *Teatro do Oprimido e outras poéticas políticas*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1977.

and actions. Their very training constitutes a mnemotechnics centered on the body. Discipline and memory are the essence of good acting: without them theater would lose its capacity to act as a bridge for human communication, and 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 theater and other performative arts from the rest of the arts. I believe that it is precisely in that absolute presence where the effectiveness of theater lies. In the case of Colombia, theater is connected to memory not only in its essence, like every good theater should be, but also in its topics, in the narratives it inscribes in the public through performance. But beyond a recreation or portrayal of the memories of violence, the theater that occupies us here makes specific claims about the nature of memory itself. Let's examine what these claims are and how they are performed.

All the theatrical pieces presented in this dissertation deal in one way or another with the notion of memory. In *Los santos inocentes*, the underlying story for the construction of the play is the making of a "fictitious documentary" about the festival of the Holy Innocents in Guapi. In *Homo Sacer*, different testimonies of victims of the war appear as either fragments of stories that are told during the play by actors, or as images or objects related to said testimonies. In *El deber de Fenster*, memory constitutes Fenster's very *deber* or duty, and the play works as a recreation of the research process needed to write the story about the Trujillo massacre.

But all three plays also question the nature and sources of those memories, and it is important to highlight here that only in the case of *El deber de Fenster*, have the creators framed their work within the genre of “documentary theater.” There is, however, an urgency to tell specific stories and episodes of Colombian history in each of these plays, but none of them (except, again, for *El deber de Fenster*) shows an open intention to communicate a specific chapter of the national, official history of the country. After all, the histories “documented” in these three plays constitute histories of absences: absent people, absent evidences, absent memories, absent justice.

One of the things that I found most striking about these plays, when presented in front of Colombian audiences, was the fact that people seemed surprised by the events they refer to. For many of us (and I have to include myself in this group) it was as if we were learning about these massacres for the first time, as if some kind of truth had been revealed to us. However, this first shock is followed by another, no less intense one when we see, on the same stage, clippings from newspapers or footage from news shows that reveal that all of it has been public since the moment it was happening. In other words, we had all been attending to the “real” spectacle for years, but did not seem to notice until it was displayed for us in the space of the theater.

For Carlos Sepúlveda, director of the Teatro de Occidente, the purpose of making a theater that gives presence to individual stories and testimonies is precisely the recovery of memories that have been reduced to pieces and disappeared, just like

the bodies of the human beings to which they once belonged. *Homo Sacer* presents pieces of stories of the dead in order to restore them to life. In Sepúlveda's words, even the act of naming them is already a restitution: "Igual es que el solo hecho de nombrarlos, el solo hecho de evocarlos es una manera de traerlos a la vida, de recuperar su vida, de recuperar su memoria"⁹⁰. And by means of that exercise, the stage becomes an altar for memory, "es decir, como un altar para hacer de alguna manera reparación simbólica."⁹¹ In the case of this play, this altar-effect is reinforced with the objects displayed on stage. When I asked Sepúlveda about the objects in fishbowls placed on the edges of the stage, he told me that initially they had wanted to fill those fishbowls with water from the Magdalena River, but it became very hard to transport the water and preserve it in order to have it available for each performance. But even though the water in which the objects rested was just regular water, the idea was to make with them some kind of gallery of memory in which the objects looked as if they had been taken out of the river.

Regardless of the specifics, images of rivers are an important aspect in all three plays. In every talk that he gives, Carlos Sepúlveda likes to recall that rivers are the biggest mass graves in the country. In *El deber de Fenster*, images of a river are displayed on the small screens located to the right of the stage during most of the performance. While in the beginning of the play it is unclear why they are there, as Daniel Arcila Cardona's testimony develops it becomes increasingly clear that those

⁹⁰ Translation: "The very act of naming them, the very evocation is a way to bring them to life, to recover their life and their memory."

⁹¹ Translation: "In other words, like an altar in order to make, in a way, a symbolic restitution."

images are, too, references to the river as a mass grave, where the bodies of the victims of the massacres are thrown after undergoing a complex treatment in order to make them sink more easily. In *Los santos inocentes* the river also makes several appearances. In this case, the river is shown as both a border and a means of transportation in a land that, as we are told from the beginning, is connected through the rest of the region only through the rivers that connect with each other. In this production the images of the river are also important to portray daily life in Guapi: they are connected with images of fishing as a means of subsistence. The image of the river constitutes a place of reinstitution of memory in all three plays, and I would even assert that the idea of flowing that the river represents stands in contrast with the fragmented character of the narratives of the stories that in all cases resist all efforts at organization and systematization.

