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Self, Esteemed: Contemporary Auto/biographical Theatre in Latin America

By

Julie Ann Ward

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Francine Masiello, Co-chair

Professor Candace Slater, Co-chair

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Spring 2013



## Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Francine Masiello, Co-chair

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In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary auto/biographical theatre questions, on the one hand, the concept of the self as an individual with clearly defined borders between “I” and other and, on the other, the very possibility of representing reality onstage. Contemporary Latin American theatre is saturated with auto/biographical plays in which onstage actors play their real-life selves and family members, representing events from history as well as their own personal stories. Looking at 21<sup>st</sup>-century plays from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, I also note that auto/biographical representation in the theatre allows for an understanding of the life story as a collective endeavor rather than the work of a lone individual. This type of dramatic representation positions the theatrical work as one among many sources of truth.

By insisting on the reality of portrayed events, auto/biographical plays ask the theatregoer to accept the “true” nature of the content and, simultaneously, the fiction of the theatre. In the opening chapter, an overarching theoretical introduction, I draw on auto/biography studies, *testimonio* criticism, documentary film theory and the concept of postdramatic theatre to examine the relationship between director/author and actor/witness. The actor, by playing the role of him- or herself, creates an autobiography through the signs of the theatre: voice, gesture, language, etc. However, the director/author (often one and the same person) plays the part of biographer by arranging the actor’s words and designing their activity onstage. Over the next four chapters I analyze the strategies employed in contemporary plays – including works by Argentine, Brazilian and Mexican playwrights (Lola Arias, Márcio Freitas, Christiane Jatahy, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, Gabino Rodríguez, and Vivi Tellas) – for creating new auto/biographical pacts between spectator and play.

By placing the biographed actor onstage, the plays ask the spectator to believe that their version of the truth is, in some way, unmediated. The fact that the onstage body is the same one that experienced the presented events gives the production immediacy and a sense of being “true”. At the same time, however, the theatrical apparatus as a whole forces audiences to recognize the hand that the directors and authors have in relaying that “truth.” Directors and authors often interview their subjects and use their exact words, in an edited form, as the basis for their scripts. Similarly, spectators must recognize the collaboration that occurs in any theatrical production

between various crew members, actors, director, and the audience itself. The very nature of the theatre precludes the possibility of the unmediated autobiography that tantalizes the audience.

Chapter two deals with the treatment of the concept of truth in documentary theatre, by looking at various critics' use of the term "truth" and its role in Jatahy's play *A Falta Que Nos Move*. Chapter three demonstrates the way that so-called verbatim theatre fetishizes testimonial language, separating the original event from the language used to speak about it, with Freitas' *Sem Falsidades*. Chapter four examines the representation of performers' family members in auto/biographical plays, focusing on Lagartijas' *El rumor del incendio* and Arias' *Mi vida después*. The final chapter considers the ethics of the representation of the real, analyzing Rodríguez' *Montserrat*. By putting the actor/witness onstage and forming a pact with the audience in which truth and fiction coexist, these plays sketch out new ways of understanding authorship, auto/biographical authority. The possibilities of theatre itself -- what it can potentially represent and how it interacts with reality -- are expanded in contemporary Latin American auto/biographical theatre.

To the memory of Aline Jackson.

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## Introduction

*¿por la Reforma Carmen me decía  
 “no pesa el aire, aquí siempre es octubre”,  
 o se lo dijo a otro que he perdido  
 o yo lo invento y nadie me lo ha dicho?  
 Octavio Paz, Piedra de sol*

In the little, black-box theatre Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, on the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City, a small audience watches as three actors read from the Mexican constitution, reenact guerrilla actions and government repression that took place forty years earlier using toy soldiers and a fish tank, and recite lines from a woman’s personal archive of letters and diaries. The audience is given to believe that the main character, Comandante Margarita, was a real, live person whose political consciousness awakened from her contact with the teachers’ union in northern Mexico, and who spent time in prison as a result of her participation in guerrilla activities. At the end of the play, Luisa Pardo, playing Margarita, smokes a cigarette and talks the audience through her post-revolutionary life, naming lovers, children, and workplaces.

When she arrives at the name of her daughter, “La Luisita”, born in 1983, my heart stops. I know that Luisa is the name of the actress playing Margarita, and had taken note that she was born in 1983 when I read the program, because that is the year that I was born, too. Confirming my suspicions, Luisa Pardo makes unnerving eye contact with me as she tells the audience that Margarita died of lung cancer, that she is Luisita, her daughter. I was the unsuspecting, marveled spectator the play was meant to surprise. Pardo made unflinching eye contact with me as she revealed her relationship to Margarita and, I felt, registered my growing realization that what I had just witnessed was not a fiction against the backdrop of reality, but a true-to-life biography. The sensation upon understanding that Pardo had been playing out her own mother’s life was gut-wrenching, as though I had been insensitive as an audience member, silently watching a reenactment of torture or listening to her private letters being read in public.

I had never seen anything like it, and as I became more and more interested in the questions the play provoked (Is it an autobiography or a biography, or somehow both? Should inherited memories be considered part of one’s own patrimony? How does the play communicate its “reality” to the audience?), I learned of other contemporary Latin American theatre practitioners who are proposing their own answers to the questions: Lola Arias (Argentina), Márcio Freitas (Brazil), Christiane Jatahy (Brazil), Gabino Rodríguez (Mexico), Vivi Tellas (Argentina), Daniel Veronese (Argentina), Mariana Villegas (Mexico), Patricia Zangaro (Argentina), among others. Throughout Latin America the theatre has become a forum for staging life stories, many of which are united by trauma, absence, and loss. The stage becomes a point of contact between the personal and the political, the present and the past, and fiction and reality.

In particular, I became interested in those plays in which an actor plays him or herself, convincing the audience that the events represented are “real.” The mediation of writing, interviewing, researching, and rehearsing is often hidden because the audience makes a one-to-one equivalence between the character and the historical person. The actor’s body becomes a site of erasure: erasing authorship, erasing theatricality.

This erasure, however, is misleading. The mechanism of the theatre, with its cooperation between director, actors, and audience and the relationship between text and performance, makes the transmission of one’s autobiography anything but direct. That mediation and its implications

for the representation of the real, especially one's own personal reality, onstage, are the subject of this dissertation.

Carol Martin defines "theatre of the real" as "a wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical" (*Theatre of the Real* 5). In this study I designate the particular examples of theatre of the real in which the reality being recycled is the personal history of the onstage actors as auto/biographical theatre. The term is problematic because, while the actors may be speaking in the first person about themselves, as in autobiographical narrative mode, their words have undergone a process of edition that strips them from their original source.

In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary auto/biographical theatre questions, on the one hand, the concept of the self as an individual with clearly defined borders between "I" and other and, on the other, the very possibility of representing reality onstage. Contemporary Latin American theatre is saturated with auto/biographical plays in which onstage actors play their real-life selves and family members, representing events from history as well as their own personal stories. Looking at 21st-century plays from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, I also note that auto/biographical representation in the theatre allows for an understanding of the life story as a collective endeavor rather than the work of a lone individual. This type of dramatic representation positions the theatrical work as one among many sources of truth.

By insisting on the reality of portrayed events, auto/biographical plays ask the theatregoer to accept the "true" nature of the content and, simultaneously, the fiction of the theatre. In the opening chapter, I draw on auto/biography studies, *testimonio* criticism, documentary film theory and the concept of postdramatic theatre to examine the relationship between director/author and actor/witness. The actor, by playing the role of him- or herself, creates an autobiography through the signs of the theatre: voice, gesture, language, etc. However, the director/author (often one and the same person) plays the part of biographer by arranging the actor's words and designing their activity onstage. Over the next four chapters I analyze the strategies employed in contemporary plays – including works by Argentine, Brazilian and Mexican playwrights (Lola Arias, Márcio Freitas, Christiane Jatahy, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, Gabino Rodríguez, and Vivi Tellas) – for creating new auto/biographical pacts between spectator and play.

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Chapter Two deals with the treatment of the concept of truth in documentary theatre, by looking at various critics' use of the term "truth" and its role in Jatahy's play *A Falta Que Nos Move* 'The Absence that Moves Us.' Chapter Three demonstrates the way that so-called verbatim theatre fetishizes testimonial language, separating the original event from the language used to speak about it, with Freitas' *Sem Falsidades* 'Without Makeup.' Chapter Four examines the representation of performers' family members in auto/biographical plays, focusing on Lagartijas' *El rumor del incendio* 'The Rumor of the Fire,' and Arias' *Mi vida después* 'My Life After.' The

final chapter considers the ethics of the representation of the real, analyzing Rodríguez' *Montserrat*. By putting the actor/witness onstage and forming a pact with the audience in which truth and fiction coexist, these plays sketch out new ways of understanding authorship, and auto/biographical authority. The possibilities of theatre itself -- what it can potentially represent and how it interacts with reality -- are expanded in contemporary Latin American auto/biographical theatre.

This study joins several theoretical discussions to approach auto/biographical theatre. Documentary film theory, auto/biographical studies, criticism on testimonio, and theories of postdramatic theatre inform my analysis of authorship in auto/biographical theatre. Contemporary discussions of theatre of the real tend to focus on European and English-language examples; however, the genre is of increasing importance in Latin America. The nature of the relationship between director/author and actor/subject can be likened to the relationship between compiler and witness in testimonio narratives.

The particularly Latin American cultural tradition of testimonio lends significant theoretical solutions to some of the problems arising in auto/biographical theatre. The genre is generally made up of narratives produced through the relationship between an author or witness who testifies about their life story and an editor that transcribes the oral history. Its challenges to Western notions of authorship, authority, and "truth" can be seen in the critical debates of the U.S. academy of the 1980s. Very similar questions, concerning the aesthetics and ethics of representing the truth, as well as the im/possibility of doing so, inspire the present study on contemporary theatre. By bringing testimonio into the discussion as well as putting a Latin American body of work into dialogue that has been either ignored or treated individually by scholars and critics, this dissertation offers a perspective on a Latin American theatrical tendency that complicates notions of authorship.

The works discussed here all originate in the 21st century, and are the products of some of the most important theatre practitioners in Latin America. Vivi Tellas' *Mi mamá y mi tía*, '*My Mom and My Aunt*,' (2003) is one of many examples of her *Archivos* 'Archives' project, in which she stages non-actors in plays about their lives. The possessive *mi* of the title refers to Tellas, giving her a first-person perspective that frames the play even as her mother and aunt are its protagonists, speaking about their own lives.

Christiane Jatahy, a pioneer of theatre of the real in Brazil, plays with the audience's perception of the possibilities of staging reality in plays like *A Falta Que Nos Move, ou, Todas as Histórias São Falsas* '*The Absence that Moves Us, or, All Stories are False*' (2005), part of a trilogy of plays that incorporate the audience, the theatre's physical surroundings, and the biographies of the actors. Also in Brazil, Márcio Freitas experiments with the relationship between the dramaturge and the actor/subjects, making his editorial manipulation obvious to the audience in plays like *Sem Falsidades* (2011).

Lola Arias' 2009 biodrama, *Mi vida después*, enjoyed immense critical success, a three-year run, and invitations to festivals all over the world. The play, which chronicles the lives of six actors born in the 1970s and their parents' lives during the military dictatorship in Argentina, is an excellent example of the double-acting auto/biography in theatre. The actors are simultaneously communicating their autobiographies as well as biographing their parents; meanwhile, Arias' role in compiling their stories is neatly hidden.

The Mexican theatre company Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol is another heavy hitter in the world of theatre of the real in Latin America. Their play *El rumor del incendio* (2010) is a documentary theatre piece that draws from history, political records, and personal archive to tell

the story of the guerrilla in Mexico in the 1960s. As I mention above, the main character, Margarita, turns out to be the real-life mother of the actress represents her, Luisa Pardo, who plays herself at the end of the play to drive this point home.

One of Lagartijas' members, Gabino Rodríguez, explores the ethics and responsibilities of auto/biographical theatre in his 2013 play *Montserrat*. The play portrays Rodríguez' search for his dead mother, whom he suspects has actually just disappeared or gotten lost. By providing documentary evidence for both her death as well as her supposed survival, Rodríguez points to the audience's desire to believe in the reality of documentary plays as well as his own desire for an alternate version of his life story, the one in which he loses his mother.

All of these plays provide distinct examples of the relationship between author and subject in Latin American auto/biographical theatre, the theme of the first chapter. Drawing from the diverse theoretical fields mentioned above, I develop a framework for thinking about the plays as auto/biographical at all, given the complicated relationship between the author/compiler and the actor/subject.

Chapter Two is a study of the way that documentary theatre practitioners and critics conceive of the idea of "truth" in the theatre. I use Jatahy's *A Falta Que Nos Move* as a case study, looking at the way that its characters goad the audience into doubting and deciding whether the play's content is true or false.

In Chapter Three I look at the treatment of language in auto/biographical theatre, focusing on *Sem Falsidades*. By offering up the verbatim transcript of an interview for the audience in place of the real, I argue that auto/biographical plays fetishize language. The audience, as the fetishist in the Freudian sense, comes to accept and desire the subject's staged language as a substitute for reality.

The question of the limits of the auto/biographical subject is at the forefront in Chapter Four, which examines *Mi vida después* and *El rumor del incendio*. By representing both themselves and their parents, the actors in the play trouble the notion of self and auto/biography, stretching their limits to include inherited memories and imagined scenarios. The insistence on the reality of the stories being told, when combined with the impossibility of representing the absent parents, challenges the documentary genre.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I examine *Montserrat* and the way that it questions the ethics, responsibilities, and possibilities of representing the real onstage. By presenting verifiable facts alongside a seemingly documented fiction, the play forces the audience to recognize its own desire for a good story, albeit at the cost of faithfulness to reality. The documentary genre depends, therefore, not only on the good faith of its creators, but on that of audiences as well.

## Acknowledgements

Just as even an auto/biography cannot be staged without collaboration, the lonely enterprise of the dissertation is also dependent on many interactions and relationships. I would like to thank Dr. Francine Masiello, my advisor, whose eagle-eye reading, advice, and cheer throughout this process have been invaluable. To Dr. Candace Slater, also my advisor, I am grateful for her honest feedback and for not letting me lose sight of the craft of writing. I thank Dr. Natalia Brizuela for her insightful suggestions and support. I also appreciate Anne Walsh's participation as reader on the dissertation committee.

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## Chapter 1: The Artisans of Aura: Authorship in Auto/biographical Theatre

In this chapter I will analyze theories of authorship in auto/biographical theatre. Whom should we consider to be the author of a play when all of its words come from someone else? How can someone be the “author” of someone else’s life story? In the cases of interview-based plays, does the interviewer somehow gain ownership of the interview’s content? When actors play themselves do they have the authority to speak for their family members and other participants in their life stories? The objective of this chapter is to define a theory of authorship in auto/biographical theatre. My approach is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Far from attempting to lock contemporary theatre into a neat category, I rather intend to pull back the curtain, as it were, on the collaborative and sometimes fraught relationship between author and subject in this particular subgenre.

As documentary film theory has taken it upon itself to identify and describe the “documentary voice”, this chapter will describe the authorial agency at work in the plays and show what they have in common, and what their differences tell us about authority. This is important because, as we will see, when actors play themselves onstage there is more at stake than the quality of the performance. They risk losing important relationships and, in some cases, incurring legal ramifications.<sup>1</sup> Even as they lay it all on the line, however, they are mediated not only by the performance but by the director/dramaturge’s hand on their words. The audience can easily be led to believe that the actors onstage and their stories are unmediated.

It is precisely this latter situation that makes an analysis of authorship in auto/biographical theatre an important critical task. We are long past Lyotard’s grand narratives; however, there is something seductive in the constant displacement of authorship that would lull even the savviest audience into ignoring the director or author’s hand in arranging the “true” stories. And beyond the recognition of this agency, for its own sake, issues of intellectual property are also affected by a conception of authorship. The importance of authority comes into play when, as occurred with Arias this year, those actors and their life stories are shown to be commonplace.

In October of 2012 Arias premiered a new play, *El año en que nací* ‘*The Year I was Born,*’ which was the result of a workshop in which Chileans born in the 1970s turned up to tell the stories of their parents during Pinochet’s dictatorship. If it sounds familiar, that’s because Arias used the concept on which she based the hugely successful *Mi vida después* (2009) to create *El año en que nací*, provoking upset in the cast of *Mi vida después* and disparaging characterizations of her work as a franchise. It is when a dramaturge takes the life stories of the other to such an extreme as to claim authorship over them that the significance of auto/biographical authority in the theatre can clearly be seen.

While Benjamin discusses the mechanical reproduction of artwork in his familiar essay, many of his thoughts apply to the present situation, albeit a physical reproduction of experience rather than a mechanical one:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity,

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<sup>1</sup> See the case of Vanina Falco who, in *Mi vida después*, speaks of the fact that her father was a secret policeman during the Argentine military dictatorship and appropriated the baby whom Falco grew up considering to be her brother. For the first time in Argentine history, a child was allowed to testify against her parent in the trial. This ruling was based on the fact that Falco was discussing the case in a popular theatrical work, and had no real relationship with her father.

the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. (Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction")

The idea that an object's authenticity is everything that it might possibly transmit, from its beginning or creation on, can be likened to the situation of the auto/biographing actor in Arias' plays.

The actor is, then, being reproduced onstage; by participating in the reproduction, i.e., acting out scenes from one's own historical testimony, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the actor is both the object of reproduction and the reproduction, but not necessarily the hand operating the machinery of reproduction. In this sense the actor's authority is jeopardized, as Benjamin states: the dramaturge who orchestrates this onstage reproduction of the actor's experience affects the historical testimony. All the while, because the actor/object is implicit in its own reproduction, it is easy for the dramaturge to be effaced from the equation.

Another of Benjamin's statements sheds light on why the actors in *Mi vida después* might be so upset at the advent of *El año en que nací*. In discussing that missing piece known as the aura, which is stripped from the object upon its reproduction, he writes that "[. . .] the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (Benjamin). Looking at the Arias case through this lens allows us to observe the way that the actors' own reproduction of themselves, night after night, a plurality of copies, has been understood as maintaining the aura of uniqueness. However, when Arias reproduces the concept of the play, the actors become aware of their detachment from that uniqueness.

This brings me to a subtlety in which I differ with Benjamin. In comparing the film actor and the stage actor, he writes that

[. . . the film actor] does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed. (Benjamin, "The Work of Art")

In the case of auto/biographical theatre, the audience really has a choice to make. The theatre audience might identify with the actor, as the performance is being experienced in person. However, it must be kept in mind that, just as the camera focalizes the film's narrative, the dramaturge focalizes the auto/biographical play's.

The audience that identifies with the actor has an experience more akin to that of a cult, in Benjamin's terms; the audience that recognizes the dramaturge's agency as the focalizer of the play, on the other hand, "tests" the play's hypotheses. It is this difference that is at the crux of the present chapter: In order to approach the plays critically, to test them, we must identify the authorial agency at work in them. As a manner of answering the question of authorship and authority in auto/biographical documentary theatre, in this chapter I will first look to various theoretical fields for concepts that can aid our understanding. I will then turn to examples the authors themselves provide of their own concepts of authorship.

The question of authorship within documentary theatre can be informed by various related fields. Of especial interest in this chapter will be theories of auto/biography, documentary

film, testimonio, and postdramatic theatre. Each of these addresses an aspect of the question at hand, while not quite fitting. Auto/biography theory provides terms for talking about the self as narrator, protagonist, author, and historical person; these terms, however, are best applied to narrative and must be redefined to apply to the theatre, where the author and director might be the same person or two people; the actors might play themselves or another character; etc. Documentary film is an excellent source for thinking on documentary voice or authorship, but the disconnect between the filmed subjects, which attempt to be an indexical sign, and those that perform repeatedly onstage, thereby showing up as an iconic sign, requires that documentary film theory be adjusted for use in talking about the theatre. Testimonio theory provides fodder for examining the right to speak for the other, but not all of documentary theatre can or should be categorized as testimonial. Finally, postdramatic theatre is the most adequate theory for working with the stage, but it lacks the specificity necessary for defining authorship in the particular subgenre I call auto/biographical documentary theatre. Such shortcomings recognized, none of these theories should be discarded, as together they provide stepping stones for arriving at the desired definition of authorial authority in auto/biographical documentary theatre.

In their excellent *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson trace the history of the definition of autobiography. The general term, life writing, is said to involve life as the subject of writing, rather predictably. Placing the life narrative against biography, they conclude that in biography scholars document and interpret from an external point of view, while a life narrative is “simultaneously externalized and internalized (5). By this they mean that the life narrative must be written during the subject’s life, while death is not definitive for the biography; that life narrative draws upon the personal archive while biography uses historical documents, interviews, family archives and in fact rarely uses personal memories; and that life narrative is usually written in the first-person while biography usually takes third-person narration (Smith and Watson 6-7). Finally, they point out that in contemporary practice life narrative and biography are often blended, through embedding versions of a family member’s life within a personal narrative, or entwining the case history of a patient with self-analysis (7).

Such understandings of auto/biography are useful for studying auto/biographical representation in documentary theatre, too. In the case of self-representation, the play, as the autobiography, must be produced and performed during the subject’s lifetime in order for the subject to act onstage.<sup>2</sup> That first-person perspective carries over from narrative auto/biography to auto/biographical theatre, and would point to a definition of authorship that includes the self-representing actor/subject/character.

We could make a system parallel to that of autobiography versus biography for documentary theatre, in which those plays that feature actors who play themselves onstage are categorized as auto/biographical and those in which actors play others as biographical; each of these categories comes with its implications of authorship that call for recognizing the actor’s role in creation and authorship.

However, the fact is that rarely are plays the singlehanded creation of one author. Even when an actor plays herself onstage, the script has often been developed through interviews between the director and actor, and, as we have seen, the director often takes a strong editorial

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<sup>2</sup> One could argue for the possibility of reading uncorrupted saints’ bodies or mass funeral processions as a sort of post mortem performance, but these events lack intentionality on the part of the dead, who, rather than representing themselves, serve more as a prop in the performance.



role in the creation process. This brings us to *testimonio*, in which such issues come to the forefront. Theoretical work on *testimonio* has often focused on the relationship between the protagonist, or witness, and the interviewer who, with varying degrees of intervention, takes dictation.

As John Beverley, along with René Jara, point out, *testimonio* doesn't exactly have an identifiable "author" in the Renaissance sense of someone having an authorial intention (Beverley, "Anatomía del testimonio" 12). Rather, the *testimonio* has what Miguel Barnet calls a *compilador* or *gestor*, "somewhat on the model of the film producer" (Beverley, "The Margin at the Center" 97). This model, based on collaboration, challenges the figure of the "'*gran escritor*' [. . .], *tan evidente por contraste en la narrativa del boom*" "'great writer" [. . .] so evident by contrast in the narrative of the Boom' (Beverley, "Anatomía del testimonio" 13).

One of the most important political implications of this iconoclastic genre is, according to George Yúdice, the fact that the intellectual cedes her privilege as enunciator to the subaltern subject (212). When contrasted with what David William Foster calls "documentary narrative", the *testimonio* stands out for its giving voice to the witness. In the case of documentary narrative, an established author novelizes a true story, and the resulting book is often classified as nonfiction.<sup>3</sup>

While, in Foster's words, documentary narrative "overtly involve[s] the difficulties of narrating a segment of Latin American reality" (Foster 42), *testimonio*'s process of direct transcription, with little or no edition, displays those difficulties while effacing the compiler rather than putting the author at the forefront. In order to glean what we may from the criticism on *testimonio* to inform our understanding of authorship in auto/biographical theatre, I'd like to look at Beverley's thoughtful definition of the genre:

By *testimonio* I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience.

(Beverley, "The Margin at the Center" 92-93)

Obviously the plays dealt with here are not novels, and their archival and reportorial natures make them both printed (the script) and acoustic and visual (the performance). However, the content of these plays are the first-person accounts of life experiences by the real protagonist or witness of the events recounted. In this way, especially in plays with a clear political memory, the *testimonio* genre can give us some insight into the relationship between *gestor* or *compilador* and the witness.

In documentary theatre, there are several possible configurations for the compiler-witness relationship. The most common is also most like *testimonio*: the director or company interviews witnesses, transcribes their reactions, and presents them verbatim, albeit mediated through an actor's body, onstage. In the plays analyzed here, the auto/biographical plays, this relationship becomes more hidden and complex due to the presence of the witness onstage; i.e., the onstage actor's body is also the witness's body. The mediation that occurs between the events experienced by the actor-witness and their conveyance by the same actor-witness is partially concealed by the fact that witness and actor are one and the same. As in the case of *testimonio*, the seemingly direct recounting on the part of the witness is actually mediated through the

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<sup>3</sup> See *La noche de Tlatelolco* by Elena Poniatowska or *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* by Gabriel García Márquez

compilador, and this relationship must be taken into account when considering authorship of auto/biographical plays.

I now turn to documentary film theory, which offers a critical trajectory dedicated precisely to the problem of authorship. Bill Nichols' writings on documentary voice over the past few decades has both contributed to and provoked debates on how best to characterize the perspective from which documentary film is produced. In his seminal 1983 article, "The Voice of Documentary", Nichols retraces the history of documentary film and its progression from direct-address or "voice of God" style, in which a didactic purpose results in authoritative narration, through *cinéma vérité*, which attempted to capture unaltered reality without accompanying commentary, finally arriving at interview-based style and self-reflexive documentaries that mix interviews, voice-over, and explicit interventions from the director (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" 17-18).

These categories aid in this analysis of documentary theatre, with direct-address corresponding to early plays such as the Living Newspapers, *cinéma vérité* perhaps informing examinations of performance art, interview-based style describing more recent documentary plays such as the Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project* (2000), and finally self-reflexive style being most like the self-conscious plays seen here in which the director's intervention is made explicit. Of course, these categories are not a one-to-one conversion from film to theatre; the documentary film's "voice" is made up of techniques unavailable to theatre and vice versa, but Nichols' thinking is useful for conceptualizing authorship of auto/biographical plays.

Nichols defines the "voice" of documentary as the voice of the text; the combination of meaning-bearing signs that make up the film:

Documentary displays a tension arising from the attempt to make statements about life which are quite general, while necessarily using sounds and images that bear the inescapable trace of their particular historical origins. These sounds and images come to function as signs; they bear meaning, though the meaning is not really inherent in them but rather conferred upon them by their function within the text as a whole. We may think we hear history or reality speaking to us through a film, but what we actually hear is the voice of the text, even when that voice tries to efface itself. (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" 20)

This explanation is useful for understanding the voice of the text of auto/biographical theatre. While the signs used in film will vary from those used in a play, they are still rooted in a particular historical context and, in the case of auto/biographical plays, that specificity is an asset that helps to efface the voice of the text. That is, the specificity of the onstage actor, who is the unique individual that experienced the events described in the play, helps the audience to accept that actor as the one source of unmediated reality, while in fact several factors come together to create the theatrical product.

For Nichols, the fact that "the voice of the text disappears behind characters who speak to us" causes "[t]he sense of a hierarchy of voices [to be] lost" (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" 24). In the plays examined here, nevertheless, the hierarchy is not so much lost as inverted. Rather than privileging an authorial voice, as we might recognize in the plays of Nelson Rodrigues or Rodolfo Usigli, for example, it is rather the interviewee's voice, the actor's voice, that takes its place at the top of the pyramid. The strong dramaturgical influence of directors like

Lola Arias and Vivi Tellas, or the style of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, is, however unmistakable and must be considered even as their voice seems to be effaced in the performance.

As will be the case throughout this study, the question always boils down to the element of reality. As Nichols puts it in a more recent essay, “To present a realistic likeness of something is to efface the agency of representation so that the likeness comes to the fore. To stand for someone or something else is to assert the agency of representation so that an issue or concern comes to the fore.” (Nichols, “Getting to Know You” 175) Even as the plays examined here assert “realistic likenesses” of the truth they represent, they simultaneously efface that reality.

The point is that while the agency of representation, that is, the theatrical process that brings the reality to the stage, is effaced, the issue of mediated reality is sent to the back burner, out of the audience’s mind. However, the second part of Nichols’ assertion, that standing for someone or something else is to assert representation, must also be considered. That is, the actors in these plays are standing for themselves, but they are also standing for something else: the past. These plays at once assert and efface the agency of representation inherent in theatre.

Nichols deals with interview-based and self-reflective documentary in terms of excess or insufficient bodies:

By avoiding reenactments, the use of interviews [in documentary film] to recount events together with archival footage (fact or fiction) avoids the problem of ‘a body too many,’ where actors double for historical figures. Actors can never be the person they imitate in reenactments. Instead, historical documentaries that rely on archival footage are faced with ‘a body too few,’ lacking both actors and the historical figure. (Nichols, “Getting to Know You” 177)

In interview-based and auto/biographical theatre, the bodies onstage are both surplus and lacking. I mean by this that even though the body onstage is the same one that experienced the events in question, the fact that the events are recreated or retold makes the play a representation, not a direct, unmediated experience. Similarly, the reality factor, the archival nature of the presentation, renders the play lacking in that same immediate reality.

Nichols’ answer to these issues is that the documentary “establish[es] a preferred reading by a textual system that asserts its own voice in contrast to the voices it recruits or observes” (Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary” 27). Twenty-five years later Trish FitzSimons would propose the concept of choric voice as a way of understanding documentary voice “not as unitary but as ‘braided,’ a form of stranded singularity in which ‘coming to voice’ typically includes the input of many individuals and institutions” (FitzSimons 131), “albeit often and arguably ideally with a director’s perspective forming the main channel at the centre of the braid” (FitzSimons 138). Both Nichols’ and FitzSimons’ contributions are valuable for this meditation on authorship in auto/biographical theatre. The relationship between dramaturge and actor-witness must be made evident for a clear understanding of the authorship of these plays, but the option of a braided series of voices, rather than choosing one as the hierarchical hero, is attractive as a way of analyzing the voice of auto/biographical theatre that allows inclusion of the various threads that make up the play.

In his account of theatre’s turn to performance since the 1960s, Hans-Thies Lehmann, too, provides contextual information for understanding that the plays analyzed here do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they form part of the postdramatic theatre tendency that Lehmann identifies. As translator Karen Jürs-Munby points out in her introduction to the English-language version of Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre*, “the ‘exclusion of the real’ is an essential principle

of drama, and its performance through particular real individuals always already constitutes a constant latent threat to its abstract ethical content” (Lehmann 4). These plays’ blatant inclusion of the real challenges the fictional, self-contained premise of traditional drama and adds new, real elements to the theatre.

One way that theatre has broken with drama over the past half century or so has been its turn to the audience: “Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating take place. The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously. The theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text [. . .]” (Lehmann 17). Indeed, the plays I look at in this thesis do precisely turn the performance into a joint text, and not only one written between dramaturge and actor-witness, but with audience participation as well.

The auto/biographical premise of the plays has the actors constantly facing the audience, addressing the public rather than relying on hermetic dialogues between characters, as in more traditional dramatic theatre. Likewise, the audience’s understanding that what is being presented is real is of utmost importance, conceptually speaking, to these plays’ execution. Whether or not the reality of the play’s content is successfully communicated to the audience will drastically affect the performance’s significance.

Such performances represent, for Lehmann, a return to theatre’s ceremonial roots without the obligation of ritual belief. It is ceremony for ceremony’s sake. The critic emphasizes the importance of presence in postdramatic theatre, which is, of course, an important discourse for understanding the power of auto/biographical theatre. He writes that the performance text “becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information” (Lehmann 85). While auto/biographical theatre effectively pushes presence as its mark of authenticity, we must consider the fact that the calculated presence of the actor-witness is, at the same time, a representation of the past. Similarly, even as the experience must be a shared, meaning-making process with the audience, the authority of experience rests on the actor-witness’s body and its ability to communicate that experience to the audience.