But if individual memories are re-inscribed in *Homo Sacer* through the act of naming, collective stories also have their appearance in the play. Let us remember the moment when, towards the end of it, an actress takes off the clothes of another and attaches newspaper clippings to her skin with the help of clothespins. The clippings, Sepúlveda told me, are all headlines of massacres and homicides collected during the time when the group was creating the play. The presentation of these news stories as simple clippings, in the case of this production, reinforces the idea of fragmentation that the entire play is centered around, and at the same time reminds the viewers that all those stories are already part of the public realm.

Media footage also makes repeated appearances in *Los santos inocentes*. In the case of Mapa Teatro's play, it is mixed with images taken by the group as part of the "fake documentary" in a way that makes the audience wonder which parts are "real" and which are staged. Rolf Abderhalden has asserted that the poetics that Mapa Teatro plays with lie precisely in that border between truth and fiction. In his own words, which I have quoted before,

nos parece que el texto o los textos, las posibles teatralidades o performatividades están justamente allí: como en un territorio donde no hay verdad, no hay mentira, la ficción es tan verdadera como mentirosa y la verdad es tan ficcional como... y la memoria también, la memoria no es una construcción objetiva, la memoria también es una ficción, la memoria también se construye, es subjetiva, la memoria colectiva es una memoria ficcional, está llena de mitologías que a su vez generan nuevas mitologías...⁹²

In a way, if the only space for theater is precisely the zone where the borders between fiction and truth are erased, it is because the "truth" that constitutes the core of the massacre, the pain, the suffering, is the unnamable. Rolf Abderhalden explains that the group toyed for a while with the idea of creating characters for "Alias HH" and other people who played an important role in the history of the

⁹² Translation: "We think that the text or texts, the possible theatricalities or performativities lie precisely there: in a territory where there is no truth, no lie. Fiction is as truthful as lying, and truth is fictional as well. And memory too, memory is not an objective construction, it is constructed, it is subjective, and collective memory is a fictional one, full of mythologies that in turn generate new mythologies."

massacres of the Naya River. However, they gave up on this idea when they realized that the victims, as he asserts, are unrepresentable, and so are characters like HH, whose personality would exceed all efforts of description and reconstruction. The victims become then the modern-day *santos inocentes*, the new holy innocents, killed, like the *matachín* reminds Heidi at the end of the festival, on account of their innocence, on account of nothing. Rolf acknowledges the implausibility of such events and characters and opted to show it precisely by emphasizing the confusion established by these events that makes the viewer/listener incapable of discerning truth from fiction. The only part of the play where “truth” is unquestionable is at the end, when the confession of HH is displayed on the screen, and in a way it is exactly at that moment when the theatricality dissolves opening a space for something else, something comparable to a ritual. Mapa Teatro’s poetics is, then an operation on truth that questions it from the impossibility to articulate it in any kind of language. In this case, it is in that impossibility where theater is born.

If Mapa Teatro’s artistic proposal is that theater is only made possible through destabilizing our notions of truth and fiction, the creators of *El deber de Fenster* take, in many ways, an opposite approach in order to show the improbable character of historical truth. Humberto Dorado faced the same dilemma as Sepúlveda and Abderhalden when he first encountered the testimony of Daniel Arcila Cardona in order to transform it into a play. How does one account for that horror? How does one present that story, that truth, in a way that does not transform it into narrative and therefore into fiction? And moreover, how to re-create the discovery that the creators had to make in a way that would reproduce the same process of recognition

and awareness of something that had been in front of their faces and yet had gone unnoticed for so long? Even if we only learn about the nature of Fenster's "deber" at the end of the play, the purpose is inscribed in the very title of the play. "La memoria para no olvidar, el sagrado deber de recordar, ese es mi deber" ("memory in order to not forget, the sacred duty to remember, that is my duty") is what Fenster declares at the end of the play, after having gone through all of the archival material that "el ingeniero" had sent to him and discovered something that had already become too much to bear. It is unlikely that Fenster could actually produce a documentary with the information, just as Dorado and Montero could not simply make a documentary on the Trujillo massacre to present it on the stage. As Fenster declares at the end of the play, the exposure to those documents has turned him into someone who bears a disease. The only possible acknowledgement of the facts consists of the absorption of them, by which memory is inscribed in the body just like a disease.