Lehmann cites the primacy of the physical body as a hallmark of postdramatic theatre, in which it “has become its own reality which does not ‘tell’ this or that emotion but through its presence manifests itself as the site of inscription of collective history” (Lehmann 97). Indeed, as the actor-witnesses flash their credentials through the various techniques to be discussed throughout this study, a heavy credibility has been granted to bodily experience and presence. This, in turn, affects the spectators in their role as participants, co-authors of the joint text.

It is precisely the fuzzy delimitation between truth and fiction that allows postdramatic theatre to both include and implicate the spectators, even, in the case of auto/biographical theatre, as the actor-witness stakes claims on authority through lived experience. Lehmann’s text explores the way that the distance between reality and fiction and actor and spectator shrinks in postdramatic theatre:

When the staging practice forces the spectators to wonder whether they should react to the events on stage as fiction (i.e. aesthetically) or as reality (for example, morally), theatre’s treading of the borderline of the real unsettles this crucial predisposition of the spectators: the unreflected certainty and security in which the experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behaviour. The question of where exactly the moveable border between ‘theatre’ and everyday

reality runs in the course of a performance appears often enough as a problem and thus an object of theatrical design in postdramatic theatre – it is far from being a known factor secured by the definition of theatre. The aesthetic distance of the spectator is a phenomenon of dramatic theatre; in the new forms of theatre that are closer to performance this distance is structurally shaken in a more or less noticeable and provocative way. Wherever this unsettling blurring of boundaries happens in postdramatic theatre, it is invaded by the qualities of a situation (in the emphatic sense of the term), even in cases where all in all it seems to belong to the genre of classical theatre with its strict division of stage and theatron (auditorium). (Lehmann 104)

The moral conundrum of the postdramatic spectator as to whether to react aesthetically or morally to the play is magnified in the case of overtly political pieces like Lola Arias' and Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol's. Upon presenting lived or inherited experiences from guerrilla movements or dictatorial repression, the actors, by staking the claim that they are who they say they are, are more than just actors but also witnesses, and are presenting not only a theatrical text but also a testimony.

It is important to note that, even in plays like Arias', in which the high production quality and staging techniques do hearken to a more traditional separation between audience and actor, that quality of situation persists, in which the audience should understand a given set of circumstances (namely, that the onstage actors play themselves and tell true stories from their own and their parents' lives) in order to participate responsibly in the theatrical endeavor.

Auto/biography theory, testimonio and documentary film studies, and the concept of postdramatic theatre all add essential elements to our understanding of the subgenre of plays in question here. While documentary theatre is a well-known and well-studied topic, the phenomenon of actors representing themselves presents unique challenges and requires certain subtleties on the part of the scholar who would analyze such plays. The hybrid nature of auto/biography in general, the relationship between witness and compiler in testimonio, the (braided) voice of documentary film and the turn to performance in postdramatic theatre all contribute to a richer understanding of plays like *Mi mamá y mi tía*, *A Falta Que Nos Move*, *Sem Falsidades*, *Mi vida después*, *El rumor del incendio* and *Montserrat*, among others.

I will now turn to notes from the field, in which the creators of these plays themselves speak about how they consider their relationship to the content as authors, witnesses, and actors. The Mexican theatre company Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol's play *El rumor del incendio* revolves around a central character who turns out to be director-writer-actress Luisa Pardo's real-life mother. The company insists that no one but Luisa could ever play Comandante Margarita/Luisa. In an interview they explain their desire for specificity, for being indispensable, essential:

GABINO RODRIGUEZ. Y también, como nos gusta mucho el teatro, lo estudiamos y nos gustaba, pero...el teatro tiene que ver con el museo, con la idea de que hay ciertas obras escritas para ser representadas una y otra vez, por los siglos de los siglos.... Era difícil de ser como actores de teatro, y representar personajes que, seguramente, hay otras personas que...lo hacen mejor.... Hay algo, sí, un poco impersonal de la idea de hacer Hamlet, de alguna manera tal vez podría ser yo, podría ser otro actor, y nos gustaba la idea de hacer obras que sólo se podían hacer con esas personas. Que no pudiera ser otras personas....

LUISA PARDO. No, no. Pensar que somos indispensables, que realmente es algo propio.

Justo en la contemporaneidad, un tema en que estoy pensando, todo es desechable y todo es ajeno y todo es pasajero. Pero nosotros queremos, o intentamos hacer un teatro que sale naturalmente, hacer un teatro que sea toda nuestra vida. Cada obra es un pedazo de nuestra vida, y vamos creciendo junto con la obra y la obra se va reformando. O sea, nuestra compañía es todo un proceso que va junto con nuestra vida, y enseña cómo vamos aprendiendo cosas y con quién podemos trabajar.... Creo que el teatro va pegadito a nuestra vida y...eso es el objetivo. No somos burócratas del teatro, no somos maquiladoras del teatro, sino somos muy conscientes de la parte personal del teatro.

(Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, "Entrevista con Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol" 141-42)

GABINO RODRIGUEZ: And also, we like theatre a lot, we study it and we liked it, but ...the theatre has something to do with the museum, with the idea that there are certain plays written to be staged time and again, for centuries and centuries....It was difficult to be, like, theatre actors, and play characters that, surely, there are other people who...do it better... . There is something, yes, a little impersonal about the idea of playing Hamlet, in a way it could be me, it could be another actor, and we liked the idea of doing plays that could only be put on with those people. That couldn't be other people....

LUISA PARDO: No, no. To think that we are indispensable, that it really is something of our own. Precisely in the contemporary moment, a topic that I am thinking about, everything is disposable and everything is distant and everything is ephemeral. But we want, or we try to make a theatre that comes out naturally, to make theatre that is all of our life. Every play is a piece of our life, and we go along growing with the play and the play is reshaped. I mean, our company is a process that goes along with our life, and shows how we learn things and who we can work with.... I think that the theatre goes right along with our life and...that is the objective. We are not theatre bureaucrats, we aren't theatre factories, but rather we are very conscious of the personal part of the theatre.<sup>4</sup>

While I do not intend to rely on the creators' claims as the definitive source for understanding their works, it is important to note the discourse on individuality and specificity, the desire to be indispensable evident in the words of Rodríguez and Pardo.

One could perfectly easily conceive of another company taking up *El rumor del incendio* (Lagartijas published the play's text in the volume *El rumor de este momento*) and another actress playing Margarita. The shocking end, in which Luisa reveals herself as Margarita's real life daughter, would, however, have a new significance. Either the players could leave the text as is and the actress could claim to be Luisa, or claim that she herself, keeping her actual name, is Margarita's daughter; or they could cut the ending and the play would be merely documentary instead of auto/biographical.

The situation, in which the audience forms a pact with the play and its creators to agree to believe that the play's content is true, would be altered and take on a new meaning. In a sense, then, even though it is conceivable that another actress could play Margarita/Luisa, the company

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

is right in that for the play to have its current auto/biographical meaning, only Luisa Pardo could play that role. She has written and acted herself into indispensability.

Márcio Freitas' 2011 play *Sem Falsidades*, for its part, strips the specificity and indispensability of its actors while conserving the postdramatic situation. The audience is made aware of the process the play represents, and the actresses, while not necessarily reciting their own testimonies, are supposed to be performing a remix of testimonies obtained by Freitas in interviews with actresses, some of whom are onstage.<sup>5</sup>

Taking into account these two extremes, one of which prescribes Luisa Pardo as the one and only actress who could play Margarita/Luisa, the other of which allows for infinite potential actresses appropriating one another's words, allows us to consider a wide range of possibilities for auto/biographical theatre's relationship to authorship. Whereas Lagartijas, including Pardo, is the author, director, actor and witness in *El rumor del incendio*, Freitas takes a harder line, claiming directorial authority over the interviewees' testimonies and manipulating them as he may, resulting in a message that would paint the actresses' experiences as anything but unique.

Lola Arias, whose fame in the field of documentary theatre grows constantly, especially with regard to her Argentine play *Mi vida después* (2009), has an even more fraught relationship with authorship of the plays she directs. *Mi vida después*, in contrast with *El rumor del incendio* and *Sem Falsidades*, has actors play themselves throughout the play, with some breaks to represent their parents, although this is done explicitly, unlike the treatment of Margarita by Lagartijas, whose relationship to Luisa is only revealed at the end of the play.

The fact that the actors introduce themselves historically, by talking about the day they were born, and show family artifacts like photographs, clothing, and audio tapes to the audience binds the onstage actors-witnesses to the stories they are recreating. The play's accompanying book states that Arias had the idea to have actors born in the 1970s tell their parents' stories and step in as stunt doubles for them; but since the stories told belong to the actors, where does that leave Arias with regard to authorship?

According to Arias herself, she is the author of the play's concept. She is the one who came up with the idea of interviewing actors born in the 1970s in Argentina, look through their family documents, and have them play their parents' *dobles de riesgo* 'stunt doubles.' They self-identified, gave their family history, provided the objects used in the play. This means that the writing of *Mi vida después* was a collaboration. The technical data on the play gives Arias credit for writing the play ("dramaturgia"), musical collaboration, and direction. The actors, Blas Arrese Igor, Liza Casullo, Carla Crespo, Vanina Falco, Pablo Lugones, Mariano Speratti, Moreno Speratti da Cunha, are given credit both for acting and for authorial collaboration.

Sofía Medici, who does not act in the play, is credited as dramaturge, and she is in charge of updating the play as events call for it (*Alternativa Teatral*). For example, as legal decisions were made outside of the theatre that affected the stories told inside, DNA results returned confirming deaths of family members, members of the cast became pregnant or grew up (especially in the case of Moreno Speratti da Cunha, who spent his childhood onstage before offering to cede his role to his younger brother), Medici changed the script as necessary to include the current information.

Even with collaborative and dramaturgical credit going to the actors and Medici, the play is still squarely identified as "*de Lola Arias*." The idea of authorship, or at least authority over,

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Three for an in-depth discussion of how Freitas inserts himself into the play while, at the same time, pointing out the directorial manipulation of the actor-witnesses' words

the play was put to the test in 2011 as Lola was invited to direct a workshop at a festival in Chile. She followed the same formula that she had used to develop *Mi vida después*, gathering a group of people born during Pinochet's regime, asking them to bring objects from their family's history, and interviewing them about their and their parents' lives.

At the participants' urging, the results were staged as the play *El año en que nací* in Santiago in January 2012 and in Buenos Aires later the same year. Most Chilean reviews called it the "Chilean version of *Mi vida después*". The play, naturally, has its differences from *Mi vida después*, such as a larger number of characters and the use of both professional actors and non-actors (*Mi vida después*' cast is comprised completely of professional actors, except in the case of Moreno, who is the son of one of the actors). The similarities, however, were too striking for the comfort of some members of *Mi vida después*' cast, and the conversation of who, really, has authorial rights to the play and its situation became spirited.

There is a fear inherent in auto/biographical collaboration; Arias claims authorship of the concept, and could, according to her own ethics, go around making hundreds of plays following to her formula in post-dictatorial situations around the world. I believe that it is precisely the indispensability to which Pardo refers above that produces the anxiety of mass production. It is as though self-representing actors in auto/biographical plays feel that they have made their way back to Benjamin's aura, and the reproduction of the situation (keeping in mind postdramatic theatre's arrangement around a situation rather than a narrative) is like the mechanically reproduced work of art. The actors, while aware of the fact that they are representing, not reproducing reality, seem to have discovered an artisanal alternative to the mass production of theatre. Arias' transplanting of the concept threatens that uniqueness and the idea that the actors are artisans of aura.

The adaptation does have its limits, however. Arias was asked to adapt *Mi vida después* for German audiences and actors, which would involve not only a linguistic translation but also decisions to make on how to translate the lives. Would the German actors be interviewed and inserted into the play with their own family history somehow melded into the Argentine story? Would the script merely be translated, as any dramatic play might be, and staged as a based-on-a-true-story play? Those questions, when it comes to Arias, remain unanswered because she refused to accept the proposal.<sup>6</sup>

For another example of the director/author – actor relationship, I turn to Vivi Tellas, the renowned Argentine director of alternative theatre. In 2002, when she was director of Buenos Aires' Teatro Sarmiento, Tellas initiated what she called the biodrama cycle, in which playwrights were invited to produce plays about real, living Argentines (Arias' *Mi vida después* was the last of the fourteen plays in the cycle). The idea began with her own foray into theatrical self-representation with what she called "family theatre", a play entitled *Mi mamá y mi tía* (2003-04), starring Tellas' mother and aunt.

She moved on to direct several auto/biographical plays as part of her Archivos project, including *Tres filósofos con bigotes* 'Three Mustached Philosophers' (2005), featuring three philosophy professors from the Universidad de Buenos Aires; *Cozarinsky y su médico* 'Cozarinsky and His Doctor' (2005), starring Argentine filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky and the real-life doctor who saved his life; *Escuela de conducción*, 'Driving School' (2006), which

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<sup>6</sup> For future study, an interesting case that might shed light on this question is the 2011 adaptation of Daniel Veronese's biodrama *La forma que se despliega* (2003) by Mexican director Noé Morales Muñoz. The Argentine play does not deal directly with self-representation like those in this study, but the process of adapting a biographical drama to a different cultural context will be informative for future analyses of authorship in documentary plays.



presents the employees of a driving school, including the only one who does not drive, a woman; *Disc Jockey* (2008) with two of Buenos Aires' most experienced DJs; *Mujeres guía 'Woman Guides'* (2008), featuring city and museum guides; and *Rabbi Rabino* (2011), a project completed in New York with the participation of rabbis. In each case, Tellas chooses people whose careers contain some sort of inherent theatricality, such as the fake city streets in the driving school or the performance aspect of a rabbi's work.

In an interview with Alan Pauls, Tellas explains the process that dominates her development of the biodramas: "The rehearsal begins the moment the performers enter the door of the studio. [. . .] I see what they bring, what they tell first, how they choose to present themselves. [. . .] That first moment is very strange, because people don't necessarily appreciate what they bring. It's as though nothing holds importance for them. I'm the one who gives it value" (Pauls 249-50). This statement stakes a powerful claim; much as Arias asserts her authorship of the concept behind *Mi vida después* and *El año en que nací*, Tellas sees herself as the compiler, and the compilation as giving value to the various elements making up the lives of the people she stages.

After the arrival of the participants, Tellas sets out to work. She draws them out, searching for the theatre in their lives. She has an interview process, which she shares at biodrama workshops, and that involves a series of prompts. The questions are designed to find drama, to seek out the moments that the participants themselves may not offer up without Tellas' coaxing. The list of prompts is as follows:

- El momento más violento;
- Una carta;
- Diferentes versiones del mismo momento;
- Una foto especial, significativa o misteriosa;
- El amor de mi vida;
- El momento más extraño, misterioso y/o confuso jamás vivido;
- Supersticiones y cábalas;
- Buena y mala suerte, el destino;
- Personas influyentes;
- Una traición;
- Un engaño descubierto;
- Una pérdida (material o personal);
- ¿Qué te gusta hacer?
- ¿Qué sabes hacer?
- ¿Qué te hubiera gustado hacer?
- ¿Qué es lo mejor que sabes hacer?
- Apariciones públicas;
- Cantar y bailar. (Tellas "La familia como teatro")
- The most violent moment;
- A letter;
- Different versions of the same moment;
- A special, significant, or mysterious photograph;
- The love of your life;
- The strangest, most mysterious, and/or most confusing moment ever experienced;
- Superstitions and kabbalahs;

Good luck, bad luck, and  
 destiny;  
 Influential people;  
 Betrayal;  
 A deception, discovered;  
 A material or personal loss;  
 What do you like to do?  
 What do you know how to do?  
 What would you have liked to  
 do?  
 What is the best thing you  
 know how to do?  
 Public appearances on  
 television or radio;  
 Singing and dancing.

The list is a clever way for Tellas to find out where the participants in her Archivos projects have experience performing or with drama in their lives. The questions deal with revelations, discoveries, and entertainment.

The work she does in the preliminary rehearsals is, for Tellas, a sort of “found theatre”:

The archives are my way of ‘doing’ worlds without adding anything. The worlds are already there, like the Surrealist Objets Trouvés or the Duchamp ready-mades. I don’t produce them; I postproduce them. [. . .] I might have gotten bored talking to my mom and my aunt, but *My Mom and My Aunt* was my way of ‘doing’ my family. [. . .] Each time I stage an archive I organize someone else’s world to my liking, I put on stage what I’d like to see happen by importing the real materials of these worlds. (Tellas “Kidnapping Reality” 251)

It is precisely *Mi mamá y mi tía* that I want to focus on to analyze authorship in auto/biographical theatre. The play is especially interesting because it is the only one of Tellas’ *Archivos* that is not only auto/biographical in the sense that the staged characters represent themselves, but also because the family in question belongs to Tellas herself, thus doubling the auto/biographical sense of the play.

Beginning with the title, and its personal possessive pronoun, Tellas inserts herself into the storytelling mechanism of the play. Although the characters in question are her mother and her aunt, Tellas herself is the binding element that ties the theatre and the staged lives. As she



Figure 1 Vivi Tellas. Source: “Vivi Tellas; Inspiration.” *mfemfem*. N.p., 10 June 2010. Web. 23 Dec. 2012.



Figure 2 Graciela Ninio, Vivi Tellas’ mother, and Luisa Ninio, her aunt. Source: Pamela Brownell. “Project Archivos: Documentary Theatre according to Vivi Tellas.” *E-misférica* 9.1 (2012): n. pag. Web. 23 Dec. 2012.

mentions above, the play is not merely placing her relatives on a stage and cutting them loose. Tellas is the compiler of the stories that she thinks will make theatre. However, her relationship to the play and its players is unique and throws a wrench into our examination of authorship in documentary theatre.

For one thing, as the title hints, there is a family relationship between director and players. This is especially evident given the striking resemblance between Tellas and her relatives (see figs. 1 and 2). Secondly, Tellas participates in the performance, prompting her mother and aunt with cues to move them through the play. For example, when her aunt tells of how she and her sister used to play with some childhood friends and study the Catechism with them, Tellas reminds them from the audience that their friends did not know that the sisters are Jewish: “*Pero ellas, ustedes, no sabían que eran judías*” ‘But they didn’t know that you were Jews.’ She prompts them to move on to describe the sleeping situation in their house, asking them questions (Tellas, “Proyecto Archivos 1 of 8”).

She even takes to the stage as her mother measures a dress pattern against her aunt’s body, helping to hold it up. As Luisa, her aunt, tries on the skirt her sister is hemming later in the play and talks about her famous lemon pie, Tellas asks her what the recipe is. The play’s conclusion is also signaled by the director, who asks Luisa how her life is now, prompting a sexually charged description of her life as a widow (Tellas, “Proyecto Archivos 2 of 8”). With that, Tellas ends the play with a *gracias*, which could be read as directed to the players, the audience, or both.

That blurring of the lines between actors and audience, which Lehmann points out as a characteristic of postdramatic theatre, is also an important aspect of Tellas’ *Archivos*. The audience, limited to 30 people, is invited to a Sephardic buffet after the show and to tour a “museum” of Ninio family history. In this way the spectators are drawn even further into the auto/biographical world. Not only is the theatre a family affair, but it is as though Tellas and the Ninios have opened the family home and scrapbook to intimate guests.

It is tempting to grant Tellas authorship, and auto/biographical authority, over *Mi mamá y mi tía* based on her genetic relationship to the characters and subject matter. However, the process she used to develop this play is the same that she used for *Tres filósofos con bigotes*, *Cozarinsky y su médico*, and *Escuela de conducción*, even though the participants in those plays are not, at least not apparently, related to Tellas.

This is where we must, with clear eyes, avoid allowing the obvious connections between director and work, that is, the familial ones, to obstruct the reality that, even if Tellas’ play were about someone else’s mother and aunt, her position as author would not change. Even a change in the possessive pronoun would not change the relationship between Tellas as author/director and the players, who are at best collaborators in the development of the plays that make up the *Archivos*.

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, my objective is not prescriptive. I do not want to declare a regime of authorship that would limit or exclude auto/biographical plays because they do not fit a presupposed mold. Rather, I have examined a wide range of theoretical approaches that inform my understanding of the voice of auto/biographical theatre. From auto/biography studies, it is important to remember the relationships between narrator, subject, and author, while at the same time recognizing the hybrid, often collaborative nature of the seemingly individualistic auto/biographical project.

With testimonio, the relationship between witness and compiler is of utmost ethical importance. Similarly, those who, in auto/biographical theatre, would claim authorship of a play that involves the lives of others must examine their relationship to those others. Besides the simple issue of whose name goes at the top of the program, there are ethical and legal implications to this problem. Firstly, as in the case of Arias, a play may lose its artisanal, aural essence if its concept is transposed onto another set of circumstances. Even though the actors in *Mi vida después* receive credit as authorial collaborators, Arias has the last word when it comes to translating the situation of the play, as in *El año en que nací*.

From documentary film theory the ideas that Nichols and FitzSimons put forth about voice are especially useful for thinking about the voice of the auto/biographical plays analyzed in this dissertation. It would be a futile exercise to attempt to pinpoint a single author of these plays; all of them depend upon collaboration between writer and actor-witness. Even in the case where actor-witness and writer are one and the same, as in Luisa Pardo's, the element of cooperation between Pardo and the other members of the company who did historical research and also act in the play, and the relationship between Pardo and the audience, which must understand the situation into which they are entering, namely, that the presented information is supposed to be historically accurate, also adds an element of joint creation to the play. Therefore, while I wouldn't go so far as to consider these plays as having a choric voice, as FitzSimons describes, Nichols' proposal of understanding the text itself as having a voice of its own and FitzSimons' description of the voice as made up of several braided strands is especially attractive for considering the various authorial contributions that make up these plays.

Finally, Lehmann's concept of situational, postdramatic theatre also points to the collaborative nature of these plays. Not only is the author of an auto/biographical text in communication with the actor-witnesses whose words will be melded into a script, but the author must also find a way to communicate the situation to the audience. In some cases, as in Freitas', the relationship between interviewer, interviewee, and play is made clear from within the play itself (Freitas projects a disclaimer onto the back wall of the theatre as part of the play's opening; more on this in Chapter Three).

Lagartijas, too, inform the audience of Luisa's identity from onstage, although this happens at the end of the play and could therefore be considered almost to be part of the fiction. Here the role of paratexts, such as the program, will come to the fore (see Chapter Four). The spectator might read the program to find out whether the actress is truly named Luisa Pardo as she claims; other details, such as the year she was born, are also provided in both the play and the program, as a sort of confirmation of these facts. Finally, in a play like Arias', the situation is never made completely explicit; one could conceivably sit through the whole play without realizing that the actors are supposed to be the character they say they are. However, the journalistic apparatus and the accompanying book, usually for sale outside the theatre, confirms the reality of the situation for the curious viewer. This communication of the situation to the audience is part of the author's work upon compiling the text.

To conclude, one of the innovations of this subgenre of documentary theatre, and documentary theatre as a whole, is to explode the concept of author. Rather than writing a traditional dramatic text, these playwrights are the authors of a situation. Their relationship to their characters, or the actors in their plays, is bilateral. While authorial rights, in the legal sense, still remain firmly with the declared author of the texts, this set of circumstances could conceivably be challenged in the near future. Either way, the position of author at the top of any

theatrical hierarchy has definitely changed, and the actors themselves, the artisans of the aura, must be considered as collaborators in the auto/biographical enterprise.

## Chapter 2: The Truthiness of Documentary: How We Talk About Truth in Theatre

In this study of self-representation in Latin American theatre of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, questions of truth and authenticity have emerged time and again. This type of drama is designated as “theatre of the real”; audiences come to the plays with the expectation that “what is represented is real or has a relationship with what is real” (Martin, *Theatre of the Real* 5). However, the association between theatre and falsity is deeply rooted, making the aforementioned relationship to what is real paradoxical. As Carol Martin points out, “Before people grew apprehensive about the proximity of the theatrical to the real, there was first a tension between imitation and authenticity” (*Theatre of the Real* 9).

All of the plays analyzed here, in various ways, flirt with, deal with, or reject the concept of truth in theatre. The characters in Vivi Tellas’ *Archivos* project do not consider themselves to be actors; she chooses them for that very reason, to get closer to an authentic self-representation, which an actor might be too well-trained to provide. Christiane Jatahy’s *A Falta Que Nos Move*, which taunts the spectator, asking point-blank whether the actors’ assertions are true or false, will be analyzed in this chapter.

These examples, culled from contemporary dramatic production in Latin America, can be considered as representative of a strong sector of theatre. Arias’ and Lagartijas’ have been successful and widely produced in theatres and festivals around the world. Jatahy’s play has been adapted into a critically acclaimed film, and Tellas is one of the most important movers in the Buenos Aires theatre scene. The fact that they are all plays that treat the real and include self-representation demonstrates the preoccupation that the current culture has with reality, individuality, and specificity.

This chapter takes a look at the way that the cultural community, including theatre practitioners, critics, and scholars, talk about the truth when it comes to documentary theatre. It examines interviews with directors, authors, and actors to see how those who craft the plays see the role of the real and their role in communicating it. It analyzes the way that critics manage the term “truth” when dealing with documentary theatre. Finally, it weighs the implications of contemporary auto/biographical theatre’s truth claims by analyzing the Brazilian play *A Falta Que Nos Move*.

To begin with, the lore of documentary theatre is revealed through the way that playwrights and directors talk about truth in their own work. Whereas theatre scholars are, generally speaking, wary of designating a play as “true” or not, theatre practitioners have more at stake when defending their own truth claims. Often interviews and essays written by dramaturges include defenses of the real nature of their plays, as though the media formed part of the universe of their play, a method of communicating that reality to their potential audiences.\

In an interview with Alan Pauls, tellingly entitled “Kidnapping Reality”, Vivi Tellas speaks of the way that she sequesters the truth of her subjects. She constructs a process for creating her *Archivos* projects, including *Mi mama y mi tía*, *Tres filósofos con bigotes*, *Cozarinsky y su médico*, and *Escuela de conducción*. She explains, “In all of them I’ve worked with regular people and the real worlds to which they belong” (Tellas 247). This insistence on the reality and ordinariness of the biographed subjects includes a discussion of how the play maintains its reality even as Tellas begins to shape its narrative.

She goes on to say, “At some moment during the work, the play begins to ask for specific things. I think: ‘I need something violent’ or ‘I need body, I want to see their bodies’” (Tellas

250). Here the process takes a turn that might weaken the truth claim, given that Tellas reveals the way she manipulates the play. However, even as she asks for violence or bodies from her subjects, she only accepts “true” examples of such events in their lives.

Lola Arias, too, speaks of the reality factor in her work, in an interview with Ana Longoni and Lorena Verzero. Whereas Tellas insists upon the truth of her sources, Arias takes the reality of her own subjects for granted and goes on to talk about the work of convincing audiences of the truth of her plays’ content. She speaks of the difficulties of presenting *Mi vida después* internationally, where audiences were sometimes unfamiliar with the political and historical context of the play:

Creo que hubo gente que no se dio cuenta. Piensan que son personajes. Acá en Argentina también. Cuando estábamos en Noruega nos parecía que estábamos del otro lado del mundo y que era muy difícil transmitir la historia del país. Y pusimos en el subtítulo: “Basado en historias reales,” porque nos parecía que era tan inverosímil para ellos, tan distante la historia que estábamos contando. Creo que fue en el único país donde lo hicimos, insistir para que conectaran con la historia del país. (“Teatro y memoria” 14)

I think there were people who didn’t realize. They think that they’re characters. Here in Argentina too. When we were in Norway it seemed to us that we were on the other side of the world and that it was very difficult to transmit the country’s history. And we put in the subtitle: “Based on real stories”, because it seemed to us that it was so implausible for them, the story we were telling so distant. I think it was the only country where we did that, insisting on their connecting with the country’s history.

The subtle understanding that Arias has constructed with her interviewers, and therefore with her readers, is that the stories in *Mi vida después* are unquestionably true. Only by creating an exotic other, pinpointing Norway as Argentina’s opposite, can the possibility of doubting the play’s reality be fathomed. By positing the possibility of disbelief, but setting the scene of the disbelief in the most distant land available, Arias discounts the very possibility she admits.

The Norwegians followed suit, dutifully doubting the tragic stories presented in the play. However, Arias insists that the problem for their assimilating the information was not in the possibility that reality could be presented onstage; rather, the nightmare history that the play presents is what inspires audience’s doubt:

[. . . C]uando salían los actores, los agarraban y les preguntaban: “¿Pero, es verdad?”, como que no lo podían creer. Y no sólo “¿es verdad, es verdad, sos vos?”, sino “¿es verdad que pasó ese delirio en ese país?”, “¿es verdad que había gente que robaba hijos nacidos de gente torturada y asesinada y los hacían pasar por otros?” Es como si verlo con la mirada del otro. Es como ciencia ficción. Los mataron, pero además se robaron a los hijos, les hicieron creer que eran otros. Es mucho. Se les fue la mano. ¿Cómo se llegó a ese extreme delirante de borramiento de apropiación y de delirio? También era esa la pregunta cuando preguntaban: “¿Es verdad?” (Arias 13-14).

[. . . W]hen the actors would come out, they would grab them and ask them: “But is it true?” like they couldn’t believe it. And not just “is it true, is it true, is it you?” but rather “is it true that that delirium occurred in that country?”; “is it true that there were people who stole babies born to tortured and murdered people and

gave them new identities?” It’s like seeing it through someone else’s eyes. It’s like science fiction. They killed them, but on top of it they stole their children, they made them believe they were someone else. It’s a lot. They went too far. How did it get to that outrageous extreme of erasing appropriation and delirium? That was also the question they were asking when they asked: “Is it true?”

In a skillful rhetorical turn, Arias transforms the reality of the individual stories told in the play into the reality of an entire country, both of which are, according to her, possible to stage.

The work of staging reality, not only on a personal level but also including the potential for staging national reality, is a vision shared by Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, as well. In an interview directors Gabin Rodríguez and Luisia Pardo explain how they went about researching for their project, *El rumor del incendio*, which juxtaposes the life of an individual with events of recent Mexican history.

Rodríguez explains,

RODRIGUEZ. [. . .] partimos de esa idea de que la creación artística no necesariamente tendría que ver con el interior de una persona que imagina cosas en la soledad... ni del interior de nosotros mismos. Para nosotros, nuestra premisa era salir a recoger de la realidad ciertas cosas, e ir retrayendo, y después ver cómo organizar eso, más que la idea de crear o la idea de inventar algo que no estaba. (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, “Entrevista” 140)

RODRIGUEZ. [. . .] we started with the idea that artistic creation doesn’t necessarily have to do with the interior of a person who imagines things in solitude...or even with the interior of ourselves. For us, our premise was to go out and recover certain things from reality, and draw it in, and then see how to organize it, more than the idea of creating or the idea of inventing something that wasn’t there.

Like Arias, Rodríguez takes for granted that the interlocutor or reader accepts the possibility of representing the real onstage. By claiming that the play is different from purely fiction plays because it comes from an exterior place rather than an interior, or the imagination, Rodríguez assigns Lagartijas’ work a relationship with reality that plays like, say, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, cannot claim.

In their own words practitioners defend or assume the possibility of representing the real onstage, of somehow representing the “truth”. Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in talking about how the pudding was made. While we would be unwise to take the statements of the playwrights about their plays as the key to interpreting their work, analyzing the way that they talk about their work reveals something about the desire and impulse behind documentary theatre.

In *Verbatim Verbatim*, Will Hammond and Dan Steward collect interviews with and essays by some of the most well-known creators of documentary, or verbatim, theatre in the UK. The dramatists (Alecky Blythe, David Hare, Nicolas Kent, Richard Norton-Taylor, Robin Soans, and Max Stafford-Clark) in this collection, as in the interviews I mention above, use their space on the page to insist upon the truth of their plays. It is worth closely analyzing their discourse in order to understand not necessarily what verbatim theatre *does*, but what it *claims to do*.