But *El deber de Fenster* does not just affirm the necessity of that discovery. It also imputes Fenster's duty on everyone else. And it does so by creating a theatrical *event*, an experience more than a presentation of the facts. The extensive display of media footage intensifies the surprise effect on the audience, who discovers that all the things presented to them had been in front of them for over twenty years. The spectacle created by the media is one of appearances but at the same time of disappearances. Images come and go, and so do voices and even documents, but it is at the moment that they are transmitted through a body that they acquire an undeniable and unavoidable presence. First, there is Fenster's body, the carrier of the disease, and then there is Daniel Arcila Cardona's body, the body of a

disappeared, the body of a ghost. No other medium of communication, written or visual or graphic or otherwise could perform the inscription that these two bodies perform in *El deber de Fenster*, as is proven by the fact that it is only after attending the performance and becoming part of that theatrical event that the audience is able to absorb those stories as well. What this play shows is that there is no real memory without an inscription (just like a testimony) and that a real inscription can only take place in the space of the theater, through one body on another. Therefore, by inscribing the events of Trujillo in the space of the theater and constructing with them an event that becomes, as I have shown, a new instance of the testimony itself, this play is telling us that there are truths that can only be fully communicated in the theater. More specifically, a theater that constitutes a real event in which truth is made *present* and palpable through the irrefutable presence of the bodies of the actors and the spectators.

Now, so far I have shown the operations that the theater I study here performs on our grasping of excess and our construction of memory. I have shown that these operations are only made possible by the creation of a theater that constitutes an *event* and that said event is only made possible by the undivided presence of actors and spectators alike. Moreover, I have asserted that this presence is complete only insofar as it is embodied. But there is one aspect about this process that remains to be explored and it is the ritual character of said events. In each instance, in each conversation with the creators and producers of these plays, words like “ritual” and “sacred” came up in reference to the function that theater must play in the face of

the history of violence that makes it necessary. In different ways, each of these plays acts like a ritual, so now let us turn our attention to the ritual aspects of these pieces.

3. Ritual Stages

What is a ritual? Different theorists of religion and the sacred have tried to understand the character and value of social events that seem to be different, separated from the rest of human existence and which display something of an other order—the sacred—through constituting an experience of it. In “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” Georges Bataille analyzes the function of ritual events and explores the role of the people who are especially trained to officiate at them and make their purpose happen. Bataille argues that rituals are at the same time expressions and foundational moments of the myths that keep societies together and express truths about existence that cannot be found in any other realm of social life:

Myth is born in ritual acts concealed from the static vulgarity of a disintegrated society, but the violent dynamic belonging to it has no other object than the return to a lost totality. Even if it is true that the repercussions are critical and transform the face of the world (whereas the action of parties vanishes in the quicksand of contradictory words), its political repercussion can only be the result of existence. That such projects are vague is only the expression of how disconcertingly new is the direction necessary at the paradoxical

moment of despair. (Hollier 1988, 23)

There are a few key concepts in this quote from Bataille that deserve some further analysis for our understanding of the ways in which theater acts as a ritual. First, the fact that they happen in a space that is concealed from everyday reality. Bataille emphasizes that the reality he refers to is actually a disintegrated society. Second, that the ritual acts as a space of restitution of a lost totality in the face of that disintegration; and third, that the space of the ritual enables a transformation that goes beyond that restitution of totality and that springs from a feeling of despair. It is also interesting to note that here Bataille distinguishes between rituals and other public events such as parties. This distinction will be important when we get into a more detailed analysis of the ritual aspects of *Los Santos Inocentes*, but for now let us explore another view on this.

Émile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, offers a detailed analysis of every single aspect that constitutes religion in a society regardless of the specific character of said religion. His book is still a point of reference for anyone who desires to understand religious life. Durkheim explored the different aspects and functions of rites through numerous examples coming from diverse societies. He asserts that every rite institutes a belief or system or beliefs and that it is in those beliefs that one can understand the object of a specific rite (Durkheim 1995, 34). But there is one more element of Durkheim's understanding of rites that is fundamental for the analysis I want to make here, and it is the presence of the sacred in these instances of religious life: "A rite can have sacredness; indeed there is no rite that

does not have it to some degree. There are words, phrases, and formulas that can be said only by consecrated personages; there are gestures and movements that cannot be executed just by anyone.” (Durkheim 1995, 35) From this perspective, the sacred is not only *contained* in the ritual; it also *happens* in and through it. And in the different descriptions of the sacred that I have presented along this dissertation, it is important to remember that in none of these cases does the sacred have to be associated with a specific divinity, but it is rather something that either has already been separated from the world of use or becomes separate precisely by means of a ritual.

These two definitions remind us of Artaud’s ideas about theater and its effects. In comparing the theater with the plague, he asserts: “this similarity between the action of the plague which kills without destroying the organs and the theater which, without killing, provokes the most mysterious alterations in the mind of not only an individual but an entire populace” (Artaud n.d., 26). For Artaud, a total theater had to be capable of producing an experience so intense that everyone involved in it would be transformed afterwards. As I showed in more detail in chapter 1, this event also had to constitute a revelation of some kind of human truth that in the end is made visible through the same process it is constructed: on the stage.

But I would like to highlight another aspect of the descriptions offered by Durkheim and Bataille on the role of the officiant in rituals. This last description echoes in many ways what I presented in the previous section about the training of an actor. In many ways (and both Grotowski and Artaud would agree with this), the

training of an actor is very similar to that of a sorcerer or a magician. Every gesture, every movement, every word and its intonation must be closely and carefully watched and rehearsed in order to make the performance effective. Actors are not just trained to imitate or portray realities; they are trained to construct them. Jerzy Grotowski criticized Artaud for having elaborated a theater that the Pole considered impossible. For Grotowski, Artaud's writings on theater place it at the level of magic and he resents the French theorist for leaving his postulates in the realm of pure theory and never developing an actual method for actors, where Grotowski saw the very essence of doing theater. In response to that lack of precision on the part of Artaud, Grotowski asserted that "whatever is imperceptible demands precision." (Grotowski 1968, 118) And it is perhaps in this assertion that the connection between theater and ritual becomes most clear: in dealing with the imperceptible, with a world that is separated from the visible and tangible, both the priest and the actor must develop an absolute precision.

So not only does theater act as a ritual, instituting a ritual space in which something happens that belongs to an order other than that of daily life, but the actors' role even is to be able to make that event happen through their presence and actions. I believe that good theater must in every case institute another level of reality and perception. It must completely involve every individual that makes part of it—from actors to spectators—and create a social space whose essence lies in what is created and communicated through the undivided presence of every single person involved. But how does theater function as a ritual in more concrete ways? Or more precisely, how do the plays presented here work as rituals? And what is the

nature of that sacred that they all seem to be pointing at?

I have shown how Carlos Sepúlveda, director of *Homo Sacer*, attempted to create a theater that would act as an instance of the sacred. In his project, there are two complementary—if contradictory—ideas of the sacred taken from Giorgio Agamben: one that assumes the sacredness of an individual in its social death and by consequence its exposure to individual death, and another that locates the sacredness of the same individual in its very life and existence. The result is a production that responds to the loss of value of life in the face of massacres with a restitution of sacredness to individual victims' life, voice and body. This restitution, in the case of this particular production, works through the display of bodies and stories meant to establish a connection between every single spectator and the actors, which in turn produces an identification with the victims of the war whose existence is brought to the stage through their remaining fragments.

Homo Sacer focuses on a very special aspect of the violence that is performed on the bodies of the victims of massacres: fragmentation. In the case of the play, the fragmentation operates in different levels of the performance, from broken mirrors that fragment the images of actors and spectators to pieces of stories, to allusions to pieces of bodies that preserve only minor details of an individual's totality. Through a fragmented narrative and the absence of dialogues that are replaced with pieces of stories and descriptions, the play is committed to the restoration of the totality of human life. Through revealing the horrors of the war and the ways in which these horrors manifest themselves in the most simple unit of a human body, *Homo Sacer* institutes a space that puts everyone in touch with the experience of dying and

disappearing. Every single aspect of the play has been carefully choreographed in advance, so that the actor's role can become like that of a priest in a ritual: without explicit references to instances of torturing and killing, these realities are made present through gestures and movements. The violence, the death, and the space of death (the mass grave) are brought into existence by means of performance and the result is, in my view, an actual restoration of sacredness to life. A true instance of the institution of totality, an effective (and palpable) approach to another order of things, a different level of reality.