The dramatists represented in *Verbatim Verbatim*, when it comes to truth in theatre, are especially concerned with issues of artificiality and purity, which are directly related to the practice of creating verbatim theatre. They insist that by controlling their process they control the



degree of reality represented in their plays. Beyond these black-and-white issues, the playwrights are also quite interested in what the audience knows and what the audience should know.

Artificiality is heavy on the minds of the interviewed dramatists. Up against the automatic relationship between theatre and artifice, they must argue that their plays, due to their authentic, true-to-life sources, somehow transcend the bounds of the theatre and its manufactured recreations. For example, Robin Soans, author of plays like *Talking to Terrorists*, makes the following, strong statement:

Artificiality is a charge that cannot be raised against the verbatim playwright unless he or she is a complete charlatan. Actually, when the bricks and mortar of a play are real conversations, people use such idiosyncratic and bizarre language that it is immediately recognizable as lacking in artifice. (Soans 24)

The decisiveness of Soans' conviction draws a line in the sand between plays in which the dialogue is invented, written entirely by the playwright, and those in which the dramatist uses transcripts of real events as the building blocks of the play.

The rhetorical device of equating anyone who could be accused of artificiality, within the realm of verbatim theatre, with a charlatan, has the effect of implying that any non-charlatan must therefore be seen as producing something authentic. Soans backs up his claim by stating that any spectator who hears verbatim speech onstage will immediately and unfailingly recognize it as such.

Alecky Blythe, the author of plays such as *Cruising* and *The Girlfriend Experience*, adheres to the "idiosyncratic and bizarre language" that Soans cites using a radical technique involving actors wearing earphones with recordings of the interviews playing during performances, so that they might repeat their utterances as exactly as possible.

Just as Soans insists that by maintaining idiosyncrasies, his plays are therefore unimpeachable when it comes to their authenticity, Blythe holds up her headphone technique as an amulet protecting her from charges of artificiality:

This always surprises actors new to the technique, as the idea of being fed a line sounds restrictive, but once actors have memorized their lines, they stop listening to how they were actually spoken in the first place, and this is when they start deviating from the original intonation and embellishing it. I have continued to work with earphones precisely to prevent this from happening. I do not deny that actors are highly skilled at interpreting their lines, but the way the real person said them will always be more interesting. (Blythe 81)

This analysis is not of the plays, but rather of how the dramatists speak about the plays. It is not for this dissertation to decide whether or not repeating ums and ahs makes a play more interesting than it would be if the actor were given more freedom to interpret. However, the way that Blythe jumps from originality to "interesting" is telling for understanding how we talk about truth in theatre.

The argument against artificiality depends on an idea of audience reception that posits that spectators will respond positively to recognizably authentic dialogue. Extreme measures of control, which ensure the untainted reproduction of the verbatim language, supposedly serve to create a more interesting theatrical product. However, the remarks of the dramatists show that their management of the language also serves to protect them from the looming anxiety of artificiality ever-present when one is claiming to hold the truth.

The other side of the artificiality coin is a concept of purity. Whereas the playwrights defend against hypothetical charges of artificiality, they go on the offensive claiming that their projects are “pure” sources of truth. These assertions depend upon an idea that recreating the original interviewees’ speech, or trial transcripts, or whatever the original source might be, onstage does not involve a transformation of the true nature of the content. That is, by claiming purity, the dramatists ask their interlocutor to accept that the theatrical representation of the truth is untainted or unmediated. (Of course, as we saw in Chapter 1, the role of the playwright is precisely to mediate, select, and edit the “pure” primary sources; therein lies the theatrical art.)

For example, Nicolas Kent, director of several so-called tribunal plays, like *The Colour of Justice* and *Bloody Sunday*, claims in an interview with Dan Steward and Will Hammond that it is dishonest to include any fictional elements in a verbatim play:

STEWARD. So how do you feel about plays which combine verbatim text with invented dialogue or invented scenarios?

KENT. I thought you’d come onto that. I absolutely don’t like that form at all. I find that form slightly dishonest. I would rather have total fiction. If you mix the two you lead an audience to believe that someone said something they didn’t actually say. The strength of verbatim is that it’s absolutely truthful, it’s exactly what someone said. [. . .] If you suddenly chuck in something you make up because it’s easier, I think you distort the truth – what you come to may be very illuminating but it isn’t, in my view, the absolute truth of what happened and what people said. And my attempt, in using verbatim, is always to get as near to the truth as you can. (Kent 152-53)

Of course, the scenarios that Steward is hypothesizing are extreme: inserting a conversation or situation that never occurred into a play that is billed as “verbatim”, without somehow alerting the spectator to the action, would be misleading. However, Kent’s extreme reaction reveals an ample, possibly naïve understanding of the possibilities of representing the real onstage. The idea that any play might convey “absolute truth” is ambitious at best and delusional at worst, and does not recognize the mediated nature of the re-production of truth represented by verbatim theatre.

Kent goes on to describe some of the techniques he uses for creating a sensation of “truth” for his audience:

KENT. I’ve always worked with microphones and with the house lights up, which is an attempt to diffuse the theatricality of the process, so that the audience are in the room with the characters and we’re all in it together; the audience’s laughter, their anger or their being moved is all part of the same event. And the microphones mean that the actors don’t even have to put on a louder voice in order to be heard. The hyper-naturalism of everything being very low-key means it’s nearer to the truth, I suppose [. . .]. (Kent 156)

The way that Kent talks about the play as an “event” shared by actors, crew, and audience reveals the separation that must necessarily exist between the historical event being presented and the theatrical event that represents it.

However, his next rhetorical move is to collapse those two events, claiming that the theatrical event’s non-theatrical ambience somehow brings it nearer to the truth. Of course, the audience is no more nearer to the “truth”, where the truth is understood to be the source material, than they would be if the house lights were down and the actors spoke projecting to the back of the theatre; Kent is confusing purity with a well-crafted illusion of purity.

Kent's hard line on the relationship between his verbatim plays and reality is an example of an extreme view; other dramatists take more moderate approaches to describing the way that they portray the real. Many of the playwrights that appear in *Verbatim Verbatim* refer to a tension that arises anytime truthfulness comes into play. Using language like "cheat", "tension", "manipulative", they discuss the ways that they reconcile their own role in manipulating or even inventing the scenes in their plays with their desire to represent the "truth".

There are various routes to take to justify the tension between truthfulness and theatre. David Hare, for example, rather than directly defending his decisions as dramatist, creates a conceit in which he compares performance and writing, with writing coming out unsatisfactorily and thereby putting performance ahead:

HARE Yes, but I've heard very few examples where people have gone to plays and felt misrepresented. I think it's to do with the act of standing up and pretending to be somebody, which I believe is a revelatory process, while just putting lines of writing down on a page is less revelatory. In other words, I believe print is much more manipulative than performance. I think the truth of what goes on is revealed in performance, whereas the truth of what goes on is not so clearly revealed by being written down on the page. (Hare and Stafford-Clark 71)

The comparison is unnecessary and unprompted, but Hare avoids any accusations of manipulating the truth by putting out the written text as a scapegoat, passing on the accusation to unnamed writers who supposedly obscure more than theatre practitioners do.

Richard Norton-Taylor, too, a journalist who works with Nicolas Kent on tribunal plays, echoes this assertion, zeroing in on journalism as the site of obfuscation in contrast to theatre's illumination:

Despite initial misgivings – my own as much as anyone else's – our staging of the Scott Inquiry was heralded as a major success. [. . .] And during our staging we exposed the truth about the 'Arms to Iraq' scandal – or at least, the closest any public report had got to the truth; certainly closer than I could have got as a journalist. (Norton-Taylor 106).

It is difficult to say how Norton-Taylor arrives at such a drastic conclusion, condemning journalism to always being one step behind theatre in the search for the truth. Other than his own experience as a journalist, which gives him credibility for having participated in both forms of truth-exposing, the assertion is dropped and seems to stand alone, unsupported. It, like Hare's statement, serves to divert the critic's attention to other discourses of truth that are said to compare unfavorably to verbatim theatre when it comes to exposing reality, rather than establish theatre's credentials as a source of truth.

Max Stafford-Clark, author of *Via Dolorosa* and *The Permanent Way*, in a similar gesture, turns the question of manipulation and truthfulness around onto his interviewers:

HAMMOND So is there ever a tension between being faithful to your interviewees and making a good drama?

STAFFORD-CLARK Yes, and just like this interview, where you're going to choose and edit what is said, that's what you do. (Hare and Stafford-Clark 60)

The defensiveness present in these interviews might be a residual build-up of having to answer to critics, especially when dealing with such controversial issues as the Israel-Palestine conflict

(*Via Dolorosa*) or the privatization of national railways (*The Permanent Way*), where toes are sure to be stepped on and accusations likely to fly.

However, the defensiveness also seems to be answering to an internal critic, one that desires deeply to represent the truth as faithfully as possible while recognizing the creative role that the author plays in such a process. The self-justification that follows usually appeals to aspects of theatre other than the truthfulness of verbatim theatre; values like entertainment, clarity, and fluidity are also important. Soans calls it “cheating”, but through a semantic transformation of the term “truth” explains himself and his actions:

But do I ever cheat? Is there ever a tension between being truthful to the interviewees and creating something that I know is going to work theatrically? The answer is yes – but not a lot.

To expand on this admission, I would say that it depends on what is meant by being truthful: literal truth or truth in spirit? A literal truth would rely on an exact replication of the research in its entirety – a tiresome and practically impossible undertaking. My sense of ‘truthfulness’ to the interviewee puts the emphasis on representing them truthfully in spirit. I might make small changes to the text for the sake of clarity or fluidity, but I take great pains to preserve the sense, tone and thrust of an interviewee’s words. If, for the sake of an and or a but, what they say becomes much clearer, I have no qualms about inserting such a word. Why alienate or confuse an audience for the sake of a monosyllable or two? (Soans 41)

Soans’ semantic reassigning of truth to mean “truth in spirit” rather than “literal truth” flies in the face of Blythe’s assertion that only by copying word-for-word the recorded utterances of the interviewees is theatre able to convey truth as well as be interesting. Soans himself, when he defends against artificiality, appeals to idiosyncrasy and bizarreness (above), values seemingly at odds with the clarity he defends here.

Blythe, too, who ardently defends the ums and ahs, fillers that somehow conserve the moment of utterance with all of its spontaneity, must backtrack and explain decisions she made when her play *A Man in a Box* was adapted for television.

The television producers were concerned that the edited interviews simply weren’t dramatic enough to keep people tuned in, so they encouraged me to write fictional scenes to include within the verbatim drama. Having never actually written dialogue before, I found this a very scary prospect. We met to brainstorm ideas. The script editor did a marvelous job of refereeing the meetings, while the director suggested possible story-lines and scenarios, which I rejected with my ‘truthometer’. Eventually, I lowered the level of truth on the gauge and started buying into the heightened dramatic narrative that the producers and director required. (Blythe 95-96)

It is interesting that Blythe, whose radical technique of piping the recordings in for actors to imitate night after night supposedly conserves the reality effect of the play, would admit to recalibrating her truthometer. This selling out, however, is portrayed as going hand in hand with the adaptation for television: the theatre remains pristine as the site of truth-telling.

The tension between truthfulness and theatre is, as we have seen, a phenomenon acknowledged by almost every practitioner of verbatim drama in the volume; it remains, too, an unresolved tension as the various dramatists cope with it by avoiding it, passing it off to other media or genres, or redefining truth to include their own practices. Another important aspect of

the way these theatre practitioners deal with truth is their conception of what the audience knows and what the audience should know about the source material.

Documentary theatre has had a strong association with didactic theatre throughout its history, which can help explain the persistent obsession with remaining true to the facts that we have seen in the interviews. Arias, above, speaks of the need to explain to audiences on the other side of the world unthinkable aspects of her nation's history; Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol see themselves as making a shadowy segment of Mexican history more transparent. This preoccupation can also include the desire to effect social change through the revelations made in documentary theatre. All of these intentions depend on the audiences' understanding and belief that the play is based on truth or *is* true, in some sense.

Blythe speaks of the audience's "right" to know what her plays' source material is; this could probably better be described as the right of her sources to be credited in the play. However, her insistence on the audience's being informed is a sentiment shared by most theatrical documentarians.<sup>7</sup> She acknowledges the need for the play to be crafted by the dramatist, but also insists on the value of the audience's understanding its real nature, using both informal and legal language for support:

The play should be strong enough to stand up on its own, but it becomes all the more poignant when the audience knows that it's created from real life recordings. (More importantly, if the audience did not know that the words were real I would feel like I was conning them. The audience has a right to know where the material comes from.) (Blythe 99-100)

Here Blythe appeals to emotion ("poignant") and a vague idea of rights ("the audience has a right to know") in combination with the negative value of "conning them" to claim the necessity of conveying the reality of the play to the audience. However, there are few swindlers like the one she posits, directors who would take the transcripts of interviews or trials and craft them into a play without revealing their source. In fact, the deception, a term I use only to match the strength of Blythe's discourse, lies more on the side of those that would attempt to convince the audience that what they are seeing onstage is "true" or "real".<sup>8</sup> There would be no gain for the con artist in the scenario that Blythe posits, because the objective of documentary theatre is precisely to convey a feeling of truth, not to present fact as fiction.

The push-pull between authenticity and representation present in *Verbatim Verbatim*, as well as in the interviews I cited with Arias, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, and Tellas, does not resolve any questions of the possibilities of staging "absolute truth". What it does is show that the desire to present the real is in conflict with the desire to create theatre. I won't attempt to resolve that conflict here; indeed, I believe that the resulting tension is one of documentary theatre's, especially auto/biographical theatre's, most salient characteristics.

Practitioners of documentary theatre are sucked into the vortex of attempting to classify their work as "true" or even "more true" than other media as they try to explain to themselves and others the new kind of work they are doing. Critics and scholars of theatre, as well, must grapple with terminology and concepts to describe, analyze, and interpret such work. In general, scholarly writing focuses less on coming down on one side of the authenticity/artificiality debate and more on analyzing the techniques used to create a truth claim, or the possibility of theatre as

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Three, "The Problem of Verbatim," and Chapter Four, "The Limits of the Self," for more on techniques that are used to convey the reality of the source material to audiences.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter One, "The Artisans of Aura," for my take on the way that authors efface themselves and their role in representing the real.

an alternative source of truth. The most nuanced scholarly analyses of documentary theatre recognize it as being a metatheatrical criticism of the (im)possibility of representing reality.

The pact that the play makes with its audience, the one which conveys to them that they can trust what is being presented as factual or based in fact, is often at the center of scholarly discussions of documentary theatre. Language revolves around issues of trust. Dan Hammond and Will Steward, in their introduction to *Verbatim Verbatim* speak for the audience when they say, “We trust and expect that we are not being lied to” (Hammond and Steward, Introduction 10). Within the confines of the theatre, where generally an audience comes with the express intention of, if not being lied to, suspending their disbelief to enjoy a representation, this statement seems paradoxical.

Carol Martin, in *Theatre of the Real*, also turns to the audience’s trust in documentary evidence: “Documents are presumed to be authentic (not forged, distorted, or invented) and are assumed to preexist the theatrical performance based on those documents. Paradoxically, the ability to perform authentic documents has become dependent on reproduction” (Martin, *Theatre of the Real* 10). The spectator feels informed enough to make assumptions regarding the authenticity of the evidence presented in this conception of documentary theatre, meaning that the truth claim has been conveyed to the audience clearly enough through some mechanism external to the narrative of the play.

Janelle Reinelt attempts to parse audience expectations in her work on documentary theatre. She gives the audience credit for understanding the paradoxical nature of the experience they are undertaking: they must simultaneously accept as “true” a concocted representation of the truth:

The appeal of the old-fashioned documentary may be that it meets a deep collective urge for the link between knowledge and truth [. . .]. In this case, audiences know that documents, facts, and evidence are always mediated when they are received; they know there is no raw truth apart from interpretation, but still, they want to experience the assertion of the materiality of events, of the indisputable character of the facts – one reason why trials and hearings, given force of law, still have so much resonance. (Reinelt, “Toward a Poetics of Theatre and Public Events” 39)

Reinelt refers to the emotional needs of the audience in an attempt to explain their desire to believe. Her account of documentary theatre assigns it a ritualistic quality, in which the assertion of an event is a worthwhile, fulfilling activity in and of itself.

This constellation of criticism referring to audience reception of documentary theatre, then, describes the audience’s relationship to the play using emotionally-charged language such as “trust”; “being lied to”; “assumed”; “collective urge”; “want to experience”. Even as the evidence is used to establish indisputable facts, its real work in the theatre, gleaned by reading between the critics’ lines, is to affect the audience.

To discuss the ways that these various theories might inform my analysis of contemporary Brazilian theatre, I will now turn to Jatahy’s *A Falta Que Nos Move*. In 2004, the carioca director and playwright Christiane Jatahy opened her trilogy *Uma cadeira para a solidão, duas para o dialogo e três para a sociedade* ‘One chair for solitude, two for dialogue, and three for society’ with the play *Conjugado* ‘Studio Apartment,’ a monologue that uses performance, documentary film, and installation to recreate the life of a woman. Part two, *A Falta Que Nos Move ou Todas as Histórias São Ficção*, debuted in 2005 and has onstage actors

preparing supper and awaiting a mystery guest, all the while conversing with the audience. Finally, in 2010 the trilogy closed with *Corte Seco* 'Cut,' a piece that further blurred the lines between fiction and reality by placing cameras in the surrounding areas of the theatre and projecting their feeds onstage. The director and technical team are plainly visible, and their interventions are unignorable, which draws attention to the theatrical process.

The play is structured around five actors, who seem to be waiting for a sixth actor. They address the audience, improvising, explaining that they have to wait for the last actor, whose had some sort of difficulty, to show up before they can begin the play. Of course, this waiting for the play is the play itself, and an hour and a half later the mysterious sixth guest hasn't arrived, and the five actors sit down to eat for the grand finale.

The writing credits on the first page of the script give authorship to Christiane Jatahy, who is also the director of the play. However, there is also a note stating that the play was created in collaboration with the actors, naming each of them. From the start, then, there is a tension revealed concerning authorship, as the supremacy of Jatahy is clearly stated, while the actors are given secondary credit for their collaboration.

The identification of collaborative authorship also signals to the audience that the play they are about to see is unique and specific to the actors that will present it, as well as hinting to the play's status as "theatre of the real." Other auto/biographical and documentary plays use programs, direct address to the audience by the actors, or even projected text on the back wall of the theatre to indicate the reality of the play's content. Here, the play itself will both propose and question the possibility of representing the real onstage, and the mediation of that reality through Jatahy, the playwright.

The set itself also does this silent work of communicating to the audience the subtle questioning of both the possibility of representing the real as well as the blurred lines between witness and compiler. The stage is set with a table and six chairs. Ingredients and utensils for cooking a meal, including a piece of raw meat, are on top of the table, and in the back there is a working, industrial-sized oven. The trick of using raw meat onstage to invoke the real is as old as Naturalist theatre, and as you can imagine, the aroma adds to the reality effect. The sound and light controls, rather than being in the back of the auditorium, are located at stage left, and are openly operated by the actors themselves throughout the play. Just as the five actors are given silent credit in the program for their collaboration in writing the play, their participation as technicians also subtly blurs the lines between actor and writer/director. The actors, by seemingly running the show autonomously, efface the presence and influence of Jatahy.

As I mentioned before, the role of the audience in creating a joint text is an important aspect of postdramatic theatre, and *A Falta Que Nos Move* is no exception. As the audience files in, the actors greet them, and often directly address them or allow for audience participation to shape the night's production. The first line of the play has Kiko, after the audience has settled in and waited a bit, telling them:

KIKO. I would like to apologize on behalf of the production, but we're going to be a little delayed because we are waiting for one of the actors who should be arriving any minute, he had a little problem but he's almost here...and we're going to stay here waiting for him with you all...we just need a little patience.  
(Jatahy 2)

This audience address not only involves the spectators from the very start, implicating them in the waiting game that turns out to be the play, but also continues the work of camouflaging the

role of the compiler, Jatahy. Whereas an audience member might expect a stage manager or director to deliver such extraordinary news, it is unusual for an actor to break character and appear as himself before the audience. The trick, of course, is that Kiko is not breaking character – this is his character, and his opening line.

Another aspect of postdramatic theatre that Lehmann identifies is the element of randomness, and *A Falta Que Nos Move* quickly incorporates a coin toss into the games it plays with the audience to create the illusion of freedom from authorial control. The actors sit around the table, drinking the first of several bottles of wine and improvising conversation. They offer wine to some audience members, and include them in their time-killing chatter. Finally Pedro suggests a coin toss to determine whether or not they will change the subject of their conversation. However, he blatantly cheats when he calls the toss, determining that they will continue with the same topic. Later, when they are discussing whether or not they should go ahead and start cooking the meat without the sixth actor, Pedro suggests another coin toss to decide. This time Kiko defies him:

KIKO. No Pedro! You always manipulate the toss, we're going to play evens or odds.

[. . .]

(He plays evens or odds with someone from the audience, depending on the result, they either put the meat in the oven or don't.) (Jatahy 14)

By initially revealing that the coin toss is rigged, the play lets the audience know that there is an agency at work in determining the seemingly improvised flow of conversation. However, the fact that Pedro is the one manipulating the game further hides the true force behind the play's direction: the author. The game with the audience, which only determines whether the meat goes into the oven at that point or later, also does the work of allowing the audience to create a joint text with the actors, and distancing them yet more from the playwright.

The conversation continues, at times improvised but mostly following a script, and the actors begin talking about their memories. Some of them are individual, personal memories. However, these individual memories are scrambled, repeated by more than one of the actors, so that the audience has no way of knowing whether they are invented or true, and, if they are real memories, to whom they belong.

For example, at one point early in the play three of the actors stand up and address the audience simultaneously. The stage directions say "*The audience chooses what it wants to look at and listen to.*" (Jatahy 3) The note is a strange one, because there is no way of knowing what the audience will do – the spectators do not have access to the script, and therefore are not aware that the author is directing them to choose a focal point. However, for anyone who does have the chance to look at the play's text, this stage direction is revealing of the role of the author in this play. Even as the authorial agency is constantly effaced by the illusion of randomness, audience influence on the outcome, and the actors' taking on the role of the stage crew, it is present in the play's text, similar to the voice that Bill Nichols notes in his analysis of documentary film. Here Jatahy is attempting to assert her authority over the audience, and is actually able to do so, because her desire for the audience to choose one of the many stories to listen to is carried out by the actors onstage.

The individual memories seem to be based on reality, as the audience is aware that the actors are playing themselves. However, the fact that they are following a script that has been arranged beforehand comes to light as the memories are jumbled, their owners confused. For



example, at one point Marina tells a section of the audience that when her father left, she hid in the shower with his suitcase, and thought that it was a game. Cris, however, addresses the same section of the audience directly afterward, and repeats the memory word for word with one alteration. At the end, after a pause, she asks the audience, “True or false?”

This game of true or false becomes a motif of the play. Later, the same two actresses will argue over Cris’ real name. Marina accuses her of being called Cristina Pinto Coelho, saying that Cristina Amadeo is her stage name. However, in the middle of her accusation she mentions her own grandmother Elza, and Kiko breaks in, saying that Elza is his grandmother, not Marina’s. The implication of all of this doubt and questioning is not necessarily that the play is a fiction; rather, it reinforces the idea that there *is* a truth buried somewhere in the lies. While the authorial agency hides its strong influence over the play with false games of chance, the constant accusations of lying only strengthen the audience’s connection to the idea that the play belongs to theatre of the real.

A later game, also instigated by Kiko, involves the macabre hypothesis that he is HIV positive, and he playfully goads Marina into guessing whether it’s true or false. She ignores him, attempting to change the subject. However, her uncomfortable reaction is akin to the stage direction for the audience I mention earlier. The constant hints that the play is representing the real puts the audience into the awkward position of guessing whether or not Kiko is telling the truth. The author, once again, wields authority over the real lives of the auto/biographing actors, as well as over the audience members.

The play concludes with the five actors making a toast to the future, and Pedro goes to the light board. He turns off the lights, waits a beat, then turns them back on and says “Begin” (Jatahy 46). The others continue eating at the table, and the play ends. The expectation is never fulfilled, and the truth about whether what was presented is reality or fiction never comes out. In fact, the secondary title “All Stories are Fiction”, would seem to hint that the play itself is a fiction. The audience came to see a play that was never going to be put on, and waited for an actor who was never going to arrive. The reminder, it would seem, is that even the theatre of the real must be experienced critically.

I would not consider *A Falta Que Nos Move* to be a representative of the documentary theatre genre. In fact, even its status as an auto/biographical play is tenuous. There is little evidence, textual or otherwise, that the stories being represented onstage are true. However, what the play does imply is that they *might* be, or *could* be real. This, along with the fact that the actors are in fact playing themselves, or a version of themselves, places the work among the examples of theatre of the real that can be found proliferating in contemporary Latin American theatre.

The fact that Jatahy is experimenting with the theatre of the real, exploring the role of memory in constructing a character, and participating in the construction of the concept of an author in this genre, makes *A Falta Que Nos Move*, as well as the other plays in the trilogy, *Conjugado* and *Corte Seco*, important examples to consider in any study of contemporary Latin American theatre. Jatahy’s work is in dialogue with artists in Brazil, like Freitas, as well as in Latin America. In Argentina, Vivi Tellas’ work puts non-actors onstage to represent themselves, using a concept of “found theatre”, while Lola Arias’ plays focus heavily on personal and inherited memories, and the inheritance of a generation whose parents were often lost to dictatorship in one way or another. In Mexico and the United States, too, companies like Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol or The Civilians experiment with national and personal history in their

documentary plays. One of the tasks of the current analysis is to put this body of work in dialogue in order to identify tendencies and national, cultural, or linguistic differences that can tell us more about this moment in which the real has become one of the most important concepts in cultural production.

In *A Falta Que Nos Move* as well as other plays I've mentioned, the position of the author is called into question even as the playwright gains authority over personal territory: the life story of another person. On the one hand, authors like Jatahy, Arias, Tellas and Freitas openly share credit with the subjects of their interviews as sources for the material; on the other, those same interview subjects are the actors that will portray their own words in a mediated form onstage. While in traditional documentary theatre professional actors recite lines just as they would with any traditional dramatic play, the only difference being that the lines were culled from testimony, interviews, letters, or diaries, here the actors (professional or not) are reciting lines that were crafted from their very own stories. In Peter Weiss' *The Investigation*, the play about the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, a director has the discretion to choose the cast that she considers the best fit for her vision; in a play like *A Falta Que Nos Move*, however, the audience expects that only Kiko, Pedro, Marina, Cris, and Dani could possibly act in the play. They are not only the creative collaborators who helped develop the play's content; they are also characters in the play whose names are their own names, bodies their own bodies, and memories their own memories. It is in this insistence upon specificity and uniqueness, in which only a certain set of actors could conceivably play the roles in an autobiographical play, or risk changing its autobiographical significance, which belies the often heavy-handed editorial role that the playwright has in compiling the testimony of the actors. While the audience is convinced that, because the character is supposed to be the same person as the actor, the content being delivered is unmediated, direct, and true, the role of the author in compiling, modifying and making new meaning for the material is often easy to ignore.

The tension between truthfulness and artificiality in documentary theatre is unresolved, and by understanding audience's reactions to it as complex, we can see how that unresolved tension might be assimilated as neither one thing nor the other. Martin sensitively acknowledges what is easy to forget in discussions of authenticity; that even in a postmodern world of doubt and fragmentation, "most people live guided by convictions about what they believe to be true. It's this world – the world where truth is championed even as we experience our failure to ever know it with absolute finality – that theatre of the real attempts to stage. Its assertion is that there is something to be known in addition to a dizzying kaleidoscopic array of competing truths" (Martin, Introduction 3-4).

The black-and-white truth-or-fiction frontier is not necessary. The theatre provides a unique space, apart from film, television, or a court of law, where both intensity and form can be assimilated in the shared experience, the communion between audience and actor. Taking into account the nuanced, complex world of emotion and logic that each spectator brings to the theatre, truth becomes something that is not only proven; it is felt.

### Chapter 3: The Problem of Verbatim: The Fetishization of Language

Documentary or verbatim theatre<sup>9</sup> depends on an agreement between spectator and play that some inkling of what is presented onstage has a strong relationship with reality. This accord requires mental gymnastics that allow viewers (as well as the directors, playwrights, and actors) to simultaneously accept the truth and the theatrics of the representation. In some auto/biographical theatre the seams between truth and theatre are well hidden; the fact that the onstage body is the one that lived through the reality being represented makes it that much easier to accept the fusion of the fictional with the real. However, actors and audiences alike know that the production is precisely that, a product, and must reconcile the temporal and spatial distances between the events being portrayed and their portrayal in a sort of psychic split that simultaneously accepts the product as both reality and representation.

What binds the two together is language and, in the case of auto/biographical theatre, corporeal experience.<sup>10</sup> If the audience is convinced that the words being spoken onstage are the exact words of the person who lived through the portrayed occurrence, then this language serves as a fulcrum upon which the balance of reality and representation rests. However, there is always an awareness of the impossibility of representing the already-lived. When playwrights focus on this inevitable failure, and explicitly mention the way they have edited, cut, and produced the lived experiences, they create a complicity with their audiences. Their documentary plays become that much more authentic. This chapter focuses on the fetishization of language in documentary theatre, particularly in the play *Sem Falsidades* (2010) by Brazilian writer-director Márcio Freitas, as well as the way that an aesthetics of failure allows for the psychic split necessary for such a fetishization.

To fully explain what I mean by this, it will be useful to look at the critical definitions of so-called verbatim theatre. Writers on the subject vary in perspective (some are practitioners, others critics), but most emphasize that it is how the play is made that determines its status as verbatim. In their critical anthology *Verbatim, Verbatim*, Will Hammond and Dan Steward focus on this (mainly British) term to define a technique, rather than a form:

The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used.

In this sense, verbatim is not a form, it is a technique; it is a means rather than an end. (Hammond and Steward 9).

Their definition depends on the origins and creation process of the plays' texts, not the final result.

While Hammond and Steward are right in highlighting the fact that verbatim theatre depends upon a process or technique for its definition, I would point out that this kind of theatre is often formally recognizable. Verbatim plays often employ recorded sound and video, and some mechanism for communicating the reality of the themes to the audience, and frequently

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<sup>9</sup> Generally, what is called verbatim theatre in the United Kingdom is referred to as documentary theatre elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Four for more on lived, bodily experience and auto/biographical theatre.

mix historical context with individual stories. Not only do they share such formal aspects, but their content often shows certain similarities.

These plays often have a political bent. Attilio Favorini explains the roots of the documentary genre, which are inextricable from their politico-historical context. The critic describes how technological advances such as the modern newspaper and historical archives, as well as the rise of the social sciences, “exerted increasing pressure on the theater to represent reality concretely, precisely, and directly. Although this may sound superficially like a rehash of the project of Naturalism or Realism, in practice documentary theater rejected both the emphasis on the clash of personalities, hallmark of the old historical drama, and psychological drama in the realistic idiom” (Favorini xviii). Notice that Favorini not only focuses on the process and techniques, as Hammond and Steward do, but on their reasons for being. The use of recorded sound and image in the theatre did not spring up spontaneously, but rather was the product of technological advances. However, Favorini’s description varies from Hammond and Steward’s as he finally does focus on formal characteristics that would pit documentary theatre against genres such as the Naturalism or Realism.

Documentary or verbatim theatre has its roots in the Living Newspaper plays, a product of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The genre would later take root in the United States in the 1930s as part of the WPA’s Federal Theatre Project. Favorini points out that from the start, with the first (though never performed, due to censorship) U.S. Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia* (1936) by Arthur Arent and Elmer Rice, the insistence on using a subject’s exact words was already strong. The play took on Italy’s 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, and the Roosevelt administration’s neutrality. After receiving a request for a speech made by Roosevelt, the WPA ruled that “‘No one impersonating a ruler or Cabinet officer shall actually appear on the stage. If it is useful for you to do so, the words of such persons may be quoted by the others’” (Favorini xxiii). Thus, a complicated precedent is set with one of the very first documentary dramas. With this political ruling, the importance of acquiring transcripts of speeches, interviews, and other proceedings in order to scramble them into a dramatic presentation is established for the genre. Political themes continue to be a common thread in contemporary documentary theatre.