I have shown how the aesthetics of *Homo Sacer* and *Los santos inocentes* work almost in opposition to each other. If the first institutes a ritual space by bringing us close to an experience of death, the latter brings the ritual-effect to the stage through the creation of a carnivalesque performance that reveals the excesses that bring together joy and pain in spaces such as festivals. I have pointed out how I see the relation between Mapa Teatro's production and the carnival in different levels: as a system, as an event and as an aesthetics. *Los santos inocentes* reveals the essence of human life through bringing together different instances that constitute markers of life's cycles. First, there is a birthday that coincides with a religious holiday and a carnival that manifests the identity as well as the historic and mythic foundational narratives of a population. In the celebration of the actual carnival, we have the various festive elements that constitute social life: games, music, dancing and unrestrained license. The carnival is mixed with the portrayal of essential activities for the maintenance of life in Guapi that revolve around the river: fishing and navigation. Lastly, we have different indicators of violent and natural death

brought on stage by scenes of butchery and, of course, the presence of “Alias HH” and his testimony, along with the declarations of the man at the beginning of the play describing the long history of violence to which the town has been subject since the foundation of the nation.

The play engages the audience in the events that take place on stage on different levels, by making them part of the party that is being celebrated. Up to the end of the play, the audience is part of the festival along with its interruptions: the joy of the actors is theirs too, and so is their confusion with the mixture of violent and joyous, real and mythical presences in the celebration. But the moment when the ritual is inscribed in all its wholeness is at the end of the play when, almost by magic, all the elements of the festival and the massacre come together in the body of a single actor. It is at the end of the play where the idea of the sacrifice of innocent people, which is the main motif of both the play and the holiday, is finally apprehended in its true meaning. Heidi repeats the motto “por inocente, por inocente, por inocente” three times as if it were some kind of conjuration, at the end of which her voice is overpowered by the sound of the whip against the floor and Julián appears on stage, still wearing his costume and mask—even though by how they are almost destroyed—holding the whip in his hands, throwing it aimlessly against the floor. The third part is the appearance, on the screen at the top of the stage, of the confession of “Alias HH” which reduces an endless list of victims to just that: a simple list.

I believe this last scene is the place in the play in which that restoration of totality essential to the ritual really takes place. Not only because in many ways it brings

together the totality of the play and the festival in one action, but it also constitutes an expression of the totality of the horror that the play hinted at in so many instances, if only to expose how it goes unnoticed precisely because it gets lost in the midst of so many spectacles. It is at this point where a *revelation* takes place: horror is revealed in all its power through human pain. The truth about the fates of the victims is revealed in a list that displays details about how, when and where they were killed as well as the locations of some of the bodies. Something deeply human is revealed in the conjunction of festival and horror, something that cannot be articulated in language but can only be effectively expressed through the bodily presence of an actor on stage, through his gestures and movement, his hard breathing, his exhaustion, his horror. Moreover, the action shows that language is pointless when what needs to be expressed can only be felt, it can only be apprehended through the skin. Like a priest or a sorcerer, Julián makes present and real something that can only be made palpable through a body and its closeness to those around it.

So both *Homo Sacer* and *Los santos inocentes* reveal, in the events they constitute, some universal truths about human existence through mechanisms that, even though essential to theater, belong as well to the world of ritual, and *El deber de Fenster* is no exception to this work. Even though this last play, perhaps because of the materials it uses and the ways in which it displays them, accomplishes this effect in more subtle ways than the other two. Just like in the Teatro de Occidente's piece, in *El deber de Fenster* objects play a primordial role in the *mise-en-scène* and acquire an almost sacred character in the work they perform within the entire

production. I believe that the two most important ones are first the box, placed in the middle of the stage and marked with the number assigned to the “case” of the Trujillo massacre and emphasized through a direct light that makes it visible during the entire play, and second the table, located at the front and towards the left of the stage, along with two of the objects it contains: the sculpture of the hand and the dictionary. The producers claim that the hand is meant to represent something like the hand of god: on the one hand as an almighty hand that has the power of making anything happen, and on the other as a constant witness to everything that takes place around it, almost like a supernatural judge. Fenster uses the dictionary at different times of the play in order to look up words related to the testimony, the most important of which is the definition of “párroco” (parish), which leads him to a play on words that reveals the superfluous character of language and word definitions. *Párroco*, an officiant, an innocent victim, whose last speech is brought to the stage towards the end of the play. The same *párroco* whose last words echoed Christ’s own in saying that he would offer his own life in sacrifice if pouring his blood would stop the pouring of the rest of his people’s blood. The *párroco* whose death became a sacrifice.