Context is key in these issues, and the documentary genre in general is implicated in its representation or revision of political and historical context. In *Autobiography and Performance*, Deirdre Heddon reminds us that, in documentary theatre, interviewees and interview transcripts undergo a process of selection and edition that cannot be understood as free of directorial intent:

Verbatim plays do not, typically, provide us with the full contextual information of the interviewing process itself; speech is lifted out of context and used within a different context. [. . .] As the interviewer is often invisible in the subsequently represented interview, we are unable to witness the extent to which the speech statements are jointly authored, the creation of a collaborative or interactive process rather than unprompted and unmediated reflections. Where an address to the interviewer is included within the performed text, this seems only to increase the appeal to ‘veracity’ rather than provide any actual contextual information regarding the interviewing process and the dynamics that structured it or indeed the process by which the recorded interview was subsequently edited and restructured. (Heddon 131)

Heddon observes that the exact interview context, as well as the subsequent edition of the transcripts, is often hidden from audiences.

It is important, however, to note that the interviewer is often referred to within many documentary plays (like the ones treated in this project), and while the “full” context is unavailable to the viewer, these plays often depend on the audience’s at least partial understanding of the interview context. Plays like *the Laramie Project* by the Tectonic Theater Project and *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans have made this interview process a well-known documentary drama technique, and plenty of critics have commented on the problematic relationship between interviewer and interviewee.<sup>11</sup>

The play analyzed here, *Sem Falsidades*, produced in Rio de Janeiro in 2011, forms part of a growing tendency toward exploring the real in theatre. Artists push the boundaries of what constitutes theatrical space, an actor, or theatricality. Unlike the plays Heddon describes, in which the interviewer is effaced and doesn’t appear in the final production as a figure of any importance, the 2011 play *Sem Falsidades* by Márcio Freitas widely broadcasts the process used to arrive at the play. With the help of social media and a website, viewers can download copies of the script, and read a detailed description of the process used to arrive at the play. Billed as an “*espetáculo teatral baseado nos depoimentos de 12 jovens atrizes*” ‘theatrical performance based on the interviews of 12 young actresses’ (Freitas, “Projeto versão 2011” 1), the play puts the interview at the forefront of its paratextual and virtual world of documents.

One of these accompanying documents is the visual plan for the play, which contains three, square sections of either images or text on each page. The images are photographs of five different young women. The first section, which includes the title page and introductory text, (Freitas, “Projeto versão 2011” 1-3) shows the women with their hair up, all turned toward their right, with their right hand placed on their neck. There is no clothing visible in any of the shots.

Some have tan lines, some wear earrings or rings, others have their nails painted. All of them are wearing makeup. (See fig. 3.) Freitas posts on the play’s blog, describing the photos: “[. . .] an attempt to copy a posed photo of Marília Pera (I have the impression that it was of Marília Pera, but I’m not sure, it might have been of Fernanda Montenegro or of Tonia Carrera, I’m not finding the photo on the computer here, it was one of the three, I think)” (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades*). This, one of many instances of playful mimesis of reality, alerts the reader to the directorial unreliability at work in the play.

The photographs surround the introductory text in the visual plan, which describes the play thusly:

**Sem Falsidades** é uma montagem teatral inédita, de uma hora de duração, na qual cinco atrizes discursam diante de um público, a partir de um texto composto por material proveniente de depoimentos reais.

A concepção do espetáculo parte de uma aproximação dos relatos autobiográficos de jovens atrizes residentes na cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Ao longo de 2009, forma entrevistadas 12 atrizes. Todas elas haviam concluído, a menos de 5 anos, um curso de formação de atores. São atrizes no começo da carreira, com inserção ainda frágil no meio teatral.

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<sup>11</sup> For criticism on the interviewer-interviewee relationship in these two plays, see Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster. “Performing the “Really” Real: Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in The Laramie Project.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 19.2 (2005): 127-45. Digital file; Stephen J. Bottoms. “Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?” *TDR: The Drama Review* 50.3 (2006): 56-68. Digital file; Ryan Claycomb. “(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, The Communal Subject and Progressive Politics.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17 (2003): 95-122. Digital file; and Ester Žantovská. “The Limits of the Representation of Authenticity: Documentary Drama and Politics Today.” *Literraria Pragensia* 20.39 (2010): 73-91. Digital file.

Deparamos-nos com tentativas falhadas, que biografam uma falta de sucesso, falam de incertezas, discursam de um lugar rebaixado. (Freitas, “Projeto versão 2011” 3)

*Sem Falsidades* is an unpublished theatrical montage, with a running time of one hour, in which five actresses hold forth before an audience, based on a text composed of material from real testimonies.

The conception of this performance builds on an approach to the autobiographical accounts of young actresses residing in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Throughout 2009, twelve actresses were interviewed. All of them had completed, within five years prior, a degree in acting. They are actresses at the beginning of their career, with a still-fragile foothold in the world of theatre. We come across failed attempts, the biography of a lack of success; they speak of uncertainty, holding forth from a relegated position.

The significance of the interviews, then, is clear from the start, if one has access to this PDF file, downloadable in 2011 from the website <http://semfalsidades.com.br>, and their importance will continue to be emphasized throughout the visual plan as well as in the play itself.

The script, the visual plan tells us, is made up of the transcripts of the interviews, which were then chopped into a series of small passages, which were in turn “remixed” into a script to be performed in the theatre. Freitas insists,

A organização das falas em um texto teatral é uma descontextualização, um remix. O interesse não é documental, o texto não almeja reconstituir a vida de cada depoente; ele cria outro discurso com o recorte, misturando as memórias, caminhando em direção à investigação do discurso em si. (Freitas, “Projeto versão 2011” 4)

The organization of the lines in a theatrical text is a decontextualization, a remix. The interest is not documentary, the text does not seek to reconstitute the life of each interviewee; it creates another discourse with the cutting, mixing the memories, moving toward an investigation into discourse itself.

While insisting on the centrality of the interviews to the theatrical process here, Freitas then feints a rejection of the documentary intention.

Even as the reality of the actresses and their words continues to be reiterated, the biographical gesture is relegated to a secondary status. It is not only this extra-theatrical material that makes the interview process clear for the audience. Before the play begins, a description of it, outlining the fact that the play is based on interviews with twelve young

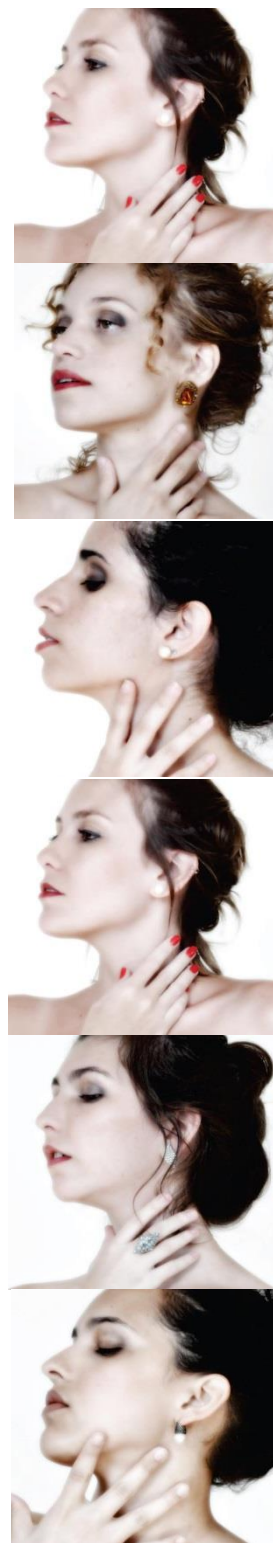


Figure 3 Posed photographs of actresses. Source: Freitas “Projeto versão 2011” 1-4.

actresses, is projected onto the back wall of the stage. Later, a disclaimer of sorts is projected:

O que ficar gravado dessa conversa aqui pode aparecer escrito em algum lugar, ou ser falado em algum lugar. Pode também não ser utilizado, ou ser utilizado for a do contexto original. Essas palavras nunca vão aparecer especificamente associadas à pessoa que falou, nem ao nome da pessoa nem à imagem da pessoa. Eu também vou fazer o máximo para omitir detalhes do discurso que possam, de alguma forma, identificar quem falou. Mas, no fim das contas, o que for gravado dessa conversa aqui pode ser utilizado por mim da maneira que eu achar apropriado. Tudo bem? (Freitas, “Questionário para jovens atrizes” 1)

The recorded part of this conversation might appear written in any place, or be spoken in any place. It may also not be used, or be used out of its original context. These words will never appear specifically associated with the person who uttered them, or with the name of the person or the image of the person. I will also do my utmost to omit details of the speech that could, in some way, identify the speaker. But, in the end, what is recorded in this conversation may be used by me in the manner I deem appropriate. Okay?

This humorous use of the disclaimer, as the first thing the audience sees in the darkened theatre, and its surprise, informal ending (*Tudo bem?* in the original Portuguese), serves a triple purpose.

First, it lets the audience know from the start that some sort of interview will come to bear on the succeeding show. Second, it reveals the imbalance of power between interviewer and interviewee, with the former wielding complete control over the words of the latter. Finally, it announces that reality, or some semblance of it, is of importance to understanding the play.

Like the disclaimer, the themes of the actresses’ answers are projected in white text on the back wall as they are “remixed” onstage. They take on the structure of a Bildungsroman, beginning with when the actresses first “knew” they wanted to act [“*desde pequenininha*” ‘since I was a tiny little girl’ (Freitas “*Projeção Sem Falsidades* 7)], advancing through their school years [“*ano de vestibular*” ‘senior year’ (11) and “*as piores*” ‘the worst’ (23)], and ending up with their wish for “*um outro teatro*” ‘another kind of theatre’ (127). By categorizing the fragments of the testimonies collected in the interviews, Freitas at once imposes his directorial voice on the individual stories and, simultaneously, reveals the cliché or universality of the actresses’ experiences.

What ends up being acted out onstage is a presentation of edited, produced identity. The five actresses cycle through playing either one *mulher* ‘woman’ or various *locutoras* ‘speakers’. The *mulher* stands at stage left, reading from a large book on a lectern, whose passages seem to be from her journal. She (or “shes”, as the woman is clearly not singular; she is played by all of the actresses at various times, and claims to be of several different ages) reflects on failure, her education as an actress, and uncertainty as to her vocation (Freitas, “Projeto versão 2011” 5). As she speaks, however, she often gives the impression that she is reading the journal for the first time, as if she were doing a cold reading of a monologue. She hesitates, pauses, and looks to be reading ahead for meaning.

In contrast to her halting style, the *locutoras* trade anecdotes in a quick back-and-forth reminiscent of *Annie Get Your Gun*. They attempt to top each other’s stories of childhood, their first contact with the theatre, their hopefulness, harsh reality, and regret (Freitas, “Projeto versão 2011” 5). The *locutoras* interrupt one story only to tell another that sounds quite similar to the one being cut off:

LOCUTORAS. Eu sempre, desde pequenininha, quis ser atriz. [. . .] Eu comecei a estudar teatro com 12 anos, né... Não não, na verdade foi com 9, eu comecei a fazer cursinho de teatro com 9 anos. (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 1.46-67)

LOCUTORAS. I always, since I was itty bitty, wanted to be an actress. [. . .] I started studying theatre when I was 12 years old, you know?... No, no, actually it was when I was 9, I started a little theatre course when I was 9.

The audience has no idea to whom each account belongs, and whether or not its teller is onstage. The overall effect is a sense of just how clichéd (or, to be more generous, universal) these deeply personal stories are.

First off, the play's script contains references to the presence of an interviewer or interlocutor. The characters often ask for clarification or refer to a second person. In one case a locutora confirms, as though someone doubted the truth of her statement, that she was indeed an athlete as a teenager:

LOCUTORAS. Eu lembro que eu sempre joguei tênis, né, então fui aquela adolescente que tinha – é, era atleta, era atleta – e eu tinha a rotina preenchida, assim, saía da escola jogava tênis, a tarde inteira, treinava mesmo, de verdade. (1.107-110)

LOCUTORAS. I remember that I always played tennis, you know?, so I was that that teenager that had – yeah, I was an athlete, I was an athlete – and I had a full routine, like, I left school, I played tennis, the whole afternoon, I really practiced, truly.

The audience must imagine the interviewers' doubt, perhaps a tone of flirtatious incredulity, that the young actress was once a tennis player.

Because the players address the audience for the entire length of the play, the spectator is put into the position of interviewer. Armed with the program, which includes information about the interview process, the audience is made to believe that the script is formed of the interviewed actresses' testimony. These verbal inflections, referring to that mysterious figure of the interviewer, work to remind the audience both of the real status of the text as well as the unreliability (as far as faithfulness to the truth goes) of the director, who has used the testimonies however he chooses.

The play also displays heavy use of intertextuality, likening itself to the actresses with their shared experiences and situations. Just as the characters in the play cite one another (or rather, plagiarize one another, given that one never knows the original source of the text), the play itself cites other works on the art of theatre. Freitas specifically cites the biographies of Liv Ullmann, the Norwegian actress and director who appeared in several of Ingmar Bergman's movies as well as many stage productions.

These references reveal a focus on the problems of the documentary genre. In particular, the play is indebted to David E. Outerbridge's *Without Makeup: Liv Ullmann. A Photo-biography*, whose Portuguese title, *Sem Falsidades*, gives Freitas' play its name. The book consists of two sections: a collection of photos of the actress as well as "On Acting: An Interview with Liv Ullmann" which

is a composite of several interviews conducted [... in] 1976 [...]. The interview also might be entitled 'Without Makeup,' as it penetrates the actress's very being. We are offered the secrets of her art: how she is able to distill the essence of each



new character. This, in turn, leads ultimately to a revelation of the sincerity of an interpretation. (D. E. Outerbridge 9)

Reading Outerbridge's description of his interviews against the comically clichéd testimonies of Freitas' *Sem Falsidades* offers a glimpse of the play's response to ideas about "the actress's very being", "essence" and "sincerity".

Whereas Outerbridge seeks to get to the truth of Liv Ullmann, Freitas reveals the double-edged sword that protects such a truth. Firstly, the repetition of the actresses' experiences makes them seem shallow, and therefore less penetrating, to use Outerbridge's terms. Secondly, though, the repetitiveness makes it unnecessary to go to the greats – all young actresses can answer these questions, revealing a communal experience.

Another, peripheral, intertextual reference to Ullmann provides important insight as to *Sem Falsidades*' take on fiction and reality in art. In the questionnaire that Freitas used to interview the young actresses, Question 9 reads,

A respeito do filme *Cenas de um casamento*, a Liv Ullmann afirmou uma vez, pra um entrevistador: "Eu sabia que as pessoas que vissem o filme iam se identificar muito intimamente comigo, pensando que aquela era a *minha* história". Você tem alguma história da sua vida, que entrou em cena com você, que se misturou? Você já representou como se fosse uma confissão sua, sem que ninguém soubesse? Você já sentiu que alguma cena ou alguma peça foi uma confissão? ("Questionário para jovens atrizes" 2)

With respect to the film *Scenes from a Marriage*, Liv Ullmann once told an interviewer, 'I knew that people would identify very closely with me, thinking this is my story.'<sup>12</sup> Do you have any story from your life that ended up onstage with you, that mixed into the scene? Have you ever confessed something personal while acting, without anyone realizing it? Have you ever felt that a scene or a play was a confession?

The reference to *Scenes from a Marriage*, a 1973 Swedish television series written and directed by Bergman, and which later became a feature-length film, does not point to a documentary per se. However, given Ullmann and Bergman's real-life personal relationship (they lived together and had a child in 1966) and the hyper-realistic style of the film, it was easy for some audience members to merge reality and fiction. At least, that is what Ullmann fears.

In *Without Makeup* she tells Outerbridge,

I know it's not me. I know that. But I also know that many people believe it's me. [. . .] Because although I know that I am a character in a film, many in the audience take everything I say as me. Especially with Ingmar. There were so many critics saying this was our story, and he didn't make it less so by showing my childhood pictures. They even thought that was my diary that I was reading in the picture. That bothered me very much too, because it wasn't my diary. (D. E. Outerbridge 24)

The film, which follows a couple through ten years of their marriage and eventual divorce, integrates photos of Liv Ullmann as a child and young woman, which adds to the sense that she is playing herself. Similarly, there are various close-up frontal scenes in which the characters seem to be speaking with an interviewer or reading from the aforementioned diary, engaging

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<sup>12</sup> "About *Scenes from a Marriage* you complained: 'I knew that people would identify very closely with me, thinking this is my story'" (Outerbridge 23).

directly with the camera. These elements combine to create the sense of a documentary, even if the film was never billed in such a way.

Ullmann's mentioning the diary refers to a scene in which her character in the film, Marianne, reads a passage from her diary. This can be linked to the *mulher*, who reads from what seems to be a diary on a lectern in *Sem Falsidades*. The diary in the film is fictional, though many took it to be Ullmann's own diary for the reasons mentioned above. The diary in the play is some kind of hybrid between fictional and real. It seems to be a compilation of the testimonies of young actresses, so in that sense it must be considered "real", but at the same time the play points to the impossibility of representing the real onstage.

The fragments chosen to make up the text of the play are not smoothly edited. There are obvious jumps in subject matter and perspective, and repetitions of passages in new contexts that alter their meaning. Take this passage, which is repeated various times throughout the play:

LOCUTORAS. Meu pai tem uma coisa que, ele toca violão, ele participou de várias coisas, só que não deu certo como compositor, mas enfim. Ele não era músico na verdade, ele sempre teve, eu acho, uma coisa meio idealista, assim, um sonho, de ser, de ser músico, de fazer alguma coisa ligada à música. E, na verdade, ele fazia composições, assim, ele compunha muito. (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 1.101-107)

LOCUTORAS. My dad has a thing that, he plays guitar, he participated in several things, he just never made it as a composer, but anyway. He wasn't a real musician, he always had, I think, a kind of idealistic thing, like, a dream, to be, to be a musician, to do something with music. And, in truth, he did write songs, like, he composed a lot.

The repetition of this fragment by both the locutoras and the *mulher* (1.240-244) signals to the audience its importance.

However, while the memory presented in Act 1 is poignant and sweet, as though describing a silly, childish dream, at the end of Act 2, the *mulher* will extend the story, repeating the aforementioned fragment and adding onto its end:

MULHER.[. . .] ele aprendeu a tocar violão sozinho, pela revistinha. E fazia umas... Ele compunha, e ele tem, ele canta bem, eu acho. Participava de festivais, quando ele era mais novo, assim a minha idade, mais ou menos, viajava muito com a minha mãe. Ele até ganhou um festival, não lembro agora qual foi. De vez em quando ele ainda pega o violão em casa e vai tocar, se bem que tem tempo que ele não faz. Ele não teve como investir, ele começou a trabalhar cedo pra ajudar em casa. E hoje em dia é um hobby: ele sai com os amigos, sai com um tio meu que canta também, e ele vão cantar no videokê. As pessoas pedem pra ele cantar, sabe, ele canta direitinho, meu pai tem um estilo meio romântico. Eu trago da escola na cabeça uma frase que um professor que eu gostava muito disse, e eu nunca esqueci, que ele dizia: 'o difícil não é subir essa escada, o difícil é descer' [. . .]. (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 2.382-395)

MULHER. [. . .] he learned to play guitar all by himself, from tab books. And he did some... He composed, and he has, he sings well, I think. He participated in festivals, when he was younger, like, my age, more or less, and traveled a lot with my mom. He even won a contest, I don't remember now which one it

was. Every now and then he still picks up the guitar at home and goes to play, even if it's been a long time since he's done it. He didn't have a way to invest, he started working really early to help out at home. And today it's a hobby: he goes out with his friends, goes out with one of my uncles who also sings, and they go to sing at the karaoke bar. The people ask him to sing, you know, he sings just right, my dad has a kind of a romantic style. I carry around in my head a phrase from school that a professor I really liked said, and I never forgot, that he said: 'the hard thing isn't to go onstage, the hard part is coming down' [ . . ].

In their separate contexts, these two incarnations of the father story take on different meanings. In each instance either the locutoras or the mulher relates the father-artist tale to their own artistic development, stressing either the father's desire, as a sort of link to their own vocation in Act 1, or his failure as a musician, as the incarnation of their fears of failure in Act 2.

Finally, in the third act, the locutoras take up the fragment and relate it to their own development as artists in order to answer Freitas' question about confession. They begin with the familiar introduction to the father's musical dream. However, rather than going on to discuss the father, this scene resolves the father issue with a meta-theatrical discussion of auto/biographical performance. The locutora in question describes an acting exercise she did as a student, in which she addressed her father:

LOCUTORAS. aquilo acabou virando uma espécie de dramaturgia, você sobe no palco pra falar as suas verdades misturadas com outras coisas. E um dia eu apresentei isso na sala. Eu fiz uma célula, onde eu só falava assim: 'pai, eu queria te dizer uma coisa', e aí tinha uns gestos, umas músicas, umas fotos, e aí eu falava 'nada não'. Terminava assim: 'nada não'. E assim, eu acho que ficou uma curiosidade em quem viu, do tipo, 'que será que ela queria dizer pro pai?', ou 'o que que ela tava sentindo?', ou 'o que que tinha ali?', mas, cara, foi uma experiência muito bacana. Eu mesma não sei dizer... Eu sei que não tava ali a dor, a dor da coisa mal resolvida, tava mas não tava, tava nos gestos, nos elementos, mas era uma outra coisa, como se (3. 106-116)

LOCUTORAS. [ . . . ] And it ended up becoming a sort of dramaturgy, you go onstage to talk about your truths mixed with other things. And one day I presented that in class. I made a cell, where I only said this: 'dad, I wanted to tell you something', and I had some gestures, some songs, some photos, and then I would say 'nothing no'. I ended like that: 'nothing no'. And like, I think it was curious for the people watching, kind of like, 'what was she wanting to say to her dad?', or 'what was she feeling?', or 'what was that?', but, man, it was a really cool experience. I myself don't know how to say... I know that the pain wasn't there, the pain of the poorly-resolved thing, it was there but it wasn't, it was in the gestures, in the elements, but it was another thing, as if

This repeated-and-altered story serves as a springboard for discussing the role of language, of another's language, in *Sem Falsidades* specifically and documentary theatre in general. The fetishization of language, the directorial manipulation of the interviewee's words, and, finally, the impossibility of linguistic communication are all present in the musician-father sequence.

To start this discussion, I'll explore the idea of the fetishization of language in these excerpts. Beginning with the fact that the words do not belong to any one character, but are

rather shared between various locutoras as well as appearing in the mulher's diary, the stripping of the words from the object to whom they originally belonged is emphasized in the play. Just as in the case of the fetish, which is detached from the individual and becomes the sole sexual object, the story of the father is detached from its original owner and becomes the object of the audience's desire. It no longer matters whether the story of the father is about one man or whether it is a compilation of several answers about the interviewed actresses' fathers; likewise it is unimportant whose father is being described. The story is traded between onstage players, embedded in the journal, and placed into varying contexts that change its meaning.

The author William Pietz, in a series on the fetish for the journal *Res*, describes the origins of the term in a mercantile-commercial situation, specifically the encounter between Portugal and sub-Saharan Africa or "Guinea". He cites the way that "the heterogeneous components appropriated into an identity by a fetish are not only material elements; desires and beliefs and narrative structures establishing a practice are also fixed (or fixated) by the fetish, whose power is precisely the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relations between certain otherwise heterogenous things" (7-8). Whereas in these cases the fetish served as a material object that constituted the social value of other objects, the idea of desire and relationship between unlike things is what most relates to the use of verbatim in auto/biographical theatre.

Pietz goes on to define "the material fetish as an object established in an intense relation to and with power over the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals whose personhood is conceived as inseparable from their bodies" (10). The fetish, in its earliest, anthropological sense, rules the selfhood of the material body that wears it. With respect to *Sem Falsidades*, we can think of the bodily origins of spoken language as the materiality Pietz emphasizes.

Marx's commodity-fetishization also informs my understanding of the fetish in relation to auto/biographical theatre. Whereas for Pietz fetishism differed greatly from Christianity in that it does not separate soul and body, spirit and materiality, for Marx the relationship between producers rather than products strips commodities from their materiality, their use-value. The exchange-value of a commodity has nothing to do with its physical properties, and rather represents a social relationship:

In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things *quâ* commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so

soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx I-104 - I-105)

I relate the use of verbatim text in theatre to commodity-fetishization in that the subjects' testimony is stripped of the production, or interview, process, as Heddon points out, and presented as an object relating spectator and actor. That is, the language becomes a product with no relationship to the body that originally uttered it, but rather represents a way to span the distance between the theatre seats and the subjects' lived events.

In her defense of language as sublimation, Julia Kristeva sheds light on the way that language can be separated from the desires it represents and become a source of pleasure in and of itself: "This experience of language is not necessarily a regression [. . .]. It is rather a displacement of the perversion inherent to the part-object of desire-pleasure into a foreign fetish-object, which is a third and universal medium: It is a language transformed into an object of pleasure [jouissance]" (Kristeva 686). The notion of language as object of pleasure, in and of itself, brings us to my interpretation of the use of verbatim in auto/biographical theatre. While anthropology and political economy have much to contribute to notions of fetishism, it is in psychoanalysis that I find the most useful metaphor for verbatim theatre's use of language.

In his essay "The Sexual Aberrations" (1953) from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Sigmund Freud tackles fetishism for the first time. From the start, credulity and authority figure large in Freud's understanding of the phenomenon: "the credulity of love becomes an important, if not the most fundamental, source of authority" (150).<sup>13</sup> Freud borrows a term from Alfred Binet, who had himself taken it from religion and economics to apply it to psychology, to describe the pathological extension of this authority-granting: fetishism.

Rather than desiring past the genital and appreciating the sexual object's intellect as well, the fetishist rather substitutes the genitals entirely with some extension of the sexual object:

The situation [of fetishism] only becomes pathological when the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually takes the place of the normal aim, and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the sole sexual object. These are, indeed, the general conditions under which mere variations of the sexual instinct pass over into pathological aberrations. (Freud, *The Sexual Aberrations* 154)

Freud's basic definition of fetishism will become important for the present analysis of the use of "verbatim" text in theatre, as it grants sole authority to the object's words, rather than to the object itself, and allows language to take the place of the desired object, i.e., truth.

Writing about Binet's initial treatise on fetishism, Emily Apter emphasizes the partiality at play in the "aberration":

Opening his essay, Binet offered a synopsis of fetishism's etymological origins that would become a kind of stock point of departure for future writers on the subject. [. . .] Binet thus emphasized the fractal, metonymic nature of the fetish, religious or sexual. Whether inanimate (the night cap, the apron, the nail of the

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<sup>13</sup> "It is only in the rarest instances that the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object, as being the goal of the sexual instinct, stops short at its genitals. The appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it. The same overvaluation spreads over into the psychological sphere: the subject becomes, as it were, intellectually infatuated (that is, his powers of judgement are weakened) by the mental achievements and perfections of the sexual object and he submits to the latter's judgements with credulity. Thus the credulity of love becomes an important, if not the most fundamental, source of authority" (Freud, *The Sexual Aberrations* 150).

shoe) or alive (red lips, an alluring curl of hair, an eye or mouth), the fetish was partial; a detached spot of intense visual cathexis. (Apter 19-20).

The psychoanalytical concept of fetishism, then, is from its origins related to language. Binet finds authority in tracing the term's etymological origins,<sup>14</sup> as well as using a linguistic metaphor, metonymy, to illustrate it. The emphasis on the partial will also be useful in analyzing verbatim theatre, as the work of edition, compiling, and, most importantly, omission plays an important part in meaning-making in these works.

It is this cutting, or omission, which is especially favorable for looking at the fetishization of language in verbatim theatre. The object's words are glorified onstage, used to replace the object itself. This synecdoche, which lets one's own words stand in for one's self, relates neatly to sexual fetishization. Whereas in sexual fetishism an object or relic becomes more desirable than the lover's body, in verbatim theatre the auto/biographical subject's words become more desirable, more significant, than the subject itself.

If we replace "relic" and "object" in the following passage from Apter with "language", the point where fetishization, language, and verbatim theatre intersect becomes clear:

The relic, intransitively inscribed within the consciousness of the fetishistic lover, was revered in and for itself. No longer just the signifier of an absent totality, the material object was severed from the woman's body and actually preferred to the living self to which it originally belonged. [. . .] Freestanding, self-enclosed, and abstracted from context, Binet's fetish object bore the signs of cutting, a violent image that, in addition to prefiguring Freud's association of fetishism with castration, underscored the importance of the synecdochic gaze. (Apter 21)

The violence of castration or cutting, of separating the object from its body, is a fitting image for the violence of cutting or edition. As we will see, *Sem Falsidades* does an excellent job of both displaying such violence as well as, in a fashion, criticizing it.

The next connection to be made, after that between language and the fetish object, is that of reality and fetishism. Freud traces the fetishistic impulse down to a particular attitude towards reality, which begins with a disavowal.<sup>15</sup> The situation he describes involves a child who realizes that women do not have a phallus, in contrast to his prior beliefs. The child, in this case, reacts by refusing to believe what his observations tell him to be true; i.e., he continues, in the face of evidence to the contrary, to believe that women have a phallus.

This obstinacy, however, is not without its weaknesses. As Freud puts it, "It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up" ("Fetishism" 154). The child then sustains two parallel belief systems that uphold distinct and exclusive

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<sup>14</sup> Tracing fetish's etymological pedigree has become a must for anyone writing on the subject. See William Pietz' well-known rundown for a good synthesis:

While I argue that the fetish originated within a novel social formation during [the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] through the development of the pidgin word *Fetisso*, this word in turn has a linguistic and accompanying conceptual lineage that must be traced. *Fetisso* derives from the Portuguese word *feitiço*, which in the late Middle Ages meant "magical practice" or "witchcraft" performed, often innocently, by the simple, ignorant classes. *Feitiço* in turn derives from the Latin adjective *facticius*, which originally meant "manufactured." The historical study of the fetish must begin by considering these words in some detail, only then going on to examine the initial application of *feitiço* on the African coast, its subsequent development into *Fetisso*, and finally that word's textual dissemination into the languages of northern Europe, where national versions of the word developed during the seventeenth century. (Pietz, *The Problem of the Fetish*, I 5)

See also "The Problem of the Fetish, II" for a more thorough investigation of the term's origins.

<sup>15</sup> "[. . .] The correct German word for the vicissitude of the idea [of the woman's lack of a penis] would be 'Verleugnung' ['disavowal']" (Freud, *Fetishism* 153).

realities. This condition can be compared to that of the audience of a documentary play, which simultaneously expects to see something “real” and knows that the play is a mere representation of the real.

Freud marvels at the ingenuity of the parallel belief systems, one of which allows for the sexual instinct to continue even in the face of the danger of castration, and the other of which allows for reality. He writes,

[The child] replies to the conflict with two contrary reactions, both of which are valid and effective. On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms he rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand, in the same breath he recognizes the danger of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a pathological symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of the fear. It must be confessed that this is a very ingenious solution of the difficulty. Both parties to the dispute obtain their share: the instinct is allowed to retain its satisfaction and proper respect is shown to reality. (“Splitting of the Ego” 275)

This split into instinct for satisfaction versus reality is the key to understanding the Freudian concept of fetishism. It will also be key for comprehending my argument that verbatim theatre fetishizes language. I mean by this that the audience requires the satisfaction of certain theatrical elements such as characterization, closure, and repetition as well as, in the case of documentary theatre, reality.

Allowing the theatrical to commune with reality requires a certain suspension of disbelief, and the result looks a lot like what Freud describes as “a psychical split. Two psychical attitudes have been formed instead of a single one—one, the normal one, which takes account of reality, and another which under the influence of the instincts detaches the ego from reality. The two exist alongside of each other” (“An Outline of Psycho-analysis” 202). While it may be going too far to call a theatregoer’s reaction “normal” or abnormal, the split between accepting the representation as an artificial recreation of a script and accepting it to be true is one that documentary theatre does require of its audience.

There is, in a sense, a disavowal of the fact that the play absolutely cannot be “reality” because it is always a representation, a copy thereof. Freud recognizes that disavowals of this kind occur very often and not only with fetishists; and whenever we are in a position to study them they turn out to be half-measures, incomplete attempts at detachment from reality. The disavowal is always supplemented by an acknowledgement; two contrary and independent attitudes always arise and result in the situation of there being a splitting of the ego. (Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-analysis* 204).

While there may not be a clinical splitting of the ego in the case of a theatrical audience, documentary theatre does require of its audience the “two contrary and independent attitudes” towards the reality being documented onstage. I turn to Lacan for the way that language seems to be the foundation on which these two attitudes are constructed.

Lacan focuses on the fact that the analyst must “[. . .] suspend the subject’s certitudes until their last mirages have been consumed. And it is in the discourse that, like verse, their resolution must be scanned” (Lacan 13). He, like Freud, is dealing with the existence of reality and disavowal in the analyzed subject, referring to them rather as certitudes and mirages. For Lacan, the way to reality, the way to navigate the subject’s parallel belief systems, is language or discourse: “Even if it communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of

communication; even if it denies the obvious, it affirms that the word constitutes the Truth; even if it is destined to deceive, here the discourse speculates on faith in testimony” (Lacan 13). The discourse or the word is irrevocably connected to the idea of “truth”. Even words designed to deceive are playing on a firm-held belief in the truth of the word.

In this way the use in a documentary play of an auto/biographical subject’s “own words”, whether these were written in a diary or letter or recorded either spontaneously or in a formal interview for the purpose of the play, appeals to deep and complex connections between reality, desire, language, and truth. As the plays use a subject’s language as a synecdochic stand-in for the subject him/herself, they are calling on the audience to at once disavow the fact that the subject is not present onstage (or, in the case that the subject is onstage, that his/her language is not spontaneous, but rather rehearsed and repeated) and to recognize the reality of the discourse being presented.

A certain violence is inherent in this splicing of language from speaker, which Freud would probably liken to castration. By repeating the story in various manifestations, from the mouths of various players, *Sem Falsidades* makes clear the directorial manipulation of the interviewees’ words. As the projected Verbal Contract reminds the spectator at the beginning of the play, Freitas reserves the right to do with the words as he will, assigning them new meanings, new voices, and new contexts. The jokingly abusive style of the contract highlights the imbalance of power between director and interviewee in documentary theatre. The seemingly capricious “remix” of personal memories further separates the language from the speaker, likening the documentary-theatrical process to the fear of castration behind the fetish.

By splitting the speaker from the spoken, the play seems to be positing a paradox. As *Sem Falsidades* focuses so thoroughly on language, at the same time it displays the impossibilities of representing once-spoken language. That is, the play explicitly communicates the fact that its text is based on interview transcripts and, at the same time, by stripping the words from their speakers, reveals the impossibility of conveying their reality in a new context. In a way, the audience is asked to undergo a psychic split like the one Freud describes, and to accept simultaneously that the theatricalized version of the interview transcripts is both real and impossibly far from reality.

This impossibility is inherent in the final portrayal of the father story mentioned above, in which the actress decides to confront her father from the stage in a semi-confessional setting that depends upon a certain autobiographical reality. The locutora supposes that her audience did not understand what she meant by her piece, but that for her the experience was wonderful. In fact, the locutora is unable to find the words to describe the feeling (“*Eu mesma não sei dizer...*”).

The pain she felt about her father’s lack of resolution does not exist in her words, which are themselves merely interpellations (“*pai, eu queria te dizer uma coisa*”), free of substance. Therefore the performance described within the play is yet another instance of fetishizing language. The locutora does insist, however, that the pain is present in her gestures, and in elements such as songs and photographs.

The conclusion I draw from this complex system of layers upon layers of representation is that documentary theatre’s adoration of verbatim language is a red herring. The use of interview transcripts, of a subject’s “own words”, is a signal to the audience that what happens onstage purports to be real. However, the audience is fully aware of the impossibility of theatrical reality, and must choose the split acceptance of dual realities described by Freud. But the story doesn’t end there.



The affect inherent in the autobiographical experiences portrayed in documentary theatre is not lost with the castration separating language and speaker. The emotional experience remains in the practiced gestures and the artifacts that support the plays' claims to truth. The father story represents a dramaturgical mix of fiction and reality, but *Sem Falsidades*, too, is itself a mixture of reality and self-revelation.

On the blog accompanying the play, Freitas includes an entry on what he calls the "Verbal Contract" ("Contrato verbal"), the disclaimer that is projected at the beginning of the play. He writes "*Eu falava isso sempre antes das entrevistas, em 2009, que foi quando eu fiz as entrevistas que deram origem ao texto da peça. Eu acho que eu tenho isso gravado, não sei se o gravador tava ligado quando eu fazia essa pergunta, quer dizer, não sei gravou todas as vezes, tem trechos dos relatos que eu perdi, que não gravou direito.*" "I always said this before the interviews, in 2009, which was when I did the interviews that would become the play's text. I think that I have this recorded, I don't know if the recorder was turned on when I asked this question, I mean, it didn't record every time, there are pieces of the accounts that I lost, that didn't record right" (Freitas, "Contrato Verbal"). This disclaimer-to-the-disclaimer, which passes the buck to the faulty recording device, is a sign, seemingly deliberate, that not only is Freitas claiming complete ownership of the recorded words of the interviewed actresses, but also that these recordings might need some filling in here and there, giving him even more authority over the text.

These inclusions of the interviewer, director, and verbal contract in the performance of the play all highlight the documentary process as part of the show. Similarly, the paratexts, such as the handbill and website, give the curious reader even more insight as to how the play was developed. All of these elements come together to put language (testimony, interview transcript, the actresses' own words) at the forefront of the play, like a badge of honor confirming the real source of the script. Documentary theatre within postmodernity is, however, too self-conscious, and its audiences too wise, to leave it at that. Precisely by emphasizing the reality of the language at use, *Sem Falsidades* reveals all of the weaknesses in the façade of truth.

In documentary cinema, Paul Arthur posits an "aesthetics of failure", in which being too slick is suspect, and an overly-produced documentary film intends to deceive. This aesthetics involves revealing the cracks in the façade as a way of proving authenticity; if the filmmaker reveals her difficulties onscreen, the audience has more reason to identify with her and accept the truth of what she did manage to capture.<sup>16</sup> Taking this aesthetics to the stage, in the case of *Sem Falsidades*, inadequacies of representation can be found throughout.

Take, for example, the aforementioned failure of the recording device, which leaves Freitas and the audience unsure of whether he did mention the verbal contract before every interview. Or observe his inability to remember which famous actress's pose is being copied in the photographs of the visual plan. Seemingly scatterbrained lapses function as both a warning of unreliability and a guarantee of transparency.

The audience is made aware from the start that the director has taken complete license with the text, so whatever is pronounced onstage must be taken with a grain of salt. However,

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<sup>16</sup> [...] *Failure* to adequately represent the person, event, or social situation stated as the film's explicit task functions as an inverted guarantee of authenticity. The new works are textual parasites, fragments or residues of other works which for one reason or another became impossible to realize. One ramification of postmodern aesthetics, precipitated in part by the anti-metaphysical bent of poststructuralist theory, is that certain types of artistic mastery are culturally suspect. The epistemic ambition to speak from a totalizing framework of knowledge about some fully intelligible reality is anathema. The proscription of unified subjectivity is perhaps especially severe for (politically conscious) white male filmmakers working at the margins of mass culture. Although it is too soon to make any decisive judgment, it is tempting to posit a documentary 'aesthetics of failure' that grafts a protean cultural agenda onto traditional problems of authority. (Arthur 127-28)

revealing the verbal contract to the audience establishes a rapport with them, letting them in on the secret that whatever they see isn't quite reality. As in the old riddle about the two roads, one leading to perdition and one to paradise, guarded by two brothers, one who always lies and one who always tells the truth, the warning is the guarantee: you can trust me, because I'm telling you from the start that you can't trust me. This aesthetics of failure, which has Freitas letting the audience in as chummy insiders, has its echo in the play itself. Much of the discussion by the *mulher* and the *locutoras* is on the very topic of failure. While they are not revealing technical failure, necessarily, the insistence on the theme is an interesting coincidence that yields important interpretative fruits.

I return to the recurring theme of the father, the failed musician, who seems to loom as an omen in the mind of his daughter. This figure is, as I mention above, brought up time and again in the play in conjunction with the speakers' fears of failure as an artist, and in relation with the way that material reality affects the life choices of once-idealistic actors. Look again at the way he is described, in this early reference:

LOCUTORAS. Ele não era músico na verdade, ele sempre teve, eu acho, uma coisa meio idealista, assim, um sonho, de ser, de ser músico, de fazer alguma coisa ligada à música. (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 1.104-106)

LOCUTORAS. He wasn't a real musician ("na verdade"), he always had, I think, a kind of idealistic thing, like, a dream, to be, to be a musician, to do something with music.

The use of the words "na verdade" draws a thick line in the sand, defining true artists. It can be inferred by later mentions of the father that this definition involves dedicating oneself completely to the art, and living from it without taking any other jobs. The difference between an *artist na verdade* and a hobbyist is present throughout the play, and the latter option falls clearly on the side of artistic failure.

The question of money also becomes more and more present as the play develops. While the beginning memories are of homemade stages, first parts in school plays, and childish dreams, as the actresses begin to talk about their lives out of school the reality of economics and their effect on the day-to-day lives of the artists becomes ever more urgent.

MULHER. Mas hoje em dia, eu tenho uma visão um pouco prática das coisas, entendeu. Tipo, eu acabei de sair de um, enfim, de uma montagem de um grupo, que tava nessa de montar uma peça sem grana, procurando grana e ensaiando, e eu não acredito nisso, sabe, eu acho que se você não tiver um mínimo de recursos, tipo, sei lá, nem que seja a grana pra pagar a passagem do ator, você não pode, você não pode fazer. Acho que eu acabei ficando muito (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 1.270-276)

MULHER. But nowadays I have a bit more practical vision of things, you know. Like, I just appeared in, well, in a staging by a group, that was doing this thing of staging a play without money, looking for money and rehearsing, and I don't believe in that, you know, I think that if you don't have the minimal resources, like, I don't know, just the money to pay the actor's bus fare, you can't, you can't do it. I think that I ended up really

This first index of facing reality, in a sense, and that that reality involves the money involved in putting on a play, still comes from within the theatre, from the perspective of a struggling actress.

As the play continues, however, this reality becomes a signifier of failure, separating the actresses from the stage.

MULHER. E aí depois a minha vida no teatro foi acabando, acabando, como atriz. Não fiz mais nada, porque eu também não corri mais tanto atrás, acho que eu podia ter feito mais. A minha vida foi tomando outro rumo, porque eu também precisava batalhar grana, e aí a gente começa a trabalhar, e... A realidade do dia-a-dia vai impondo à gente tanta coisa, que acaba que (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 1.381-386)

MULHER. And then, afterward, my life in the theatre was ending, ending, as an actress. I didn't do anything else, because I didn't chase after it anymore, I think I could have done more. My life was taking another direction, because I also needed to fight to make money, and so we begin to work, and... The reality of the everyday imposes so much on us, that it ends up

Notice that both this fragment and the previous one end abruptly, midsentence. The mulher is interrupted by the locutoras in the first instance, who, rather than talking about failure, discuss the joy of acting school and of being in touch with art every single day. In this way, school becomes a sort of reprieve from reality. In the second example, the mulher is cut off with the end of Act 1, which gives way to the trials of Act 2. In another example of the psychic split, the audience is asked to believe that the onstage actress has failed as an actress. There is a relief, however, in the knowledge that she is actually onstage, acting in a professional production, and that her failure is not real.

While school is an idealistic space in Act 1, the second act brings the reality of an education in the arts, and its accompanying failures. The actresses talk about the criticism they received from their teachers, as well as the competition they faced against their classmates. The scars they receive during their formative years don't heal completely:

LOCUTORAS. Eu me vi, eu era a melhor aluna do colégio, de repente eu me vi a pior aluna da turma! E ela falou, a professora: você você e você são as piores alunas dessa turma! [. . .] E foi uma desconstrução total [. . .]. A minha auto-estima foi pró buraco naquele momento. E eu sinto que um pouquinho até hoje é meio difícil, de reconstruir, de (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 2.55-72)

LOCUTORAS. I saw myself, I was the best student in high school, suddenly I saw myself as the worst student in the class! And she said, the professor: you you and you are the worst students in this class! [. . .] And it was a total deconstruction [. . .]. My self-esteem went down the drain in that moment. And I feel a little bit like even today it's kind of difficult, to reconstruct, to

Once again the fragment on failure ends abruptly. These cut-off memories are failures in themselves, in the sense of lack of completion, and in this way the form complements the content. Also, the focus on deconstruction and reconstruction of one's self-esteem, or even of one's self, fits this project and its reconstruction of the actor's self.

In the final act full failure sets in, as the discourse turns to leaving acting, missing acting, and longing for a new kind of theatre that allows for a good, secure life. The desire of this locutora is poignant for its hopelessness:

LOCUTORAS. Mas eu tenho vontade de voltar a fazer teatro. Mas eu acho que eu deixei o trem passar, eu não podia ter deixado o trem passar, porque, assim, as pessoas, acaba que as pessoas, você perde os contatos. Eu acho que, o meu

erro foi ter deixado isso acontecer, ter sido um pouco relapsa com isso.  
(Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 3.176-180)

LOCUTORAS. But I do want to go back to doing theatre. But I think that I let the train pass me by, I shouldn't have let the train pass me by, because, like, people, it turns out that people, you lose your contacts. I think that, my error was letting that happen, having been a little negligent with that.

This collection of reflections on failure, while not referring to the technical failures that Arthur mentions in positing his aesthetics of failure, does the work of making *Sem Falsidades* miraculous.

The actresses interviewed are, by their own account, failures; the world of theatre in Brazil and Latin America is a cruel one that excludes anyone without independent wealth. In the face of such difficulties, the play *Sem Falsidades* rises up, impossibly. Just as the technical failures lend authenticity to the documentary and documentarian, the career failures that are the focus of this play make it that much more special. The fact that the play insists on the failure of its participants and lack of funds invites solidarity from the audience, who will see the play as an underdog.

The freely available script is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial 3.0 license, a free service which allows artist to protect their work, reserving certain rights. In this case Freitas allows anyone “to Share – to copy, distribute and transmit the work” and “to Remix – to adapt the work” as long as they attribute the work and use it for noncommercial purposes (Creative Commons). This combination of citing economic realities which affect artistry and the play's own commitment to sharing binds the sympathetic audience to the play much as the technical failures help identify the audience with the documentarian. All of this lends an aura of authenticity to the documentary.

I would now like to turn to the word *falsidade*. What started out as a meditation on the fetishization of language turns into a discussion of the aesthetics of failure in this documentary play. However, the twain are not forever cleft. The spoken word continues to be source and medium of the play, and its separation from its original source becomes the moment of meaning-making. The word is more important than its speaker; our desire for documentary reality is sated by the verbal contract and references to the interviews and testimonies more than by the presence of the body who experienced the reality itself. It is the impossibility of expressing experience in an unmediated way that simultaneously destroys and rebuilds our faith in the possibility of documentary. And the title of both this play and Outerbridge's book on Ullmann, *Sem Falsidades* is an ironic, meaning-laden boiling down of this paradox.

To begin with, the meaning of the word “*falsidade*” is very close to that of the English word “falsity”. The original English title of Outerbridge's biography of Ullmann is *Without Makeup*, which links the words “*falsidade*” and “*makeup*”, as though a costumed, made up actress were the representation of falsity. And the intertextual link is not the only connection between theatrics and falsity. The play itself refers frequently to the idea of *falsidade*, relating it closely to the theatre.

The locutoras refer to theatre as a *falsidade* in the second act, when they discuss the possibility of truly inhabiting a character:

LOCUTORAS. Você fica olhando as pessoas falando, falando, mas você tem certeza que, sabe, que aquilo não vai levar ninguém a lugar nenhum, que aquilo não é arte. Que não tem verdade, e as pessoas ficam e as pessoas batem

palma no final. Claro que talvez a gente nunca consiga alcançar a verdade plenamente, porque aí eu acho que deixa de ser exatamente... teatro, né, porque o teatro, o que que é o teatro? É uma falsidade, né, mas é uma falsidade tão verdadeira, tão bem feita, que ela se torna quase que uma verdade. (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 2.40-48)

LOCUTORAS. You sit there watching the people talking, talking, but you are sure that, you know, that that isn't going to take anybody anywhere, that that isn't art. That it doesn't have truth, and the people stay and the people clap at the end. Of course maybe we never manage to reach the truth completely, because there I think that it stops being exactly... theatre, you know?, because theatre, what is theatre? It's a falsidade, you know? but it's a falsidade that's so true, so well done, that it becomes almost a truth.

For the locutoras, reaching complete truth would no longer be theatre; and theatre is “almost a truth”. This almost is the point where the fetishization of language (the word is almost its speaker, the object is almost the object of desire) and the aesthetics of failure collide (“we never manage to reach the truth completely”).

While the idea of theatre as falsity is not new, neither is the idea of actresses as, well, phonies. The drama queen stereotype is referred to more than once in *Sem Falsidades*, and the locutora who tells of feeling betrayed by her classmates says that

LOCUTORAS. (aceleradas) [. . .] eu não aguentei aquela falsidade, falei 'não acredito, cara, sou muito idiota de ser verdadeira', sabe. (2.105-106)

LOCUTORAS. (accelerated) [. . .] I couldn't stand that falsity, I said, 'I don't believe it, man, I am such an idiot for being true', you know.

This could be an instance of protesting too much, insisting that all the other actresses are fake while the speaker is truthful. However, it does bind the audience to the side of the speaker, of the play, allowing for the hope that this actress, even as she is acting onstage, is telling the truth.

Finally, in the third act, the theme of failure meets falsity in a sad resignation. Speaking of being invisible in the world of casting and finding parts, the locutoras sell out before their audience:

LOCUTORAS. Talvez você fosse menos você. A gente tem que sempre se corromper. A gente sempre vai se corromper. Talvez você fosse menos você, mas talvez você tivesse mais realizado em outra parte, entendeu?

Financeiramente, tivesse sendo reconhecido, talvez tivesse oportunidade de fazer outras coisas. Ser chamado pra, não sei... Eu esperava mais reconhecimento, de imediato, que eu acho que todo mundo espera quando começa na arte, sem hipocrisia, sem nada, sabe. (3.75-81)

LOCUTORAS. Maybe you would be less you. We always have to be corrupted. We are always going to be corrupted. Maybe you would be less you, but maybe you would have accomplished more in another area, you understand? Financially, you would have been recognized, maybe you would have had the opportunity to do other things. To be called for, I don't know... I expected more recognition, immediately, that I think everyone expects when they begin in art, without hypocrisy, without anything, you know.

Once again, the “truth” of the claims worm their way into the hearts and minds of the audience because, even as this actress is condoning, even encouraging, selling one’s soul, she is actually lamenting not having done so herself. She is still trustworthy because she failed to sell out.

While she criticizes the frequent lack in most documentary theatre of transparency with regards to the documentary process, Heddon does point out that the meta-theatrical gesture that informs the audience of the interview process is becoming common in verbatim plays (Heddon 132). As mentioned above, the Verbal Contract is used as an introductory text to *Sem Falsidades*, alerting the audience members to both the “real” basis for the play’s script as well as to Freitas’ cavalier approach to the use of the actresses’ testimony.

Heddon observes that, “Rather than showing their processes of creativity, verbatim dramas, like other auto/biographical modes, more typically strategically deploy their closeness to the signifiers of ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’, employing particular devices such as the use of the actual recorded interviews, or the projection of video recordings or photographs of the interviewed subjects” (133). Such devices are present throughout *Sem Falsidades*, and add to the implicit criticism of documentary drama contained within the play.

It is important to note that, while the locutoras and mulher have different spatial and gestural characteristics, the fact that the mulher seems to be reading a diary while the locutoras speak in a more spontaneous style does not mean that the mulher lacks a relationship with the audience. The first index of her relationship to the interviewer could be taken to be a self-reflexive question of the type often posed to a diary:

MULHER. E tinha uma inquietação, ainda, esse deslumbramento – está certa, essa palavra? Esse virtuosismo de ‘olha como eu sou boa, eu quero fazer isso’, me colocar esses desafios. (1.22-25)

MULHER. And I had a restlessness, still, that dazzling – is that the right word?

That virtuosity of “look how good I am, I want to do this”, challenging myself. Pondering her word choice, asking either herself or her interlocutor if she’s using the right word, is one clue to the fact that the woman contained in the diary spills out beyond the pages.

Later, however, the woman will be more direct. It is almost certain that the following statement is not something one would write in a diary, as it seems to be definitely directed toward a second person:

MULHER. Olha lá hein. Eu vou ser absolutamente sincera aqui com você, franca, porque eu acho que você como uma pessoa bacana, merece isso. (2.242-243)

MULHER. Just look, eh. I’m going to be absolutely sincere here with you, totally frank, because I think that you, as a good person, deserve that.

By including these references to the interviewer, i.e., himself, Freitas not only lets the audience in on the documentary process, but also conveys a very specific message about himself as a “*pessoa bacana*”. He also includes less-than-savory stories about other directors, and inserts himself into the situation through photographs, in a self-deprecating move that nevertheless distances him from the criticized behavior.

In Act 2 the locutoras begin to talk about the issue of directors taking advantage of young actors. One complains about a time when all of the actors agreed to vote to do Panizza’s *The Love Council* rather than Schnitzler’s *La Ronde*, because the latter seemed “depraved” to the group, and they would all have to appear in the nude. However, when the director appeared, all of her companions voted for *La Ronde* in an attempt to get a good part, and she was the only one who spoke her mind and voted for *The Love Council*.

Throughout the narration of this betrayal, photographs depicting an actress voting in the minority for The Love Council, as well as of Freitas as a melodramatic, villainous director, are projected on the back wall of the stage (see fig. 4). By including, but not identifying, himself in the stage design, the author-director seems to be giving a little wink to those in the know, as if to say that he recognizes the imbalance of power that leads actresses to lie to get a part.

This dishonesty immediately influences the testimony at hand: if the interviewed actresses hoped to achieve something for their career by giving testimony to Freitas, then shouldn't we expect them to at least embellish or edit their stories according to a perceived expectation? At the least this inclusion of the story of betrayal and the photographs of the director cast doubt on the veracity of the stories compiled in *Sem Falsidades*.

The paratexts, too, allow for careful study of the play's outward connections. In the questionnaire that Freitas used to interview the actresses, which is not available to the public, several other (famous) actresses's interview responses are mentioned. Question 6 in Freitas' "Questionnaire for Young Actresses" ("Questionário para jovens atrizes") paraphrases one of Outerbridge's questions: "*O ator inglês Michael Redgrave disse, uma vez, que 'a coisa mais difícil é ser você mesmo no palco.' Pra você, uma boa atriz é aquela que a personalidade dela, o jeito como ela é, aparece em cena, ou não aparece? No palco, você sente que, como atriz, você usa máscara ou tira a máscara?*" "The English actor Michael Redgrave said once, "The hardest thing is to be yourself on stage." For you, is a good actress the one whose personality, her way of being, appears in the scene, or doesn't appear? On stage, do you feel that, as an actress, you use a mask or you take off the mask?" (1).<sup>17</sup>

Although the play is not set up in a question-and-answer format we can infer which sections of the play might have been a response to this question. At one point the mulher remembers,

MULHER. [. . .] Como eu era muito estudiosa, eu experimentava muito, todas as técnicas eu aprendia, eu exercitava aquilo com toda a seriedade do mundo. E eu via ter efeito na prática: se era uma cena pra fazer as pessoas chorarem, se emocionarem, eu atingia aquilo. Quando eu sentia o gostinho de realmente ter entregue, era uma delícia. (Freitas, *Sem Falsidades* 1.142-146)

MULHER. [. . .] As I was very studious, I experimented a lot, I learned all the techniques, I practiced it with all of the seriousness in the world. And I saw it have an effect in practice: if it was a scene to make the people cry, to move them, I would hit it. When I felt the little pleasure of really being given over, it was a delight.

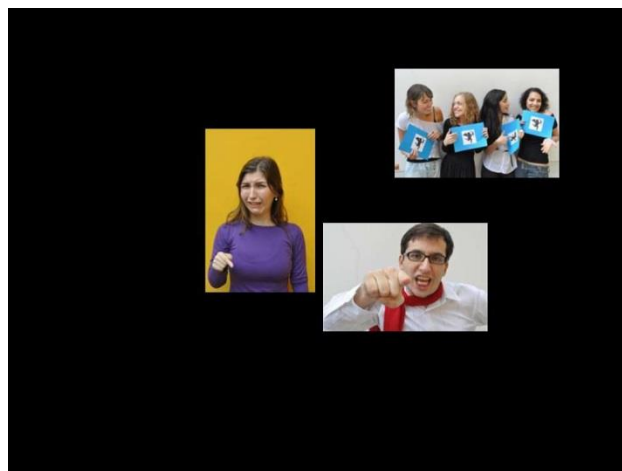


Figure 4 Slide from *Sem Falsidades* depicting the betrayed actress, her castmates and Freitas as the angry director. Source: *Projeção Sem Falsidades*. Dir. Márcio Freitas. 2011. PDF File.

<sup>17</sup> Freitas is citing Outerbridge. The interviewer asks Ullmann: "Here's a comment that goes back to the question of personality—whose personality is it onstage? Michael Redgrave wrote: 'The hardest thing is to be yourself on stage'" (Outerbridge 28).

Though the question is not available to the audience, it can be inferred that the *mulher* is responding to a question about acting technique.

Such interjections also take a humorous turn as the actresses reveal their self-consciousness as they speak. At one point a locutora complains that she was advised to study Communication because she communicates well, and reflects upon the absurdity of such a suggestion:

LOCUTORAS. E aí eu resolvi fazer Comunicação, porque as pessoas falavam que eu me comunicava muito bem, olha que ignorância, ‘você se comunica bem, faça Comunicação’, não tem porra nenhuma a ver – pode falar porra? Enfim, e aí eu resolvi fazer Comunicação [. . .]. (1.188-192)

LOCUTORAS. And I decided to do Communication, because people told me that I communicated really well, can you imagine such ignorance?, ‘you communicate well, do Communication’, it doesn’t have a fucking thing to do with it – can I say fucking? Anyway, and then I decided to do Communication [. . .].

By censoring herself, the interviewee lets on that she is thinking about the stated end of the interview, the final product that will probably be seen by an audience. So the self-representation begins much earlier than the staging of the play, but rather in the editing process the actresses apply to their own responses during the interviews.

The question also grants full authority to the interviewer, as the actress will allow the interviewer’s answer to determine her word choice. The irony, however, is that the moment of doubt is what makes it into the play, not the polished summary with which the interviewee follows the question (“*Enfim, e aí eu resolvi fazer Comunicação*”).

This reliance on the technical, on education and study, comes up often in the play. In Act 2 the locutoras will also provide a possible answer to the interview question:

LOCUTORAS. (ligeiramente aceleradas) [. . .] Claro que talvez a gente nunca consiga alcançar a verdade plenamente, porque aí eu acho que deixa de ser exatamente... teatro, né, porque o teatro, o que que é o teatro? É uma falsidade, né, mas é uma falsidade tão verdadeira, tão bem feita, que ela se torna quase que uma verdade. Até quando eu faço a lavadeira do interior, totalmente distanciada, que eu tenho que passar pros espectadores um depoimento de uma mulher super explorada, dominada, eu falo aquilo como se fosse eu, com a maior verdade do mundo, eu me emociono, eu lembro do Sebastião que é meu marido, do meu filho que foi pro corte de cana... É uma realidade totalmente distante, mas eu tou ali inteira. (2.44-53)

LOCUTORAS. (slightly accelerated) [. . .] Of course maybe we never manage to reach the truth completely, because there I think that it stops being exactly... theatre, you know?, because theatre, what is theatre? It’s a falsity, you know? but it’s a falsity that’s so true, so well done, that it becomes almost a truth. Until when I play the washerwoman from the interior, totally distanced, and I have to convey to the spectators the testimony of a woman who is super exploited, dominated, I speak as though it were me, with the greatest truth in the world, I get emotional, I remember Sebastião, who’s my husband, I remember my son who went off to cut sugarcane... It’s a totally distant reality, but I’m there entirely.



While the actresses whose interviews are woven into the script of *Sem Falsidades* are not nearly as successful as Ullmann, their thoughts on how to be “real” or what it means to be themselves onstage are echoed in these two passages.

It’s impossible to know whether these monologues come from the same testimony or whether they’re a conglomerate of interview answers from various actresses, and that really doesn’t matter. What matters is that the play presents these thoughts in such a way as to make them seem universal among actresses. While neither Redgrave nor Ullmann are mentioned in the script of the play, their thoughts on acting are reflected in the answers of these young performers. Not only that, but these thoughts are reflected not in one character’s experience, but rather as an experience stripped of the body that experienced it, separated out into pure language that can be tapped into by any one of the onstage players.

Ivette Hutchinson finds that, depending upon the context of the play, the importance of word-for-word truth and full disclosure varies. She studies South African verbatim theatre and observes that,

In the African context, the story is itself important as a mode through which we can know ourselves and explore our history, identity and collective value systems. It is no less true for being fictional or constructed. At some level it may even suggest greater truth, abstracted beyond the specific. Thus whether or not what is presented is someone’s ‘actual’ words – that is, verbatim in a Western sense – is less important than whether they represent a recognized, lived truth. (211)

As the playwright will be interested in conveying a certain truth in a given space and time, and a given number of bodies available, it may be that this poetic license is justified because its product represents something larger than its source material.

However, as Ryan Claycomb points out, this at once disempowers the interviewed subject, the body that actually underwent or observed the events described in the play, and invites the audience to participate in the mimetic recreation of the events:

These oral history plays take the discourse of history- and life-writing, and shift their discursive conceptions of the subject from the single protagonist to the greater community. This radical approach to subject formation not only disrupts the empowered status of the subject’s authority, but also encourages the integration of the audience into the tenuous sense of community created by the theatrical event itself. (95).

*Sem Falsidades*, by playing on this idea of community, insists on its truth even as it constantly negates the possibility of truth in theatre.

Defending his anthropological view of the fetish, Pietz writes, “In stressing the social objectivity of the fetish, however, these [Marxist and structuralist] theories tend to dismiss the problem of the relation of the fetish to the individual person (just as psychological and psychoanalytic theories ignore the social dimension of the fetish)” (9-10). Perhaps it is in the theatre, where the individual and the social come together, that these theories might be reconciled. By demonstrating how the testimonies are stripped from those that originally gave them and experienced the events they describe, *Sem Falsidades* allows the spectator to reconcile truth and fiction in the theatre.

## Chapter 4. The Limits of the Self: Performing Family

The term autobiography presupposes a privileging of the individual subject. Lejeune's famous pact insists that author, narrator, and protagonist are precisely one in the autobiographical mode. As discussed in Chapter One, taking this genre to the theatre allows us to insist upon the collaborative nature of constructing and telling a life story, challenging the idea of the individual autobiographer. In this chapter, the singular self – under the guise of the child – is once again put under the microscope, this time in the timeworn site of self-construction, the family. As Althusser reminds us, the family awaits the birth of a child with ideologically-charged expectation: “it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is ‘expected’ once it has been conceived” (Althusser). It is appropriate, then, that it is this very site of subject creation that allows for the disintegration of the subject when it comes to autobiographical theatre. The family becomes a lens through which a child's perspective may be focused on events that occurred, and the representation of such events in autobiographical plays brings up important questions about the limits of the self.