El deber de Fenster restores integrity to human life through a claim for justice. The use of the testimony and the display of the different personages and organizations that participated in the investigation of the massacre are efforts to establish a truth in the public realm in the name of justice, and this is emphasized at the end of the play when we are told that most of the individuals responsible for these deaths are still free. The *revelation* that takes place in this play is that of a truth that, despite the

many efforts to erase it, strives to come out and be told. Perhaps the moment when this becomes most evident is when the ghost of Daniel Arcila Cardona appears on the stage. Up to the point of his appearance, his testimony had been read and narrated by both Fenster and the voice of the actor speaking from another world. His appearance shows the need to return and declare something, in the name of justice. His life is affirmed through the presence of his ghost, almost like a talking corpse, a voice that reaches us from the realm of the dead.

What *El deber de Fenster* accomplishes is the creation of a space where the world of the living and the world of the dead can—an in fact *must*—come together in the name of a truth that must be found and communicated. Just like in *Homo Sacer*, the moment when the dead reclaims his voice and is able to appear in a space that no longer belongs to the every-day world is the moment when the sacredness is restored to his life and his being. Moreover, the very contents of that truth that needs to be told acquire a sacred aspect in this play. Let us remember Fenster's words towards the end of the play: "La memoria para no olvidar; el sagrado deber de recordar. Ese es mi deber: recordar" ("Memory in order not to forget, the sacred duty to remember. That is my duty: to remember"). Memory becomes something of the sacred order by means of reinstating it in the realm of the public, but in this case it is not just any passive memory: memory becomes an action, a duty, something that is at the same time made possible, produced and revealed in the space of the performance. And even further: it is a memory that cannot just be *told*, it is a memory that *happens*, that acts in the ritual-like space of the theater. It is a memory that has to be transmitted through means that escape language, through the

presence of two bodies on a stage, through the return of a ghost that comes back even in his return only means having to live once more the same horrors he once lived, feel the pain and the fear again, and die, once more, in front of everyone who has come to see the spectacle.

Now it is easy to understand how all the plays analyzed in this dissertation construct ritual spaces that open up the possibility for a revelation to happen. Moreover, even though the essence of said revelations belong to the realm of public memory and constitute claims for justice, what this theater shows us is that there is something about memory that can only be expressed through bodies in the context of that special event that theater creates. In these cases, the memories that constitute the material for the plays constitute memories that exceed all language along with its efforts of systematization. The memories and the excesses they carry are located on individual bodies that unfortunately are no longer present to communicate them. The role that this type of theater assumes, then, is that of offering new bodies for the inscription of those truths and communicating them through the creation of a space in which that inscription passes from one body to another, and also from the individual body of the actor to the collective one of the social.

I would add that the theater that occupies us here not only creates a specific language and space in which it can be expressed and inscribed, but also transforms the audience in ways that are not simply articulated in language. There are things that only theater can do. In these three cases, the space of the theater, which extends from the stage into the space occupied by 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. But 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 lied in the place of death. But at the same time, it is a memory that is inscribed on bodies and that can only be transmitted through the contact between human, live bodies.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, devised a philosophical method that would reveal the essence of human existence in the world based on his subjective experience of it. He explored the principles of what he called “intersubjectivity”, which would make possible human communication as the coming together of two or more such subjectivities. I believe that theater—good theater, at least—is already a repository of said phenomenological truths, and that the only difference between the philosopher and the actor is that the actor *understands*. Theater turns phenomenology and intersubjectivity into a praxis, a way of living.

As a praxis, theater is *doing*, its essence is action, as Artaud liked to remind us repeatedly in his writings. In the specific cases of the productions presented in this dissertation, what theater *does* is the inscription of a memory on bodies by means of other bodies. And it does so by re-producing the instance of violence that makes those memories necessary in the first place. It transforms the audience into a witness, but it does so by transporting the spectator to the place of the victim. It

produces a transformation by instating a reality that, in its embodied character, becomes undeniable. A total theater that sharpens our senses and makes us vulnerable in order to expose us to some truth that we are meant to absorb through our skins and carry within our bodies. A revelation, a re-inscription, an excess.

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