In families torn apart by political or domestic violence, inherited stories may be the only way a child can approach an absent family member. In Argentina of the 1970s and 80s, genetic lineages were interrupted by the systematic disappearance of dissident elements and the appropriation of their children, many of whom were born in captivity, by families deemed worthy by the military dictatorship.<sup>18</sup> In Mexico, in the same time period, guerrilla movements

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<sup>18</sup> See the *Nunca más* report by the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, which describes the victimization of families as a widespread practice in the Dirty War:

La metodología de la desaparición de personas afecta de manera especial la estructura y la estabilidad del núcleo familiar del desaparecido. El secuestro (efectuado por lo general en presencia de familiares y/o allegados), el peregrinaje angustioso en busca de noticias por oficinas públicas, juzgados, comisarías y cuarteles, la vigilia esperanzada ante la recepción de algún dato o trascendido, el fantasma de un duelo que no puede llegar a concretarse, son factores que juegan un papel destabilizador en el grupo familiar, como un todo, y en la personalidad de cada uno de sus miembros. Detrás de cada desaparición hay a veces una familia destruida, otras veces una familia desmembrada, y siempre hay un núcleo familiar afectado en lo más íntimo y esencial: el derecho a la privacidad, a la seguridad de sus miembros, al respeto de las relaciones afectivas profundas que son su razón de ser.

Este ataque al núcleo familiar reviste una gravedad extrema. Sin embargo, es sólo una parte del problema. Al instrumentarse la metodología de la desaparición de personas, el ataque al núcleo familiar fue mucho más lejos y alcanzó formas crueles y despiadadas. Hay evidencia de que en numerosos casos se usaron como rehenes a familiares de personas buscadas, que a veces la presunta responsabilidad de la persona buscada se hizo recaer con saña en su familia a través de robos, violencias físicas y aun desapariciones y que otras veces la tortura fue compartida y/o presenciada por miembros de la familia del sospechoso. Tener en la familia un presunto subversivo fue motivo más que suficiente para recibir un castigo grupal o individual; llevar a cabo un gesto de solidaridad, por mínimo que fuera, fue causa de tortura, sufrimientos y aun de desaparición. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas)

The methodology of the disappearance of persons especially affects the structure and stability of the family nucleus of the disappeared. The kidnapping (generally effected in the presence of family members and/or close friends), the anguishing pilgrimage in search of news to public offices, courts, police stations, and barracks, the hopeful vigil for the reception of some information or rumor, the phantom of a pain that cannot quite become concrete, are factors that play a destabilizing role in the family group as a whole, and in the personality of each one of its members. Behind each disappearance there is sometimes a destroyed family, other times a dismembered, family, and there is always a family nucleus affected in the most intimate and essential way: the right to privacy, security of its members, with respect to the deep affective relationships that are its reason for being.

This attack on the family nucleus contains an extreme gravity. Nevertheless, it is only a part of the problem. By implementing the method of the disappearance of persons, the attack on the family nucleus went much further and reached cruel and merciless heights. There is evidence that in numerous cases family members of wanted persons were used as hostages, that sometimes the presumed responsibility of the wanted person was made to fall upon his or her family with brutality through robberies, physical violence, and even disappearances, and that other times the torture was shared and/or witnessed by members of the family of the suspect. Having a presumed subversive in the family was more than enough of a motive to receive a group or individual punishment; to show a gesture of solidarity, as minimal as it might be, was cause for torture, suffering, and even disappearance.

usurped the role of family as fundamental unit of society, asking its adherents to forsake their parents and give themselves over completely to the cause and their comrades.<sup>19</sup> These reconstructed families leave the next generation, those born in the 1970s and early 80s, with many questions about their origins. These questions, though about the lives of their parents, are also about themselves.<sup>20</sup> Two plays from recent years, *Mi vida después* (Argentina, 2009) and *El rumor del incendio* (Mexico, 2010) are excellent examples of the attempt to make sense of one's self by making sense of one's parents. Both pieces ask the questions: What happens to the idea of self when it's represented in auto/biographical theatre that focuses on family relationships? How do the conscious inclusion and exclusion of inherited information shape the audience's understanding of the individual? In the plays treated here, the young actors invert genealogy. They are, in a sense, giving birth to themselves, creating their own legacy, self-consciously mapping out the image of themselves for posterity.

In 2002, Vivi Tellas, then director of Buenos Aires' renowned Teatro Sarmiento, convoked a cycle of what she called biodrama – biographical plays about real, living Argentines. In 2009, Lola Arias' response to the call premiered to wide critical acclaim, the last of the critically and commercially successful biodrama cycle. *Mi vida después* stages seven actors, six of whom vary between playing themselves and playing one or both of their parents. The seventh, Moreno, is the son of one of these actors.<sup>21</sup> *Mi vida después* has made festival rounds as well as having runs at two different theatres since its debut. In the play, the actors wear their parents' clothing, display and interpret photographs of their families and use other objects (books written by one actor's father, cassette recordings of another's voice, a live turtle, etc.) to evoke the stories of their parents' lives. Their parents include an ex-priest, revolutionary militants, a newscaster, an automobile journalist, a bank clerk, a secret policeman – all of whom lived during, if not through, Argentina's military dictatorship. An especially interesting feature is the way that the play has evolved over its three-year run to include updates on legal cases, DNA test results, and new discoveries. The play, which features professional actors and their own, real-life stories, is a thought-provoking study of the limits of the self, authority and authorship, and the role of theatre in society.

In *El rumor del incendio*, Mexican theatre company Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol challenges the borders between theatre and reality and biography and history with breathtaking results. The play premiered at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and is to date regularly presented at festivals in Europe and the Americas, winning the Spectators' Prize at the Festival Impatience, as well as the ZKB Förderpreis at the Zürcher Theater Spektakel. It recounts the history of armed resistance movements in Mexico in the 1960s and 70s, using the life of Comandante Margarita, played by Luisa Pardo, as the narrative thread. Characterized by the company as a scenic documentary (“documental escénico”), the play presents historical data,

<sup>19</sup> For more on Mexican guerrilla movements, see Laura Castellanos. *México armado 1943-1981*. México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2007. Print. for more on Mexican guerrilla movements.

<sup>20</sup> For more information about activism, artistic expression, and “post-memory” in postdictatorial generations, see Ana Ros. *The Post-dictatorship Generation in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print; and Susana Kaiser. *Postmemories of Terror*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print. For more on mediatic expressions of family heritage, see Anne-Marie Kramer. “Mediatizing Memory: History, Affect and Identity in *Who Do You Think You Are?*” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2011: 428-445. Digital file.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, Moreno has almost grown up onstage. In a recent interview Arias joked that “in twenty years the play was going to be put on with Moreno, and he would tell all of the stories, alone onstage, with their photos and playing all of the parts.” (translation mine) “*Siempre hacíamos el mismo chiste: en veinte años la obra se va a hacer con Moreno y él va a contar todas las historias, solo en el escenario, con las fotos de ellos y haciendo todos los personajes.*” In Ana Longoni and Lorena Verzero, “Mi vida después: Itinerario de un teatro vivo. Entrevista a Lola Arias,” *Conjunto* 162 (2012): 4-17.

video footage, and excerpts from the Mexican constitution alongside recreations of battles using toy soldiers and torture scenes in which make-up is conspicuously applied to represent wounds. This juxtaposition of factual information with ludic and theatrical elements questions and complicates generic assumptions about both history and theatre. The play's most surprising turn occurs in the final scene, a monologue by Comandante Margarita, in which she recounts her life after the resistance up to the birth of her child, "La Luisita." At this point Luisa Pardo, the actress portraying Margarita, breaks character and announces that she is Luisa, that her mother was Margarita, and that the project is a reaction to questions the company asked themselves about what they could do to live up to the legacy of their parents' struggle. This break in character only occurs for the final moments of the play, but is of utmost importance for this inquiry into the nature of autobiography. Where is the line between biography and autobiography? Do inherited memories, or family histories learned through interviews and genealogical research, belong in the realm of the one's history? Sylvia Molloy praises this tendency for tapping into a communal, family memory that occurs in Spanish American autobiography because it allows for "capturing a tension between self and other, of generating a reflection on the fluctuating place of the subject within its community, of allowing for other voices, besides that of the 'I,' to be heard in the text" (9). In *El rumor del incendio* this tension expands to include the self against history, and places historical and official discourses alongside familial and individual voices.

Both *Mi vida después* and *El rumor del incendio* use the lives of their actors' parents in a sort of revivification. In a sense these plays pay homage to the heroic parents whose lives are portrayed therein; in another they are more about their children's attempt to construct a self with the incomplete legacy of their families. Carol Martin affirms that "most contemporary documentary theatre makes the claim that everything presented is part of the archive" and that "more often than not documentary theatre is where 'real people' are absent – unavailable, dead, disappeared – yet reenacted" ("Bodies of Evidence" 18). In the cases I analyze here, however, the auto/biographical question comes to the forefront. What is presented in these plays does not come entirely from the archive, but also includes material that originates in memory, specifically the performer/children's memories of their parents. Similarly, the "real people" are only partially absent – the real parents are not present onstage, but their children, who do play themselves, are. Martin's point that "documentary theatre can directly intervene in the creation of history by unsettling the present by staging a disquieting past" ("Bodies of Evidence" 18) is especially valid here: the plays at once create history, by remitting to the parent/past, and unsettle the present by theatricalizing the child/present.

In this analysis I will use Martin's careful management of the term "truth" as I sort through the various levels of archival and theatrical veracity at work in these plays: "What makes documentary theatre provocative is the way in which it strategically deploys the appearance of truth while inventing its own particular truth through elaborate aesthetic devices, a strategy that is integral to the restoration of behavior" ("Bodies of Evidence" 19). It is important to keep this constant play between various manifestations of "truth" in mind when dealing with the plays. Indeed, the plays seem to offer up a version of reality that questions, decries, or outright contradicts official versions of the same:

Because so much documentary theatre has been made in order to "set the record straight" or to bring materials otherwise ignored to the public's attention, we ought not ignore its moral and ethical claims to truth. It is no accident that this kind of theatre has reemerged during a period of international crises of war,

religion, government, truth, and information. Governments “spin” the facts in order to tell stories. Theatre spins them right back in order to tell different stories. (Martin, “Bodies of Evidence” 23)

Martin also states that “adherence to an archive makes documentary theatre appear closer to actuality than fiction. The archive is concrete, historically situated, and relatively permanent; it is material and lasting while theatrical representation is intangible and ephemeral” (“Bodies of Evidence” 19). It is precisely the manipulation of the concrete archive in Arias’ and Lagartijas’ plays that give its intangible theatrical representation weight, and also, therefore, insists upon the existence of a self while simultaneously questioning the very concept of the self as a finite unit. As Martin concludes, “[. . .] what is real and what is true are not necessarily the same. A text can be fictional yet true. A text can be nonfictional yet untrue. Documentary theatre is an imperfect answer that needs our obsessive analytical attention especially since, in ways unlike any other form of theatre, it claims to have bodies of evidence” (“Bodies of Evidence” 24). In *Mi vida después* and *El rumor del incendio*, these declarations go beyond true/untrue, fiction/nonfiction, real/fantasy. These plays make historical and political claims, but also stake a claim on the un/truth of the self – its boundaries, its definition, and the lack thereof.

Both *El rumor del incendio* and *Mi vida después*, in their textual accompaniments, reveal how the project was conceived and what its authors hoped to achieve in creating living portraits of their parents. In the case of Arias, a family snapshot was her inspiration. For Lagartijas, the piece is the result of a political reflection on what the youth of Mexico should be doing today. Both sets of creators are responding to an emptiness: a generation marked by disappearances, followed by a generation searching for a cause around which to rally.

In the notes to the publication that accompanied the play, Arias writes:

Hay una foto mía a los 9 años vestida con la ropa de mi madre, sus anteojos y un diario en la mano. En esa foto yo actúo mi madre y actúo mi futuro al mismo tiempo. Siempre que miro esa foto me parece que mi madre y yo estamos superpuestas, como si dos generaciones se encontraran, como si ella y yo fuéramos la misma persona en algún raro pliegue del tiempo.

Supongo que muchas personas tienen una foto con las ropas de su padre o su madre entre su álbum de infancia. Para mí, esa voluntad infantil de representar al padre, trajo la idea de hacer una obra en que los hijos se ponen la ropa de los padres para reconstruir la vida de ellos, como si fueran dobles de riesgo dispuestos a revivir las escenas más difíciles de sus vidas. [Arias, *Mi vida después* (*My life after*) 50]

There’s a photo of me, age 9, wearing my mother’s clothes, her glasses and a newspaper in my hand. In that photo I’m playing both my mother and my future at the same time. Whenever I look at that photo I think that my mother and I are superimposed, as if two generations were meeting, as if she and I were the same person in some strange twist of time.

I guess a lot of people have a photo in their mother’s or father’s clothes in some childhood album. That child’s wish of representing their parents made me think of doing a play where the sons and daughters wear their parent’s clothes and reconstruct their lives, as if they were stunt doubles willing to relive the hardest scenes of their lives. [*Mi vida después* (*My Life After*) 54]

It is clear, then, that the author's intention in this documentary enterprise was to create meaning out of a murky, unexplained moment – for herself and for her peers. The tools used for creating such meaning were various: the use of several actors and their stories rather than just one signals a generational, collective experience or biography rather than an individual one; the embodiment of the parents by their actor children shows continuity between generational experience, unbreakable by deception, disappearance, and death; and the documentary nature of the play emphasizes the importance of the concept of truth. The latter is the backbone of the play's meaning-making, and the other tools rest upon a pact formed between the various participants in the play (actors, director, dramaturge, author, audience) that willingly suspends disbelief beyond Coleridge's "poetic faith", rather truly believing that the material presented, and the bodies presenting it, is and are what they purport to be. As Janelle Reinelt puts it, "Spectators come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand. This does not mean they expect unmediated access to the truth in question, but that the documents have something significant to offer" ("The Promise of Documentary" 9). This expectation is important for works like *Arias'* and *Lagartijas'*, which both come with historical and political baggage; similarly, it is important to understand that this pact involves an understanding that the audience is not naïve, but rather wise to the documentary genre and its problems. This understanding includes the difficulties inherent in any auto/biographical project as well, and we can assume these issues are part of the draw to the plays. If the selves being represented onstage are present, physically in the case of the children and figuratively in the case of the parents, then the "truth" takes on an important if somewhat suspicious significance in the play.

In the case of *El rumor del incendio*, the explicit purpose of the work is to examine closely what the generation of the guerilla did when faced with a particular set of social and political circumstances. The members of the company asked themselves what they would do if faced with such a situation, and the response seems to be: make theatre. That is, the play itself is this generation's act of rebellion, their answer to apathy and national hopelessness.<sup>22</sup> In the blog that accompanied the play, *El Rumor del Oleaje 'The Rumor of the Swell'*, the company presented some of the findings of their research into the guerrilla – historical texts, letters, photographs, and music – as well as some first-person accounts written under the name Comandante Margarita that justify and explain the work being done. In one of the earliest entries, dated May 4, 2010, Comandante Margarita posts a long reflection on the gap between the generation of the guerrilla and today's youth:

Era una sorpresa, grata e ingrata a la vez, escuchar y leer las anécdotas revolucionarias, de resistencia, de oposición en un México que me parecía tan ajeno. Sentía vergüenza de mí al saber que jóvenes, a mi edad, habían dado la vida por buscar que este país mejorara, que fuera más justo, que fuera como lo imaginaban...

[. . .]

Un día me senté con mucha gente y hablamos de lo importante que es reconstruir el mundo. Un día me di cuenta de que si dejaba de creerme incapaz y perdida entonces iba a levantar la vista y ver en el horizonte el mundo real que todo el tiempo había estado en mi imaginación.

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<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that *Lagartijas* is an active part of the #YoSoy132 movement in the weeks leading up to Mexico's 2012 presidential election, which mobilized thousands of young people, many of whom were previously apathetic to national politics.

*Comandante Margarita 2010*  
(Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol,  
"Margarita")

It was a surprise, simultaneously pleasant and unpleasant, to listen to and read the revolutionary anecdotes, of resistance, of opposition in a Mexico that seemed to me so distant. I felt ashamed of myself to know that young people, at my age, had given their lives trying to make this country better, to make it more just, to make it like they had imagined it....

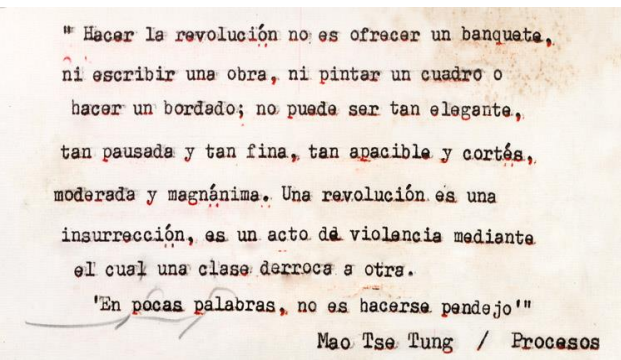
[. . .]

One day I sat with many people and we spoke of how important it is to rebuild the world. One day I realized that if I stopped believing I was incapable and lost then I would look up and see, on the horizon, the real world that had been there all the time in my imagination.

*Comandante Margarita 2010*

Clearly, although the post is signed "Comandante Margarita," the author must be Pardo, given the references to her mother and the process of researching for the project. The shame described in the second paragraph is key to the intersection between self and Other that is staged in the play – what is true about Margarita's life is exactly what lacks in the daughter's, yet in the fusion between the two characters (because both, in the process of theatricalization, become characters) this deficiency seems to find some sort of redemption. The inertia and inaction that cause Pardo to feel ashamed when she compares her own youth to her mother's is resolved in the moment that it is named – researching, blogging, and acting is the reaction that justifies the current generation in its own eyes, since the eyes of their martyred predecessors are now long closed. Many young people sit down to talk with people about "*lo importante que es reconstruir el mundo*" – this is a necessary rite of passage for most teenagers. In the blog, Pardo does not even have to explain how exactly the world would be reconstructed or what was said in this discussion. The art itself is, it would seem, this reconstruction – not in the sense of urban planning or political projects, but rather a reconstruction of past events.

Along with the blog and the play, the company published a book, *El rumor de este momento* 'The Rumor of This Moment', which is described as "*compuesto por colaboraciones de 24 personas. A partir de la convivencia de distintas voces queremos configurar un camino a future; un mapa de esperanza,*" 'composed of contributions by 24 people. Beginning with the coexistence of distinct voices, together we want to trace a path to a future; a map of hope' (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol 5). Here, the answer to the existential crisis Pardo describes in the aforementioned blog entry comes to light. The company believes in their project as a justified activity, ever as important as the resistance their parents mounted in the sierra, in a moment just



"Hacer la revolución no es ofrecer un banquete, ni escribir una obra, ni pintar un cuadro o hacer un bordado; no puede ser tan elegante, tan pausada y tan fina, tan apacible y cortés, moderada y magnánima. Una revolución es una insurrección, es un acto de violencia mediante el cual una clase derroca a otra.  
"En pocas palabras, no es hacerse pendejo"  
Mao Tse Tung / Procesos

Figure 5 "Revolution is not a dinner party, nor an essay, nor a painting, nor a piece of embroidery; it cannot be advanced softly, gradually, carefully, considerately, respectfully, politely, plainly, and modestly. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.

"In short, it's not playing dumb." (Ziff 78)

Source: Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol. *El rumor del oleaje*. 2 Sept. 2010. Web. June 23, 2012.

as critical in their nation's history. In the blog they share a photograph of text composed of two different quotes – one by Mao Tse Tung and one by the rebel group Los Procesos (see fig. 5). The question follows: Is making theater revolution, or is it *hacerse pendejo*? What is, in my view, revolutionary is making theater that at once asserts itself as a source, among many, of “truth”, providing a version or versions of reality that conflicts with or complements established discourses and, meanwhile, undoes the idea of the self as a finite, hermetic individual. In an age when many people view the artistic representation of personal life stories as grotesque, imprudent, or, perhaps worst of all, uninteresting, artists like Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol and Lola Arias are providing a different mode of transmitting life stories as well as challenging the borders between the self and the Other, biography and autobiography, and documentary and theater.

How does the representation of a supposedly real family member and their life story expand the boundaries of the self? What strategies do these plays use to challenge the limits of the self? In these plays, and others that incorporate family members' biographies, I find three discrete branches of discursive strategies that question the concept of a self defined by first-hand experience and memory: 1) Documentary; 2) Corporeal; and 3) Genealogy.

The first branch, the documentary, describes the use of documents as evidence of the veracity of the content presented in the play. These might take the form of legal documents, such as court proceedings; personal writings, such as letters; and family photographs that were generally not originally conceived as documentary in the generic sense of the word. Besides extending the bounds of the play to include the real world, these documents also work as extensions of the actor-characters'<sup>23</sup> memories and selves. This section will focus on images and archival documents, which create links between the actors onstage and the selves they represent.

The second strategy I analyze is the corporeal, which is used to unite past and present. In *At Face Value* Sylvia Molloy mentions the autobiographer's “anxiety of closure”: “How shall I write down that asymptotic point where my past and my present connect?” (34). The answer I find upon analyzing autobiographical manifestations in contemporary theatre has to do with the action of “writing down”. Here the asymptotic point is found not in writing but in embodiment. The actor-characters make use of corporeal practices and physical relics (in the case of the voice) to configure a lived memory, a re/presentation of the parent as part of the actor-child's body.

The third type of strategy I observe is the genealogical, another in which the connections between the actor-characters and the historical characters are insisted upon in the plays. Through the selective presentation of credible, inherited material and an emphasis on proper names, the plays extend the reach of each autobiographical self portrayed to include the biographical selves of their parent(s). However this information is not only transmitted, but also transformed through the dramatic process.

Finally, besides the three strategic branches I have identified, it is necessary to analyze the indices of impossibility of any auto/biographical project or family reconstruction. Each tool is subject to the strength and weakness of memory, whether individual or collective, and interpretation. The role that each actor-character plays goes beyond reciting lines, and the objects used onstage are more than props. The interpretive act undertaken by the actor-characters before the audience at once requires and reinforces the pact of theatrical truth established with the audience of any documentary play. Whether it is through interpreting photos and arranged

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<sup>23</sup> I will distinguish between “actor” and “actor-character” even though they are supposedly one and the same. Actor will refer to the actual biographical subject, while actor-character will refer to the staged version of the same.



objects or through mere auto-reflection, the work of self-interpretation further expands the possibilities of what the term “self” can contain. Nevertheless, this act of self-interpretation reveals the lacunae that exist in any memory and, therefore, the problems with a self constructed of inherited and experienced memories. The politics of memory play a significant part in these plays.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Diana Taylor proposes the concept of what she calls “a DNA of performance”, in which “performance contributes to the proof of the claim itself” (176). Taylor analyzes activist groups *Abuelas y Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* and H.I.J.O.S.’ use of photography in their claims for the truth about the disappearances of their grandchildren, children, and parents, and the concept has a thematic as well as analytical link to this project. As Ana Amado<sup>24</sup> observes in her important work on Argentine documentary film by children of the disappeared, “*La insistencia en la reproducción de escenas del pasado aflora en las distintas producciones estéticas realizadas desde la agrupación, o convocadas en torno a sus actividades. El canal privilegiado de expresión es el de las imágenes, como artefacto inapelable para encauzar las ficciones o los documentos testimoniales dedicados a la evocación de sus padres desaparecidos,*” “The insistence on the reproduction of scenes from the past flowers in the distinct aesthetic productions undertaken by the group [H.I.J.O.S.], or organized around their activities. The privileged channel of expression is that of images, as an unappealable artifact for channeling fictions or testimonial documents dedicated to the evocation of their disappeared parents’ (51). Indeed, the *Abuelas*, *Madres*, and H.I.J.O.S. have often used official government photographs of the disappeared in their public protests in an attempt to show the hypocrisy of a government – the very government that issued the photos – in claiming that the disappeared never existed. In Arias’ play, the photograph is also privileged as evidence of a truth claim, but here it is a highly personalized image, imbued with memory and interpretation.

As in the political movements Amado and Taylor discuss, *Mi vida después* relies heavily on photography to establish familial bonds between the characters. Taylor’s extended metaphor will be useful in analyzing how the play in question establishes truth:

Like DNA, the images and strategies conveyed through these performances build on prior material, replicating and transforming the received ‘codes.’ Not all the inherited materials get reused; some are incorporated selectively, others get discarded as ‘junk DNA.’ Moreover, DNA does not dictate biological determinism. Recent studies have shown the degree to which it is capable of changing rather than simply transmitting codes in the process of cultural adaptation through ‘messenger RNA.’ So too, these performances change the sociopolitical environment even as they develop within it. The information conveyed through the performances, like the genetic information, appears in highly coded and concentrated, yet eminently readable form. The images function as markers, identifying an entire movement. (176-77)

This analogy allows me to explain an important strategy for challenging the concept of self in the auto/biographical family dramas analyzed here. In both plays, but especially in *Mi vida después*, photographic images are displayed with exacting selectivity and purpose to create familial bonds between parent and child. However, these images are taken out of their context, transformed

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<sup>24</sup> Amado is, incidentally, the mother of Liza Casullo, an actor-character in *Mi vida después*.

(sometimes physically written on or cut up in front of a projector to better explain a point), and passed on to the audience as evidence of the connection between the present and absent selves.

In *Mi vida después*, family snapshots become documents, evidence. The documentary turn in contemporary theatre is reflected in the change in status of the photos. They are a family archive, personal in nature, whose documentary or propagandistic plans don't go much further than Sontag's "portable kit of images that bears witness to [a family's] connectedness" (8). Nevertheless, the play shows how the family photos construct the family's idea of itself, for better or for worse. Family relationships, whether biological or not, are established by means of the photos, stories, and inherited objects. Thus, photography conceived as a family relic merges with the practice of documentary photography and, in turn, gives the theatre a position in the field of power as a source of truth. The association between veracity, authenticity, genuineness, and the photo is so powerful that, even though the photos were not taken with a documentary purpose in mind, their use as evidence within the theatre inserts them in the documentary genre. In a way, the actor-children are inserting themselves into moments prior to their birth, or prior to their understanding of what was going on in the photograph, in an attempt to obliterate, through interpretation, the temporal separation between the present self and the past self.

*Mi vida después* opens with clothes raining down onto the stage. As a pile of jeans, T-shirts and jackets grows on the stage, Liza Casullo struggles to emerge from the sartorial flood. It is as though she were borne of the clothing, the character created from the costume rather than the costume created for the character. Each actor-character introduces him- or herself with an anecdote about the day he or she was born. They go on to introduce their parent or parents, backing up their claims of familial bond with documentary evidence: photographs, letters, and objects. These introductions are usually accompanied by an insistence on the bodily link between parent and child in a sort of performed photo caption. Indeed, as Benjamin observes, "At this point the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literarises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate" ("A Short History of Photography" 25). Therefore each relationship is, rather than literarized, theatricalized – its significance explained and performed by the actor-character insisting on the genetic relationship whose existence the photograph would "prove".

Mariano Speratti shows a photograph (see fig. 6) of his father at work, describing it:

MARIANO. Mi padre siempre usó anteojos enormes porque veía muy mal, como yo. [Arias, *Mi vida después* (*My life after*) 16]



Figure 6 Mariano Speratti's father, 1966. Source: Arias, *Mi vida después* (*My life after*)16.

MARIANO. My father always wore huge glasses because he had weak eyes, just like me. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 16]

The hereditary bad vision backs up the claim that the photograph is indeed the biological father of the man on the stage before the audience. Of course this link is weak – I myself have bad vision, and this doesn't indicate a connection between Speratti and me – but its use in conjunction with the photograph is an attempt to give Speratti the authority to tell his father's story, the authority to extend his own experience to include the secondhand experience of his father.

Liza Casullo, for her part, shows a photograph (see fig. 7) of her parents:

LIZA. Mi madre, mi padre y yo adentro de mi madre al borde de una pileta de México. En la boca de mi madre embarazada un cigarrillo y en la mano izquierda un paquete de cigarrillos que ya se fumó. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 42]

LIZA. My mother, my father and me inside of my mother by a swimming pool in Mexico. A cigarette in my mother's mouth and, in her left hand, a pack of cigarettes she already smoked. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 42]

The implication is that the unborn Casullo is inextricably linked to the photo and to her parents – she even shares a cigarette with her mother, who is, in the context of the new millennium, lightly chastised for her unhealthy habit of 1981. Casullo extends her conscious life by a few months to include her embryonic stage, as though the Mexican swimming pool of the photograph formed part of her own memory.

In another scene, Pablo Lugones tells the story of how his father, who had worn a beard all of his adult life, was approached by his manager at the bank where he worked. The manager told the elder Lugones that only terrorists had beards, and so the next morning he shaved before work. The actor-character plays himself, speaking in the first-person singular, but he stretches out his white shirt so that a photograph of his bearded father might be projected onto it. As he tells of his father's decision to shave, the projected beard is scrubbed away with a pencil eraser, leaving a photo of the same man, now clean-shaven, shining upon his son's belly.<sup>25</sup> This juxtaposition is similar to that used in Casullo's case, and also recalls the birth motif (this time inverted and twisted, with the father resting on the son's belly) with which the play opens.

In the case of Lagartijas, the documents used to extend the reach of the autobiographical self to include family members' experiences are different. Both within the play, with letters and historical footage, and beyond its boundaries, with paratexts, documents form the basis for familial connections. The book *El rumor de este momento* along with other paratexts such as the blog or the program provide clues to the spectator as to the identity of the represented characters.



Figure 7 Liza Casullo's parents, 1981. Source: Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 42.

<sup>25</sup> For a similar projection technique used to create photographs of children of the disappeared with their parents, see Lucila Quieto, *Arqueología de la ausencia*. Buenos Aires: Casa Nova Editores, 2011. Print

Just as Margarita's final monologue ends with the birth of "la Luisita", the alert spectator might wonder whether the actress identified as Luisa Pardo in the program has anything to do with the diminutive name. In this way paratextual documents establish genetic links between the characters and their creators.

In the scene of Margarita's incarceration, the three actor-characters depend upon documentary evidence to reconstruct the situation and to reinforce the reality of what is being presented. The characters identified as "G" (Gabino Rodriguez) and "P" (Paco Barreira) in the script recite, in a journalistic style, the events of the capture and arrest, and cite court documents that state that they "*En los documentos de los juicios se menciona que fueron sometidos a maltrato moral y que sus declaraciones fueron tomadas de maneras prohibidas por la ley,*" 'were submitted to moral mistreatment and that their declarations were taken in ways that are prohibited by law' (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol *El rumor de este momento* 104). This is a key moment because of the way it interweaves documentary evidence with theatricality, thereby interweaving second- and firsthand experience. As Gabino and Paco cite legal documents, Margarita is tortured in a stylized scene. Slowly, deliberately, and openly, she rubs black makeup over her face to represent wounds, the result of the simulated beating. Her head is placed in a basin full of water, but there is no attempt to recreate the scene in a realistic way. Reminiscent of Brechtian alienation, the audience is obliged to watch violence that is clearly a re-presentation. The fact is that the three actor-characters are incapable of reliving history, no matter how much historical research they do or how much data they have to support their stories. Here the tension derived from the habitation by both mother and daughter in one body is brought to the forefront. As much as Luisa would like to transmit her mother, embody her, her actions as Margarita will always be a copy – theatre. In *El rumor del incendio* the juxtaposition of documentary evidence with the impossibility of representing past violence, undertaken and experienced by absent bodies, creates friction between the reality of the familial connections proposed by the play and the fictional nature of theatrical representation. As Luisa, the character, will say a few scenes later, with respect to the student movement of 1968, "[. . .] fue 'diálogo público' o nada, fueron los estudiantes cantando el himno nacional frente al ejército, fue la fiesta, la democracia: no fue la revolución pero sí fue la representación de la revolución," "[. . .] it was 'public dialogue' or nothing, it was the students singing the national anthem before the army, it was the festival, democracy: it wasn't the revolution but it was the representation of the revolution' (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol 107). The detention scene, by emphasizing the representative nature of theatre, also reveals the problems inherent in representing the self. Pardo, attempting to "play" her mother but also herself, as she does at the end of the play, claims authority over her mother's life, almost as an extension of her own.

Another example of the use of documentary evidence to tie Margarita to the historical world is a letter addressed to her from José María Pérez Gay, a writer, journalist, and ambassador who served as advisor to Mexican presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The letter is read aloud by Margarita, after she narrates the death of her father. Dated November 14, 1975 in Cologne, Germany, Chema, as Pérez Gay is known, calls Margarita "Mi Querida Apache" ("My Dear Apache") and "Márgara", and refers to inside jokes and shared memories in an attempt to cheer up his friend and offer his condolences. What is especially interesting about the textual version of the play is that it is here that Margarita is first referred to as a mother. Although she has had one child at this point, her son, Emiliano, does not play a large part in the story, and nor does her maternity. The parenthetical notes below the scene's title read "*(Muere*

*don Luis, carta de Chema Pérez Gay, mamá triste*)” ‘(Don Luis dies, letter from Chema Pérez Gay, mamá sad).’ Mamá must be, by process of elimination, Margarita. It is through affect, through the feeling of sadness and the loss of her own genetic origins – the death of her father – that Margarita converts from a historical figure, whose reality is established throughout the play as discussed here, into a familial one, a mother. The sadness, the infinite and profound pain she describes at the death of her father, is the field on which daughter and mother finally intersect.

In *Mi vida después* the actor-characters use clothing and props, all objects imbued with meaning (based on what the actor-characters claim the object signifies within their family) to embody the absent other, their parents. Familial bonds being confirmed (or as confirmed as they can be, given the superficiality of such evidence for something as deep as blood ties) for the audience, the play then goes on to take the turn that Arias mentions when she discusses the idea of actors as dressing up as their parents, acting as their stunt doubles. Each of the actors, in one moment or other, embodies his or her parent(s), leaving the character of “self” behind to play a different character, intimately connected to that self.

Pablo Lugones brings out his grandfather’s dancing boots and physically shows the skills he inherited from his father and grandfather:

PABLO. Mi abuelo, mi padre y yo tuvimos vidas muy diferentes. Mi abuelo criaba caballos. Mi padre trabajaba en un banco. Yo soy bailarín.

Pero hay algo que los tres tenemos en común: a los 3 nos gusta bailar malambo.

Estas son las botas que usaba mi abuelo.

Cuando me pongo sus botas para bailar es como si el tiempo no hubiera pasado y mi abuelo, mi padre y yo nos encontráramos en el mismo cuerpo. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 49]

PABLO. My grandfather, my father and I had very different lives. My grandfather raised horses. My father worked in a bank. I’m a dancer.

But there’s one thing the three of us have in common –we all like to dance malambo. These are the boots my grandfather used to wear.

When I put on his boots to dance it’s like time never passed, as if my grandfather, my father and I met in the same body.[ Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 49]

Lugones breaks into dance, as if insisting on the trinity of father, son, and grandfather in one dancer’s body. His performance is unaccompanied by music or lyric. The physical expression transcends language to express more than an artistic impulse – it begs to be read as genetic evidence linking the three men.

Blas Arrese Igor, the son of a seminary dropout, brings a stand-in for his father: a live turtle. He explains that

BLAS. Esta tortuga se llama Pancho y nació el mismo año que mi padre. Ambos tienen ahora sesenta años y viven en la Plata. Pancho se pasa las tardes debajo de la heladera y mi padre es abogado y pasa los días en los pasillos de tribunales. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 31]

BLAS. This turtle is called Pancho and was born in the same year as my father. They are both 60 years old now and live in La Plata. Pancho spends the afternoons under the fridge, and my father is a lawyer and spends his days in the hallways of the court. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 31]

By bringing in his father's living double, Arrese Igor coaxes the audience into trusting that he is indeed the once celibate priest's son. The importance of the use of objects in convincing the spectators of these biological, familial bonds is demonstrated in the crew's response to restrictions on animal importation when the play has traveled to other countries for festivals. When traveling with Pancho has been impossible, he has been replaced by his own double: a guinea pig.

At one point in the narration, Carla Crespo, whose father died before she was born, reconstructs the last years of his life, when he joined *the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* 'People's Revolutionary Army' (ERP), the armed wing of *the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* 'Worker's Revolutionary Party' (PRT). Crespo explains that her father had no military training, and that he was transferred to the Rosa Jiménez Company in Tucumán. At this point in the play she describes what life must have been like in the training camp, imagining required reading of Marx and physical fitness drills. She and her fellow actors begin manically marching around the stage, shouting passages from *The Communist Manifesto* into a megaphone, then abruptly barking orders to hit the floor, crawl, roll over, and jump up. All of the actors take part, including Crespo. In a way similar to that of Lugones' trying on his grandfather's boots, by physically going through the motions her father did, Crespo attempts to lend her body to take the place of the disappeared one. As in the case of the theatrical representation of torture in *El rumor del incendio*, the farcical nature of the scene points out the impossibility of such attempts to fill in for the absent.<sup>26</sup> Where her father is unable to perform the exercises, she and the other actors are able and do so, even if only farcically. The body erases spatial and temporal distance between father and daughter, the motions serving as a conduit connecting one to the other. After the exercises are over, in the most recent versions of the play Crespo is able to tell the audience that her father's remains were confirmed among those in a common grave through the use of DNA testing. She extends the bodily connection, the substitution made in the exercise scene, to the future, stating that

CARLA. Yo nunca conocí a mi padre. Él murió a los veintiséis años, cuatro meses antes de que yo naciera. Cuando yo cumplí los veintisiete pensé: "ahora soy más vieja que mi padre, ahora voy a vivir lo que él no pudo vivir, voy a ser su vida futura." [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 37]

CARLA. I never met my father. He died at the age of 26, four months before I was born. When I turned 27 I thought, "Now I'm older than my father. Now I'm going to live all the things he couldn't live. I'm going to be his future life." [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 37]

The idea that the daughter would take the father's place in the world was presciently mirrored in the last letter he wrote to his wife before his death, a letter that was hidden inside of a doll for twenty years, until Crespo and her aunt tore apart all the dolls in the house to find it. This image of the father's words being secreted inside of a doll reflects that of his future self being placed in his daughter's body.

Liza Casullo, too, takes on her parent's identity. In this case she plays her mother, who worked as a newscaster in the 1970s in Argentina. Casullo puts on a Chanel-style suit that her mother would sometimes wear to deliver the news, letting the audience in on the secret that she

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<sup>26</sup> This impossibility of representation is reminiscent of the *Siluetazo* project by Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel in the Plaza de Mayo in September of 1983, which emphasized the presence of absence in the last months of the military dictatorship. Rather than replacing or reviving the disappeared, such actions can only point to their absence.

only had to be dressed from the waist up to appear on television, then holds a photograph of her mother's face over her own like a mask, reading events from the time in a the style of broadcast journalism. Just as the jacket is enough to synecdochically create the illusion of an entire suit, of a well-dressed newscaster, here the daughter attempts to stand in for herself and her mother. Meanwhile, clothing rains down onto the stage, sometimes hitting Casullo in the head and disturbing her reporting, though she valiantly continues to read as the situation grows more and more absurd. This seems to point to the attempt on the part of the Argentine establishment to pretend that everything was normal as illegal kidnappings occurred with regularity, disappearing around 30,000 people by the end of the military dictatorship.

Casullo's portrayal of her mother is made possible through the appropriation of her position in the media, using her clothing, her behaviors, and her words to recreate the woman. What is especially interesting about this representation is that Casullo's mother was, Casullo claims onstage, a militant, and every night's report was a performance attempting to disassemble her clandestine activities. Casullo shows a pair of photographs (see fig. 8) of her mother before going on the air, looking nervous, explaining:

LIZA. Mi madre antes de salir al aire en TELENOCHE. El compañero de mi madre (César Masetti) está tranquilo, imperturbable pero ella tiene un gesto de duda, como si no supiera qué decir. Mi madre era la chica bonita que dice las noticias y al mismo tiempo, era militante de Montoneros. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 40]

LIZA. My mother before going on the air in TELENOCHE. My mother's colleague, César Masetti, looks calm and impassive, but she expresses doubt, as if she didn't know what to say. My mother was the pretty news reporter and, at the same time, she was a member of Montoneros. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 40]

Casullo goes on, transitioning from talking about her mother, interpreting the photo, to embodying it:

LIZA. Yo no sé qué noticias habrá tenido que decir, pero cuando me quiero imaginar, agarro los diarios de la época y leo los titulares: 'Las fuerzas armadas asumen el poder,' 'Se detuvo la presidente y habrá pena de muerte para delitos de orden público,' 'La nave Viking descendió en marte y envió



Figure 8 Ana Amado and César Masetti. Source: Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 40.

fotografías,’ ‘El derecho a la huelga queda temporariamente suspendido,’ ‘Se clausura un diario por una caricatura de un militar,’ ‘Galíndez noqueó a Noriega en una pelea de película en Luna Park’. (Arias, *Mi vida después*)

LIZA. I don’t know what news she must have had to say, but when I want to imagine, I grab some newspapers from that time and I read the headlines: “The armed forces assume power,” “The President was arrested and the penalty for crimes of a public order will be death,” “The Viking spacecraft landed on Mars and sent photographs,” “The right to strike is temporarily suspended,” “A newspaper is closed for printing a cartoon about a military officer,” “Galíndez knocked out Noriega in an epic fight in Luna Park.”

As Casullo speaks, she holds a sheet of paper, supposedly containing the headlines, up to her face and the photograph of her mother as a newscaster is projected onto the back wall in such a way that her mother’s face appears on the white paper, juxtaposed against Casullo’s body. In this way Casullo provides the body and voice, while her mother provides the face, costume, and history.

Vanina Falco’s instance of dressing up as her father is perhaps the most turbulent. She wears his policeman-gray suit, a bit large for her. As she’ll later reveal, her father beat her and kicked her out of the house the day she told him she was in love with a woman, so this gender-bending is especially momentous. While Casullo and Crespo’s characters seem to feel they are putting on the uniform of heroes when they dress up as their mother and father, respectively, Falco must take up the part of the play’s villain. It is revealed early on in the play that her brother was appropriated by her parents, and that her father was a secret policeman. She wears the suit while she tells this story, an action that places her visually and bodily with her family, her father, while verbally with her brother. In this case the child that has done everything she can to cast off the relationship with her father -- a father who did not, as in the cases of Crespo and Speratti, disappear but rather formed part of the repressive apparatus that did the disappearing – puts on his clothes, claims her legacy, and speaks the painful truth. This speaking of the truth, it will be revealed, carries weight beyond the theatre walls and even the cultural field, echoing in the halls of justice, where her father was tried and found guilty of appropriating Falco’s brother, Juan Carbandié.

The play does not, however, make Falco’s father out to be a complete monster. The character-actor Falco goes into a short reverie, attempting to work through the multiple versions of her father that she knew. As she enumerates his various faces, the other actors enter the stage through a black door in the black back wall, all dressed in dark suits similar to the one she wears:

VANINA. Mi padre tiene muchas caras para mí. Luis 1: el hombre que vendía remedios y me curaba de la fiebre cuando yo estaba enferma. Luis 2: el policía que trabajaba en el servicio de inteligencia. Luis 3: el hombre deportista que me llamaba Delfín y le gustaba nadar conmigo hasta que ya no veíamos la orilla. Luis 4: el hombre que posaba como un playboy en todas las fotos. Luis 5: el hombre que rompía guitarras, vasos, muebles y huesos cuando estaba enojado. (Arias, *Mi vida después*)

VANINA. My father has many faces for me. Luis 1: the man who sold medicine and who took care of me when I was sick with fever. Luis 2: the policeman who worked in the intelligence service. Luis 3: the athletic man who called me



Dolphin and liked to swim with me until we couldn't see the shore. Luis 4: the man who posed like a playboy in every picture. Luis 5: the man who broke guitars, glasses, furniture, and bones when he was angry.

Here Falco's fellow actors also put on the suit of the intelligence officer, not exactly portraying Luis Falco – they only stand, blank-faced, in a row, an accumulation of dark suits – but rather joining Falco as she struggles to show allegiance to her brother while remembering, even embodying her father. The collaborative nature of the representation of Luis Falco seems to be hinting at a collective implication in the last dictatorship's repressive system, without being overt.

In *El rumor del incendio*, in contrast to *Mi vida después*, Luisa's putting on of Margarita is not a manifest act until the end of the play. This results in a series of doublings that emphasizes the hollow where Margarita should be. In this dance around the empty center, not only Luisa, but also the phantom-like character of Margarita's aunt participate. The aunt works as a sort of Celestina figure; she is almost always mentioned in tandem with one of Margarita's lovers and in succession with her political consciousness. She first comes into the story right after the description of Margarita's parents:

MARGARITA. Desde los 15 años, mi hermana y yo, que nos llevábamos muy bien, nos íbamos a bailar, nos poníamos bien guapas, de vestido corto y todo, nos maquillábamos las piernas. Nos hacíamos de esos peinados altos, así.  
(Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, *El rumor de este momento* 96)

MARGARITA. Starting at age 15, my sister and I, we got along really well, would go out dancing, we'd dress up really pretty, with short dresses and everything, we would put makeup on our legs. We did those tall hairdos, like this.

Here the bodies – not only that of Margarita, but also its double, her sister's – amplify the physicality of youth and sexual attraction. Interestingly, Luisa, playing Margarita, is almost a third representation of this succulence in her own costume of a short dress. In an absent Margarita's place the accumulation of descriptions and representations of youthful bodies seems to be an attempt to provide a substitute for the missing body at the center of the play.

Romantic ties will also be broken in the name of the struggle. Margarita states that

MARGARITA. A punto de casarme y con un puesto de maestra en Chihuahua, abandoné todo para continuar en el movimiento. Llegué a la Ciudad de México. [. . .] Desde México le mandé una carta a mi papá diciéndole que ya no regresaría, que mi vida pertenecía a la lucha por la libertad y la justicia.  
(Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, *El rumor de este momento* 102-03)

MARGARITA. On the verge of getting married and with a teaching position in Chihuahua, I abandoned everything to continue in the movement. I arrived in Mexico City. [. . .] I sent my father a letter from the City telling him that I wouldn't return, that my life belonged to the struggle for liberty and justice.

This decision leads to Margarita's imprisonment, where her family will once again play an important role. In the women's prison, Margarita tells that

MARGARITA. Mi hermana visitaba a varios presos en diferentes cárceles y a todos nos ayudaba con trámites legales y papeleo. A mí me iba a ver los miércoles y domingos. A veces lloraba mucho, se ponía triste de verme ahí. Me contaba que tenía que atravesar la ciudad y luego tomar un camión que

viajaba lejos por una avenida sin pavimentar, en ese entonces Santa Martha Acatitla estaba en las orillas de la ciudad. Vio atardeceres muy bonitos cuando salía de visitarme en la cárcel. (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, *El rumor de este momento* 105-06)

MARGARITA. My sister visited various prisoners in different prisons and she helped all of us with legal procedures and paperwork. She would come to see me on Wednesdays and Sundays. Sometimes she cried a lot; it made her sad to see me there. She told me that she had to cross the city and then take a bus that traveled far down an unpaved avenue; at that time Santa Martha Acatitla was in the outskirts of the city. She saw very beautiful sunsets when she left the prison after visiting me.

Once again Margarita's sister (who interestingly remains nameless) plays an important role in connecting Margarita with the greater world. Whereas Margarita is trapped in captivity, her sister is free to move around, and shares that freedom by describing the route she takes and the sunsets she sees. Her sister provides her with a proxy body that can leave the prison, and returns with descriptions of sunsets and city limits that Margarita herself cannot experience firsthand. The secondhand experience of her sister's experiences likens Margarita's position to that of her daughter, actor-character Luisa, who must recreate her mother's life through secondhand information, or that of the audience, which witnesses a stand-in body for Margarita. This putting-on of various characters makes this play about representation – self-representation. The self at play here is one that cannot be contained, but must pull from discovered, uncovered, and second-hand experiences in order to represent itself.

Besides the instances of costuming oneself as one's parents, both plays focus specifically on the physicality of voice. In *Mi vida después*, Speratti's dress-up plays with physical difference. He shows the audience his disappeared father's blue mechanic's jumpsuit, which is obviously much too small for the tall actor. Holding it up before him, as someone might in a store, checking a size, the comical effect is also poignant. Just as Crespo feels older than her father, and that she must take on his life, Speratti is larger than his father. Toward the end of the play this fact is foregrounded when Speratti takes out an old tape recorder that had belonged to his father. He calls his son, Moreno, to him. Moreno, who has grown up on stage, in this play, runs from backstage, his silhouette traced on the back screen as he races onstage, emerging and running to his father. Moreno either sits on his father's lap or stands, attentively next to the recorder. Speratti's father's voice comes out of the loudspeakers before the audience, before his son and his grandson, a stranger, and he calls to his small son, no more than three at the time:

MARIANO. Esta es la parte que a mí más me gusta de todo lo que encontré, de las cintas, y es mi padre diciendo mi nombre. (*Suena voz grabada que dice, "Mariaaaaaano...a ver...Papáaaaa, Papáaaaaaa."*) (Arias, *Mi vida después*)

MARIANO. This is my favorite part of everything I found in the tapes, and it's my father saying my name.

(*Starts reel-to-reel, which plays a recorded voice saying "Mariaaaaaano...come on....Papaaaaa, Papaaaaaa."*)

Just as Speratti summons a shadow of his son, who emerges in flesh and blood, here Speratti's father summons his own small son, Mariano, coaxing him to say his own name, Papá. The juxtaposition of three generations onstage, one of them lost, is made possible through the

archival recording and its performance in the ephemeral space of the theatre.<sup>27</sup> Later the father's recorded voice makes the painful assertion that Mariano should speak into the recorder, not listen to it: ““Es para hablar, no para oír, . . .” ‘*It’s for talking, not for listening. Is that all you’re going to do, is listen?*’ (Arias, *Mi vida después*). The physicality of the father's voice is, in this case, a one-way transmission. Mariano now, as then, can only listen to his father. What he can do, though, is pass the message on, playing the tape for the audience. He makes his father's recorded voice his own, using it to tell his own life story.

This moment recovers the physicality of voice, recalling that the body is more than its mass, but also the sounds it produces. However, this recall is only a partial recovery of absence. While the voice is, indeed, a physical relic, peculiar to its owner, the fact that the voice is reproduced once again points to the fact that the theatricalization of the self and one's family is also a reproduction – a representation. As Mladen Dolar points out in *Voice and Nothing More*, “there is an uncanniness in the gap which enables a machine, by purely mechanical means, to produce something so uniquely human as voice and speech” (7). The recording stands in for the voice, just as the child stands in for the parent and, in the end, for himself. The character of Mariano, which is comprised of three generations collapsed into one, is like the recording – the representation of a compilation of memories and experiences.

Recorded sound also plays an important part in establishing Margarita as a family member in Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol's play. Here the recorded sound is the voice of Héctor, who was Margarita's fellow researcher and lover. While his voice is not identified onstage, in the text his interventions are identified as “*Fragmento sonoro de Héctor*,” “Sound clip of Héctor.”<sup>28</sup> Without the paratext of the book, it would be impossible to tell whether the recorded voice belongs to either Gabino or Paco, or a friend or relative of Margarita. The text backs up the veracity of the recordings by identifying them as the voice of Héctor, while Margarita provides the backstory for her relationship with this figure:

MARGARITA. Augusto y yo nos dejamos, Emiliano iba y venía, con su papá, conmigo, DF, Chihuahua, Lima... Conocí a Héctor, también trabajaba en el equipo de investigación... y nos pegó el amor... apasionadamente, nos gustamos mucho, nos quisimos mucho durante tres años... pienso en eso pero es difícil creer en mis propios recuerdos porque son demasiado felices para ser ciertos, porque continuamente parecen estar recordando la felicidad de otras personas.

(FRAGMENTO SONORO DE HÉCTOR). Pero todo se fue, es difícil creer en mis propios recuerdos porque son demasiado felices para ser ciertos, porque continuamente parecen estar recordando la felicidad de otras personas.

(Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, *El rumor de este momento* 121)

MARGARITA. Augusto and I broke up, Emiliano came and went, with his dad, with me, Mexico City, Chihuahua, Lima... I met Héctor, who also worked on the research team...and love caught us...passionately, we liked each other a lot, we loved each other very much for three years...I think about that, but it is difficult to believe my own memories because they are too happy to be true,

<sup>27</sup> This theme of juxtaposition of past and present with regard to the disappeared is also treated in photography. See Gustavo Germano, *Ausencias*. Barcelona: Departament de la Presidència. Casa Amèrica Catalunya, 2007; and Lucila Quieto, *Arqueología de la ausencia*.

<sup>28</sup> This is probably a reference to Héctor Aguilar Camín, but neither the play nor its paratexts provide confirmation for this inference.

because they continually seem to be remembering the happiness of other people.

(SOUND CLIP OF HÉCTOR). But everything disappeared, it is difficult to believe in my own memories because they are too happy to be true, because they are remembering the happiness of other people.

In this clip, the second of two presented in the play, Margarita's reference to Héctor explains his role and relationship to her. As he is identified only in print and only by his first name, the information about their three-year affair is vital to the reader's understanding of the significance of the sound clips, and also to the case for the story's historical veracity. This sound clip anchors Margarita in time. As in the case of Mariano, the sound recording always points toward the past, toward a before. What is interesting about the echo presentation of this sound clip, which repeats Margarita's lines, is that it curiously inverts chronology. Even though, within the narrative of the play, Margarita is the first to speak the line, the fact that Héctor's repetition of it is recorded means that he actually spoke it first, before the performance. This opens up, if not the spatial fourth wall, then its chronological equivalent, reaching back in time and pulling completed events into the time-fabric of the play. In yet another twist of the order of things, there is the chance that Héctor, in his recording, was remembering, repeating something that Margarita had once said to him. In a sort of temporal *mise en abyme*, it is impossible to tell where the line originates, who spoke it first. This infinite mirroring of words, language, and voice, however, seems to thereby reinforce itself and the factual nature of the subject matter. The line, itself, too, reflects this uncertain origin, with the assertion that one's own memories might, in fact, belong to someone else. This line seems to be the fulcrum on which the play's argument rests – could Luisa Pardo's mother's memories ever be recovered; if so, by whom could they be recovered; does genetic and family relationship imply historical or experiential relationship?

Héctor's other intervention also points toward this possibility for extending or sharing one's memories and experiences. During the scene of Margarita's imprisonment, the clip plays Héctor's voice, saying, "Recuerdo que tu madre me decía que en la celda se imaginaba que era una hoja de papel y así podía escaparse doblada por debajo de la puerta," *'I remember that your mother told me that in the cell she imagined that she was a sheet of a paper and that way she could escape, folded, under the door.'* (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, *El rumor de este momento* 105). Here the literary metaphor of transforming the body into a sheet of paper works like the inverse of the theatrical process. Whereas Margarita wished to disintegrate her physical body and become a two-dimensional blank slate, so to speak, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol brings the documentary evidence of their archival research – stacks and stacks of papers – to life, reintegrating the historical record in bodily form. This is another clue for the very attentive spectator that Margarita has a relationship of mother-child with someone involved in the play's research. Héctor's reference to "your mother" shows that his interlocutor was Margarita's son or daughter, and also points to her absence, as he is interviewed for information about this mother's life. The interviewer, presumably Luisa, thereby absorbs more of her mother's experience into her own, extending herself beyond her years.

Genealogy and its emphasis on proper names is another strategy employed in both plays to allow the self to spill over into other selves. Names are important for establishing family connection, in theatre as in life. Even if the audience of *El rumor del incendio* believes Margarita Urías Hermosillo to be a fictional character at the first part of the play, her character is rooted in history, given a family tree, and thereby made historical. She seems registered in reality.

Margarita introduces herself at the beginning of the play, directly addressing the audience. She shares a photograph of her father and speaks about him and her mother, and even mentions another Luisa, a character her father created for the textbooks he wrote, and a hint at a connection between Luisa Pardo, the actor-character, and Margarita's father. The use of a copy of her 1978 passport in the book *El rumor de este momento* (see fig. 9) further supports the naming connection between Margarita and her family members, by providing documentary evidence that confirms her paternal and maternal surnames match up with those she mentions in the play.



Figure 9 Passport of Margarita Urías Hermosillo. Source: Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol *El rumor de este momento*.

The spectator who purchases *El rumor de este momento* upon exiting the theatre will be confronted with an essay by Rómulo Pardo Urías entitled, tellingly, “Colofón” (“Colophon”) and signed quite elaborately. Rómulo’s last names are an instant tipoff to the relationships he has with both Margarita and Luisa. And Rómulo spurns subtlety, signing his essay with an annotated “*ficha de identidad*” ‘personal data form’:

Nombre y origen literario: **Rómulo**, romano mitológico, latino fundador, itálico épico.

Apellido paterno: **Pardo**, español castellano, criollo mestizo mexicano de cuarta generación, veracruzano y volador papanteco.

Apellido materno: **Urías**, chihuahuense, furioso intelectualista, marcial belicoso, apache sin tregua. (82)

Name and literary origin: **Rómulo**, mythological Roman, founding Latin, epic Italic.

Paternal last name: **Pardo**, Castilian Spanish, fourth-generation Mexican mestizo criollo, Veracruzano and Volador of Papantla.

Maternal last name: **Urías**, Hebraic, biblical, pre-Christian, Chihuahuense, furious intellectualist, bellicose, martial, relentless Apache.

This grandiose signature, especially alongside those of the other contributors, who often put only their name and location or occupation [see Santiago Solís Montes de Oca, who offers the modest “*Cómo me gustaría presentarme: sin título nobiliario por favor, pero si es necesario pónganme Observador*,” ‘How I would like to be identified: without any noble title, please, but if necessary just put Observer’ (69)], can be read as an arrogant or self-aggrandizing signature, or as a signpost pointing to the relationship between and reality of Rómulo, Luisa, and Margarita. Just

as the colophon identifies the printer by name, indicating the origin of the printed text, the use of names by Margarita, the character, and Rómulo, the writer, points to the family origins of the character and story presented in *El rumor del incendio*. The emphasis not only on the shared last names, but also their racial heritage, is another tactic that roots these character-author-actors into a context, specifically a post-colonial Mexico. However, this insistence on reality contains within it a parallel insistence on fiction – Rómulo hearkens back to the mythical founding of Rome, and the epic, furious, and relentless adjectives lend the name a tongue-in-cheek hyperbole.

In the case of *Mi vida después*, Carla Crespo uses the hereditary trope of namesakes to back up her link to her father, whom she never met. She introduces herself in the following manner:

CARLA. Se declara el Golpe Militar y un mes después, nazco yo. Soy un bebé muy rebelde. Tiro juguetes por la ventana, grito de noche, me como pedazos de mi almohada. Mi madre me pone de nombre Carla por mi padre Carlos que era sargento del ERP. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 32]

CARLA. The coup d'état is declared and, one month later, I am born. I am a rebellious baby. I fling my toys out of the window, I cry all night, I eat pieces of my pillow. My mother named me Carla after my father Carlos, who was a sergeant in the ERP. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 34]

Here the transformation from Carlos to Carla is represented in both signifier and signified: the child, whose name automatically recalls her father's, displays behaviors that also recall the life and death of a guerrilla soldier – rebellion, violence, and torture.

Names are signifiers that make evident the bloodlines that are the signified in the case of these auto/biographical plays. In fact, the inescapability of genetics becomes an important topic in the discussion of family in *Mi vida después*. Vanina Falco, whose father appropriated the son of disappeared militants, demonstrates the problems with constructing a self based on family and the reality that results from such a crime. In the play, she shows a photograph of herself watching her mother bathing a baby (see fig. 10):

VANINA. En la foto se puede ver que yo estoy feliz pero confundida y no entiendo bien de dónde vino mi hermano si nunca vi a mi mamá embarazada. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 22]

VANINA. In the photo I look happy but confused, and I really can't understand where my brother came from, as I never saw my mother pregnant. [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 22]

This moment in the play is a careful set-up for what is to come, a piece of narrative foreshadowing with as much to do with reality as an Edgar Allan Poe story. Showing the

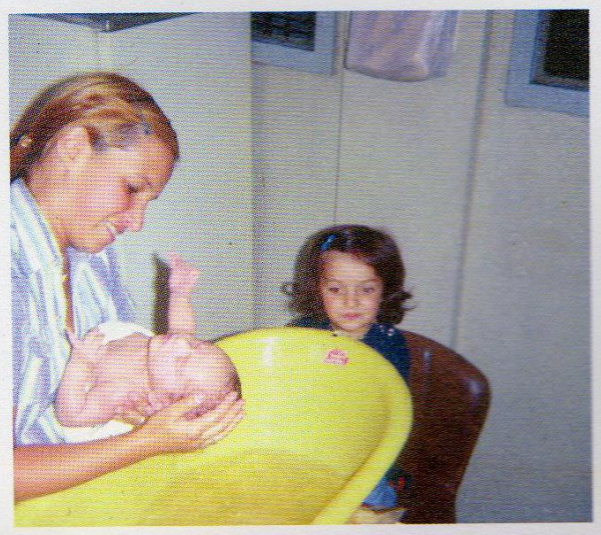


Figure 10 Vanina Falco with her mother and brother, 1978. Source: Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 22.

photograph involves a tripartite hermeneutics, in which the photograph is used as evidence of the reality of Falco's story, her interpretation of her own facial expression is used as evidence of the untruth of her parents' version of the story, and her explanation of the fact that she never saw her mother pregnant additional evidence that is unavailable to anyone seeing the photograph without Falco's explanation of it. As Roland Barthes puts it, in his description of the difficulty of focusing on photography versus a photograph:



Figure 11 Vanina Falco and her brother, 1980. Source: Source: Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 23.

A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent [. . .]. It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures [. . .]" (5).

Sure enough, it is revealed later, also through a photograph, that Falco's baby brother is not her biological sibling. In the photograph, two children with the same dark-blond hair and similar noses and eyes, hug (see fig. 11). Falco explains:

VANINA. Él es la persona que más quiero de mi familia. Siempre fuimos inseparables aunque hace 5 años descubrimos que no somos hermanos de sangre. Mi hermano es un hijo de militantes asesinados que mi padre se robó porque mi madre ya no podía tener más hijos" [Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 23]

VANINA. He's the one I love most in my family. We have always been inseparable even though 5 years ago we found out we are not related by blood. My brother is the son of murdered militants and my father abducted him because my mother couldn't have children anymore. (Arias, *Mi vida después (My life after)* 23]

This revelation is shocking, of course, but all too predictable given the history of Argentina's military dictatorship. The idea of authenticity based on documentary and biological evidence is both questioned and bolstered in Falco's segment of the play. The photographs that would seem to prove the genetic relationship between Falco's brother (Juan Cabandié) and the rest of the family turn out to be flimsy evidence when pitted against the DNA tests that would say otherwise. How, then, can we spectators trust the other characters who use photographs to

convince us of the authenticity of their statements? *Mi vida después* takes this weakness up and uses it to strengthen the impenetrability of its version of truth. By exposing the fraudulent relationship in one of the character's families and revealing the true story, we come to trust the play as a whole, even though its evidence could be accused of being as flimsy as Falco's parents' was. This evidence, and Falco's willingness to display it, extends her experience as biological child to include the betrayal of appropriation experienced by her brother.

Margarita, in *El rumor del incendio*, also constructs her family tree as a way of insisting on her place in society. In an almost biblical manner, or at least in the style of a nineteenth-century Realist, the careful construction of a genealogy gives Margarita dimension that stretches back into the past and, implicitly, into the future, to include her daughter. The bloodlines trace down through her children, Emiliano and Romulo, finally arriving at Luisa. During the last scene of the play, Margarita transforms into Luisa, publicly enacting the bloodline that connects them:

MARGARITA. En el 79 unos alumnos de la facultad de sociología de la Universidad Veracruzana me invitaron a organizar el Centro de Estudios Históricos en Xalapa, y con todo y Emiliano decidí mudarme. Trabajé mucho con los alumnos, las fiestas regresaron y conocí a Rafael, un estudiante de medicina, 8 años menor que yo. Y me enamoré y como estaba bien emocionada, un día fui a ver una bruja y me leyó las cartas, vieron que tendría dos hijos con Rafael.

Entonces corrí a verlo y le informé de nuestro destino anunciado por las cartas; me vio como si estuviera loca, como siempre, pero yo insistí. En diciembre de 1981, en Hermosillo, Sonora, tuvimos a Rómulo, nuestro primer hijo. Y seguía trabajando, iba y venía de Xalapa, Df, Hermosillo, Chihuahua, después de tener a Romulito, me embaracé luego luego, porque quería tener una niña y ya se me estaba pasando el tiempo. En los ultrasonidos salía que iba a ser niño... pero yo deseaba la niña y la deseaba y la deseaba... en enero del 83 nació la Luisita.

LUISA. Me llamo Luisa. Nací en la ciudad de México el 10 de enero de 1983. Soy hija de Margarita y Rafael. (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, *El rumor de este momento* 130-31)

MARGARITA. In '79 some students from the Faculty of Sociology of the Universidad Veracruzana invited me to organize the Center of Historical Studies in Xalapa, and with Emiliano and all I decided to move. I worked a lot with the students, the parties returned and I met Rafael, a medical student, 8 years younger than me. And I fell in love and as I was really quite excited one day I went to see a witch and she read me my cards, she saw that I would have two children with Rafael. So I ran to see him and informed him of our destiny forecast by the cards; he looked at me like I was crazy, as always, but I kept at it. In December of 1981, in Hermosillo, Sonora, we had Rómulo, our first child. And I kept working, coming and going to Xalapa, DF, Hermosillo, Chihuahua, after having Romulito, I got pregnant right away, because I wanted to have a girl and time was running out on me. In the ultrasounds it said it would be a boy... but I wished for the girl and I wished for her and wished for her... in January of 83 la Luisita was born.



LUISA. My name is Luisa. I was born in Mexico City the 10th of January of 1983. I am the daughter of Margarita and Rafael.

This moment is extremely significant for the project. Both Margarita and Luisa are present, in one body. The narration links them together just as their bodies are genetically linked, although, as in the case of Falco, there are hints at the chinks in the auto/biographical armor. More important than medical science was the desire of the mother in determining the sex of her baby, in an instance of affect winning out over genetics, symbolically speaking.

In *El rumor del incendio* as in *Mi vida después*, the physicality of absence – whether as the absent parent embodied by the present child, the physical presence of the sound of the absent character’s voice, or the use of physical objects as a psychic extension of the absent parent – constantly challenges the limits of the self, especially the limit that is death. Even as the empty center of both plays is constantly invoked, the actor-characters make every attempt to fill the emptiness with materiality and, ultimately, the body. This self-sacrifice, an exchange of the “innocent” child for the lost parent, has powerful cultural resonances and insists upon a communion, a solidarity, which hearkens back to the very origins of performance and ritual.

This communion is an affirmation of the self and the auto/biographical genre as well as a challenge to conventional understandings of them. The audience, convinced of the authority of the actor-children to claim family stories in their own life story – because it is, in the end, their life story that is represented – must then agree to accept a self that goes beyond the concept of one individual and encompasses a whole history of passed down memories and inherited experiences.

## Chapter 5. Dissecting the Truth: The Responsibilities of the Real in Contemporary Culture

With the proliferation of blogs and memoirs, the omnipresence of reality shows and the invitation by social media to “curate” our digital lives, the contemporary zeitgeist can be defined as obsessed with the real. In the international cultural landscape, examples constantly spring up of debates over the definitions and responsibilities of veracity in art. Last year saw the publication in the US of *The Lifespan of a Fact*, a debate in marginalia over the veracity and accuracy of a non-fiction essay between its author, John D’Agata, and its fact-checker, Jim Fingal. It’s a debate that resonates in various current cultural events – in print, on the radio, and in the theatre.

*Min Kamp ‘My Struggle,’* Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård’s six-volume memoir, was published in English in April 2012, reviving the scandal that the writer lived through with its publication in his native tongue in 2009. The book narrates the decline of the author’s father, his total loss to alcoholism and his final passing in horrific conditions of poverty. The memoir, which implicates not only the author-narrator-protagonist, but also his family members, provoked legal suits by Knausgård’s paternal relatives. Giving in to their requests, the author changed the names of that side of the family in the book, with the exception of that of his father, to whom he referred only as “Papa” or “my father”.

Claims to veracity in a narrative determine its publishing trajectory. If Knausgård hadn’t presented his book as autobiographical, but rather as a novel, the uncomfortable truths it describes with raw and hyperrealistic prose wouldn’t have provoked the national and, later, international scandals that the revelation of his family secrets did. While there may be parts that are more true than others (among them those that have to do with deceased characters/relatives, in contrast with the easier treatment he gives to the living), the message is that the book contains the truth. And that, besides the biting prose and epic narrative, is what simultaneously condemns and frees Knausgård.

Even as society might blame him for writing the unwriteable, it is at the same time his honesty that absolves his sins. If his were a book of bald-faced lies marked as truth, the author would have no escape. There seems, however, to be a general agreement that the content of *Min Kamp*, as unspeakable as it might be, belongs to the category of truth. The social judgment that the facts are indeed accurate, along with the deserved approval granted to a well-told story, has much to do with the success of Knausgård’s series.

On the other side of the Atlantic, on the immensely popular US radio program *This American Life (TAL)*, the trust of its loyal listeners was tested in March 2012 with its episode entitled “Retraction”. It dealt with the most popular podcast in the history of the show, with 880,000 downloads, in contrast to an average of 750,000 (Glass). The previous January *TAL* had broadcast “Mr. Daisey Goes to the Apple Factory”, a segment of Mike Daisey’s one-man play, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*.

In the program, Daisey describes his trip to China, where he claims to have interviewed factory workers for Foxconn, which produces Apple products, and members of an illegal labor union. He claim to have shown one worker an iPad – the first time that the man, who worked on the iPad assembly line, had seen one powered on. The monologue is tragic, moving, and, as was later discovered, mostly fabricated.

The creators of *TAL*, with host Ira Glass at the lead, produced the “Retraction” episode to carefully reveal every inaccuracy in the content of the prior episode and, even juicier for the

audience, interrogate Daisey about the ethical implications of his invention. Daisey didn't defend himself, but neither did he completely crack. The result was an escapist and semantic apology, although it seems to have been a triumph for *TAL*. Ira Glass' voiced mea culpa was downloaded 891,474 times, breaking the record set by the episode it discredits (Phelps). The lesson is that attention to veracity, more than its presence, is a topic of much interest for the audience.

In an interesting move, Daisey then produced what he calls *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs 2.0*, a revamped play that is, in Daisey's words, "made ethically". He writes in the prologue that "If I expect them [Apple] to build an ethical iPhone, then I needed to build an ethical monologue. [. . .] Instead of abandoning this monologue and shirking our duty, we did the hard and rewarding work of reforming it, and the adversity of these months has served as a crucible for refining this story" (Daisey 2-3). Daisey, just like *TAL*, took advantage of the situation and capitalized on the critique of the representation of the real in his play, even if doing so meant admitting the unreality present in version 1.0.

In Mexico, the theatre has recently become a space where questions of veracity and falsity are decided, as much as in other media with pretensions of veracity such as newspapers, history, or legal judgments. Or at least one could think so after seeing the company Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol's cycle *La invención de nuestros padres 'The Invention of our Parents'* (2012). The cycle is made up of three plays: *El rumor del incendio*, a scenic documentary about the life of Margarita Urías Hermosillo; *Se rompen las olas 'The Waves Break,'* a premier by Mariana Villegas about her parents' relationship; and *Montserrat*, the preview of a play by Gabino Rodríguez in which he stages his search for his deceased (?) mother, Montserrat.

The play, by mixing both verifiable, fact-based evidence with invented but credible evidence offers the audience two possible explanations for the disappearance of Montserrat. Metatheatrical techniques, however, along with common sense, show the audience that the less desirable option, her death to cancer in 1989, is the true one. By revealing the audience's and playwright's own desires to find a conspiracy and tendency to look to the more complicated version of truth in order to fulfill a desire for a well-told story, the play explores the ethics of the representation of the real in the theatre.

*Montserrat* premiered January 20, 2013 in its final version as part of the Santiago a Mil International Theatre Festival in Chile and represents a play between reality and fiction that questions the possibilities of the entire documentary genre. It opens with photos of a vacation at Chichén Itzá that show a young couple. In the age of Instagram the faded colors of the photographs really don't tell the audience anything about the time in which they were taken; the resemblance between the man in the photos, however, and the actor onstage is unmistakable.

Later, Rodríguez, the only actor to appear onstage, reads a letter to his family in which he declares himself a traitor, in some ways, and asks forgiveness for his treason.

GABINO. Buenas noches, bienvenidos.

A mi familia:

Sé que ya he ventilado muchas cosas, ajustado muchas cuentas a través de la ficción. De alguna manera soy un traidor, pero también sé que esas mismas obras, que quizás dolieron, también trajeron "la alegría de la notoriedad".

Les pido aquí, por escrito, perdón. Les pido comprensión. esto no tiene tanto que ver con ustedes ni conmigo aunque todos estaremos presentes.

Esto tiene que ver con Montserrat, mi madre; ella es la obsesión; es por ella que estoy haciendo todo esto: para saber qué pasó. Asumo las consecuencias del

daño colateral, espero que no lo haya pero se me ocurre que será más duro que antes, aunque a la vez más de frente.

Ahora todo está avisado, sin mascarar; la idea no es vengarse, ventilar cosas porque sí, andar de rebelde. Aquí no hay un afán exhibicionista, solo dudas, curiosidad, historia. No quiero herir a nadie pero sé que algunos se sentirán, con todo derecho, heridos. No es la idea pero sé que va a ocurrir. Llevo años tratando de buscar la manera para que eso no suceda. No la he encontrado.

Los quiero mucho, siempre.

Gabino. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. Good night, welcome.

To my family:

I know that I have aired a lot of things, settled a lot of things through fiction.

In a way I am a traitor, but I also know that those very plays, that perhaps hurt, also brought “the joy of notoriety”.

I ask you here, in writing, for forgiveness. I ask for your comprehension. This doesn’t have all that much to do with you or with me even though we are all present.

This has to do with Montserrat, my mother; she is the obsession; it’s because of her that I’m doing all of this: to find out what happened. I assume responsibility for the collateral damage, I hope there isn’t any but it occurs to me that it will be harder than before, although at the same time more straightforward.

Now everything is on the table; the idea isn’t to take vengeance, to air things just because, to be rebellious. Here there is no exhibitionist desire, only doubts, curiosity, history. I don’t want to wound anyone but I know that some will feel, as is their right, wounded. It isn’t the idea but I know it will happen. I have been trying for years to find the way to keep that from happening. I haven’t found it.

I love you very much, always.

Gabino.

This text, from its opening, walks a thin line between an apology and the representation thereof. There is a world of difference between the spontaneous-seeming welcome, directed to the audience, to the written and read, “To my family”. Rodríguez makes a show of apologizing for his actions, and the audience’s observation of the apology is essential to the show’s meaning-making enterprise.

This subtle shift in interlocutor places the audience in the position to judge Rodríguez’ actions, and his family’s, as well. It is Pilate’s performative hand-washing, staged in the form of a written apology. This emphasis on the written word with all of its binding permanence seems ironic, given that Rodríguez is actually asking for forgiveness orally in that ephemeral space of the theatre, even if he is reading from a piece of paper.

Right off the bat Rodríguez points to the wider world of his theatrical and cinematic works, perhaps referring to Nicolás Pereda’s semi-documentary films that Rodríguez and his father, José Rodríguez, have starred in, playing characters called Gabino or José, or other plays by Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol. He roots himself firmly in the representational world as that most dramatic of actors: the traitor. Pilate and Judas in one, washing hands, kissing lips, flinging ill-

gotten coins, Rodríguez wastes no time getting to the drama of betrayal. And, again, the audience is on the receiving end of this ever-so-private letter of apology. Does this make the audience Rodríguez' family? No, but I, as an audience member at the previews, couldn't help but wonder if any of those addressed might be somewhere in the darkened theatre, either nodding consent or stoically denying forgiveness.

The game Rodríguez is playing with the audience becomes especially

clear when he introduces the eponymous Montserrat. If the letter were for his family's benefit alone he would have no need for the qualifying clause, "my mother". Rather, the letter is used as a classical Greek exposition, placing the characters in their circumstances, letting the audience in on the story about to unfold before them. This exposition also works with the snapshots projected beforehand to create a pact with the audience. The family resemblance and the heartfelt letter apologizing for airing the family's dirty laundry are signals to the audience that they should believe that what is about to be represented is, on some level, real.

He speaks of memories constructed from photos, as though giving voice to the activity that the audience has already undertaken. The silent opening scene, with the slideshow of photographs, spurs the spectator to enter immediately into meaning-making territory. No words guide the audience, but the darkened, hushed theatre prompts them to search for connections and signification in whatever crosses the stage from play's start to finish.

Therefore the physical resemblance between the man in the photos and the man onstage is immediately imbued with dramatic meaning. Not only should the audience begin to believe that the photographs have something to do with the play's action, they will also extend that relationship beyond the theatre walls, where it would seem that the connection between Rodríguez and the photographed man exists in reality as well as in the play. The meaning-making then must include the woman in the photographs to complete the story. Who is she?

The photographs look like they might have been taken in the 1970s, given the style of the clothing and the tinge of the photographs. A quick calculation confirms that, if the actor onstage



Figure 12 José Rodríguez searches for the tree where Montserrat's ashes were scattered. Source: Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, "Montserrat XII", *Teatron*, 17 May 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

is pushing 30, the couple in the photographs could very well be his parents before he was born. Rodríguez finally confirms suspicions that the play is about his parents when he expresses his doubts about the official story about the disappearance of his mother: “They say... that she died.”

What follows is a combination of personal memories, inherited memories, and documentary evidence, all pointing to the possibility that Montserrat did not die at all, but rather disappeared, perhaps even willingly, and is still alive today. Rodríguez claims that after his parents’ divorce, when he was still quite young, his mother got sick and then simply vanished. Apparently due to his tender age, Rodríguez was never really properly informed of her death, though his family would later claim that she had, indeed died.

He also claims that she has no tomb, but rather that he and his father used to find a certain tree on the Ajusco, an extinct volcano on the outskirts of Mexico City where Montserrat’s ashes were scattered, and picnic there to commemorate his mother’s death.<sup>29</sup> He then shows a film of himself and a man, who could possibly be an older version of the man in the Yucatan photographs, wandering through a pine forest searching for the tree (see fig. 12). “There is something strange about losing a tomb,” Rodríguez affirms from onstage as the two projected men go to first one tree, then another, unable to locate the marker.

This scene points to the larger world of Lagartijas. In their play *Asalto al agua transparente* (2006) Rodríguez’ character addresses the audience, announcing that he will now read a letter that he once wrote to his mother and left for her at the tree where his family would go to remember her. In a 2011 performance of the play that I attended in Mexico City, the company had come straight from a festival in Switzerland and could not find the letter. Rather than replacing it with another worn-looking paper and reciting from memory, Rodríguez rather told the audience that the letter had been lost and that he would do his best to recite it from memory (Lagartijas *Tiradas al Sol Asalto al agua transparente*). This sort of display of faithfulness to the real is an important episode to which I will return to discuss the way auto/biographical theatre addresses the ethics of representing the real. Apparently the letter was subsequently rediscovered, as it is read as part of Montserrat with no mention of its loss.

The use of the photographs of the couple at the beach is the first gesture towards a critique of the representation of the real onstage. When combined with an exposition of Rodríguez’ family history, their status as documentary evidence, as well as the possibility of using memory as evidence of the real, is called into question. Rodríguez announces that

GABINO. De mi infancia tengo muy pocos recuerdos y en ninguno aparece Montserrat, mi madre.

La mayoría son recuerdos armados a partir de fotos. Como si a las imágenes les hubiera inventado un antes y un después. Como si de ver el fotograma hubiera intuido la película.

Uno de esos pocos recuerdos que tengo es en Durango, en esa época había muchos alacranes, yo buscaba sus nidos con varillas y agua hirviendo. Mataba a algunos pero nunca se acababan los nidos y sin embargo en la casa disminuía la plaga después de mis batallas. Buscando alacranes, una vez me encontré un nido de arañas grandes, tal vez tarántulas. La araña madre me

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<sup>29</sup> This is, for Rodríguez followers, another place where the play leaks beyond its borders, although not necessarily into the world of the real. In a film by Nicolás Pereda, *Perpetuum Mobile*, Rodríguez plays a character called Gabino who, along with his mother Teresa, played by Teresa Sánchez, must take his grandmother out to the forest and bury her surreptitiously under a tree outside of Mexico City.

lanzó un líquido lechoso, pero la destripé. Me desconsolaba no hallar en mis acometidas heroicas ni uno de los tan temidos alacranes güeros, que decían abundaban por ahí.

(Pausa)

Un día después de una de las cacerías estaba con mi abuela en la cocina, ella preparaba patoles mientras yo dibujaba en la mesa. No tenía más que pintura azul, pero yo quería representar una cacería. Hice a un niño azul y perros azules, pero no sabía si era posible dibujar a un alacrán azul. Le pregunté a mi abuelita si había alacranes azules y ella sin levantar la vista de la hoya [*sic*] me dijo: Si hay mijito, si hay.

Por ese tiempo me cuentan que lo que más me gustaba era esconderme, dicen que no tenía miedo de nada, dicen que mi Mamá se enfermó poco tiempo después de que yo nací, dicen también que murió en 1989, cuando yo tenía 6 años. No estaba seguro de que hubiera sido así, yo no fui testigo, pero tampoco tenía elementos para dudarlo.

Pero hay intuiciones que no dejan vivir tranquilo, hay ocasiones que uno sabe que vive en una mentira y algunas veces, en mi experiencia por lo menos, tiene ganas de salir de dudas. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. From my childhood I have very few memories and Montserrat, my mother, doesn't appear in any of them. The majority are memories constructed from photos. It's as though I invented a before and after for the images. As though by seeing the frame I had intuited the movie.

One of those few memories that I have is in Durango. At that time there were a lot of scorpions; I looked for their nests with sticks and boiling water. I killed a few but their nests were never-ending and anyway in the house the plague was diminished after my battles. Searching for scorpions, one time I found a nest of big spiders, maybe tarantulas. The mother spider shot a milky liquid at me, but I squashed her. I was distressed at not having found even one of the feared blonde scorpions in my heroic attacks, which supposedly were abundant there.

(Pause)

One day after one of the hunts I was with my grandmother in the kitchen; she was making *patoles* while I drew at the table. I only had blue paint, but wanted to draw a hunt. I made a blue boy and blue dogs, but I didn't know if it was possible to draw a blue scorpion. I asked my grandmother if there were blue scorpions and she, without raising her eyes from the pot, said to me: Yes there are, my boy, yes there are.

At that time they tell me that what I liked most was to hide, they say I wasn't afraid of anything, they say that my Mama got sick a little while after I was born, they also say that she died in 1989, when I was six years old. I wasn't sure that it had been like that, I wasn't a witness, but nor did I have elements to cause doubt.

But there are intuitions that don't let you rest, there are occasions in which one knows that one is living in a lie and sometimes, in my experience at least, one wants to leave doubt behind.

This artfully constructed, and deconstructed, description of seemingly disparate memories is, in a nutshell, the play's critique of representing the truth.

First of all, Rodríguez admits that he has very few memories of childhood, and that those he does have are reconstructed from photographs. Most anyone can relate to this feeling of doubt when it comes to childhood memories, as to whether they were dreams, memories absorbed from hearing stories told over and over, or memories constructed from photographs or films. The doubt even exists that one has embellished the real memory, adorning it with extra information intuited as the logical consequence of an action or setting. Therefore the memories that are presented in auto/biographical plays must be approached with suspicion, or at least understood as fallible evidence of reality.

Secondly, the information that Montserrat never appears in Rodríguez' memories also supports the critique of the representation of memories implicit in the play. The title character is utterly absent from the primary source of information, that is, Rodríguez' memory. Everything that is presented onstage, even as it insists on its own reality and credibility, must therefore be understood to be a reconstruction, an intuition, an invention.

The absent mother is the maximum symbol of abandonment and divorce from the Imaginary. The not-casually-chosen memory of the scorpion hunt is especially telling for understanding the relationship between Rodríguez and his mother. His search for the scorpion nests is a violent one, his intent to kill. When he surprises the mother tarantula, the milky substance she attacks him with is poisonous, not nourishing, and his reaction is to demolish her.

He is especially distraught over never having found a blonde, or güero, scorpion. While the use of the term güero to refer to light-colored scorpions is common in Mexico, it more often refers to light-haired or -skinned people, similar to the word blonde in English. This semantic relationship between the elusive güero scorpion and the light-skinned woman in the photographs (who contrasts strikingly with the dark skin of her companion and Gabino himself) would be a logical connection for a Mexican audience, emphasizing the child's desire to find her as well as his failure to do so.

Finally, the element of the blue scorpion demonstrates the lack of reliability of the people that surround a child in his early memory- and meaning-making processes. His obviously distracted grandmother allows for the existence of blue scorpions alongside the certainly fantastic blue child. While blue scorpions do exist, the juxtaposition of the fantastic child with the uncertainty of the reality of the scorpion points more toward the doubt, if not the outright unreliability, of the grandmother's assent.

It is also important to note that the possibility of the blue scorpion's existence only arises due to the child's limited circumstances. If he had had the right colors to draw the scorpions he had personally witnessed, he would probably never have even asked his grandmother the question. The situation of limited possibilities for reaching the truth is especially endemic to childhood, and reflects the unreliability and the difficulties of representations of reality based on memory.

The final paragraph in this description, with its repetition of "*me cuentan*" 'they tell me' and "*me dicen*" 'they say,' contrasts starkly with the rich, memory-based description of the childhood scorpion hunts. The dry, fact-based information surrounding Montserrat's death will serve as the single frame within which the play is intuited; Rodríguez will construct a reality, and a play, from the snippets of information he has received.



The monologue continues, punctuated by the video of Rodríguez' father searching for the tree that served as Montserrat's memorial, and of Rodríguez' younger half-brothers. He includes hard data, such the name and location of the street where he lived with his father, stepmother, and half-brothers after Montserrat's death, punctuating the real, verifiable nature of the personal history, and sums up his childhood with the musing that he is sure that a large part of who he is has to do with having lost Montserrat, and growing up without her (Rodríguez 5).

Rodríguez continues to establish facts in a matter-of-fact way. He goes the genealogical route to begin reconstructing Montserrat's biography, outlining her relationship to her parents and their own basic biographies. As he is rattling off the verifiable information, however, he introduces doubt by regularly interjecting with questions or personal impressions:

GABINO. Una biografía corta de esas que solo se fijan en los hitos y se saltan todo lo importante: María Montserrat Geraldina Lines Molina, nació en 1951 en San José Costa Rica. Y dentro de todo, dentro de lo que sé, su vida se desarrolló sin demasiados sobresaltos, exceptuando la lamentable muerte de un amante. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. A short biography, of the kind that only focuses on the milestones and skips everything important: María Montserrat Geraldina Lines Molina was born in 1951 in San José, Costa Rica. And all in all, as far as I know, her life developed without too many scares, except for the lamentable death of a lover.

In this first introduction Rodríguez feints giving a straight, fact-based rundown of Montserrat's life. Vital statistics like her name and date and place of birth are established, all of which are verifiable. However, in only the second sentence of this supposedly dry biography, he brings himself, in the first person, into the equation with his "as far as I know", thereby upsetting the promised objectivity. This personalizing gesture not only focalizes Montserrat's story through Gabino; it also acknowledges the limits of his trustworthiness. He has already stated that he has no memory whatsoever of his mother, so the "as far as I know" really can't be all that far.

Rodríguez goes on to analyze his mother's relationship to his grandparents:

GABINO. Una biografía corta de esas que solo se fijan en los hitos y se saltan todo lo importante: María Montserrat Geraldina Lines Molina, nació en 1951 en San José Costa Rica. Y dentro de todo, dentro de lo que sé, su vida se desarrolló sin demasiados sobresaltos, exceptuando la lamentable muerte de un amante. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. She was (is?) the eldest daughter of María Molina and Don Jorge Lines. [. . .] They enjoyed a comfortable position and the horizon, from what can be perceived from the images of those times, only seemed to hold progress in store for them.

The parenthetical present tense is the first clear indication that Rodríguez suspects his mother is still alive. Of course, it could be read as a grammatical misstep, as though he is not sure whether he should retain her status as eldest daughter, but given the quantity of third-party information that has been passed on, it is clear that this is the moment that Rodríguez chooses to reveal his suspicions. He also refers back to the reconstruction of photographs as a source of information, intuiting a family's future from its photographs.

From first-person doubts to third-person discoveries, Rodríguez then reveals that he has interviewed his mother's acquaintances in order to find out more about her. It is interesting that

he quotes a childhood friend, rather than his grandparents or aunt, who have already been mentioned in this monologue:

GABINO. Montserrat fue una excelente estudiante, también era alegre y simpática.

Aunque un amigo de la niñez la describe así: Montserrat parecía que estaba en paz, tenía una calma silenciosa, como la que precede a la tormenta.  
(Rodríguez)

GABINO. Montserrat was an excellent student, and was happy and nice.

Although a childhood friend describes her thusly: Montserrat seemed like she was at peace, she had a silent calm, like that which precedes the storm.

Of course, such a clichéd statement, especially coming from the perspective of hindsight, will catch the discerning spectator's attention and presage the tragedy that awaits. Quoting the friend is an important gesture to set up the detective story that the play will become; by establishing himself as a researcher who has interviewed his mother's acquaintances, Rodríguez not only presents himself as an informed authority, but also hints, once again, at the idea that there is more to the story than what we, the audience, have been told.

Finally Rodríguez breaks from the style his biographical sketch has been using up to now and goes straight into speculation. He says that,

GABINO. Mi abuelo era arqueólogo, al parecer bastante importante, tengo la sensación de que ella se sentía cohibida por entrar al mundo académico Costarricense siendo hija de Don Jorge, pienso que ese fue su mayor motivo para decidirse a emigrar a México. Montserrat llegó cuando era muy joven. En 1970. Entró a la ENAH. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. My grandfather was an archaeologist, seemingly quite important. I have the sensation that she felt inhibited from entering the Costa Rican academic world, being the daughter of Don Jorge; I think that was her biggest motive for deciding to emigrate to Mexico. Montserrat arrived when she was very young. In 1970, she entered the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH).

In this section, Rodríguez cites neither interviews nor diaries; rather, he gives verifiable facts such as dates and names of institutions, interspersing them with completely hypothetical conjectures.

He assigns feelings to Montserrat without backing them up; the audience can expect that he himself has felt that way, inhibited; or that he has somehow ascribed these feelings to a woman of whom he has no recollection, based on what he imagines she must have felt given the circumstances of her life. By moving so quickly from extremes of establishing facts to extreme speculation, Rodríguez weaves a web for his audience members, luring them into his confusion of truth and deceit.

He finally begins to openly play with the spectator, presenting a Kowzarian game of intonation and inflection, dancing to Neil Young as he describes the night his parents met (see fig. 13):

GABINO. Mi Papá y mi Mamá se conocieron en una fiesta en 1975. Me parece que mi Papá se enamoró de mi Mamá desde que la vio, mi Mamá me parece que se tardó más, ella había tenido otros amores.

*Final rola 1.*

¿Mi Papá y mi Mamá se  
conocieron en una fiesta en  
1975, dicen que esa noche  
bailaron juntos?

*Rola final*

Me parece que mi Papá se  
enamorado de mi Mamá desde  
que la vio, mi Mamá me  
parece que se tardó más.  
(Rodríguez)

GABINO. My dad and my mom  
met at a party in 1975. It  
seems to me that my dad fell  
in love with my mom from the moment he saw her; my mom, it seems to me,  
took longer. She had had other loves.

*(End of Track 1)*

My dad and my mom met at a party in 1975; they say that that night they danced  
together?

*(Final track)*

It seems to me that my dad fell in love with my mom from the moment he saw  
her; my mom, it seems to me, took longer.

The combination of repetition, changes in intonation to create a questioning attitude, and the use of the phrases “it seems to me” and “they say” cause the spectator to doubt the truth of Rodríguez’ statements. It is as though he is asking the audience to reconsider the seemingly innocuous phrases, to find the cracks in the façade. However, audience members do not yet have enough information to understand his doubt; the only thing that is clear is that there is doubt.

At the end of his biography of his mother, Rodríguez will reveal that the doubt has to do with his parents’ relationship, and that it is perhaps endemic to all romantic love.

GABINO. Poco a poco José y Montserrat se juntaron. Al principio no fue fácil y parece que al final tampoco. Pero dentro de todo creo que fueron una pareja, como todas las parejas, con mucho amor algunas veces, con sus dudas, con sus eventos, yo que sé.

Pienso, por algunas anotaciones en los diarios de Montserrat, que vivieron momentos difíciles. Son páginas sospechosas aunque en lo absoluto contundentes. Me parece que no dejaban de ser las dudas razonables que tenemos los que, por lo general, buscamos convencernos de que estamos enamorados. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. Little by little José and Montserrat got together. In the beginning it wasn’t easy and it seems that it wasn’t at the end, either. But all in all I believe they were a couple, like all couples, with much love sometimes, with their doubts, with their events, what do I know?

I think, because of some notes in Montserrat’s diaries, that they experienced difficult moments. They are suspicious pages although, at the same time, absolutely convincing. It seems to me that they weren’t more than the

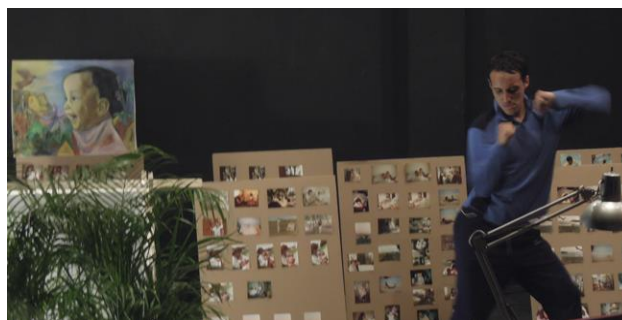


Figure 13 Gabino Rodríguez dances during a performance of Montserrat. Source: Santiago a Mil. “Montserrat.” *Santiago a Mil*, n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

reasonable doubts that those of us have who, in general, seek to convince ourselves that we are in love.

The revelation of the existence of Montserrat's diary, and Rodríguez' access to it, will be another hinge that allows the play to swing around the real, playing with the ethical relationship between reality and representation.

Reading another person's diary, even if that person is dead, already implies an invasion of privacy and trust, similar to revealing family secrets onstage. It also finally provides the hint of concrete evidence for all of the suppositions Rodríguez has presented thus far. While he does not produce the physical diary, or even explain what those "suspicious pages" say, the reference to a diary is comforting to the audience seeking a link between the stage and reality.

As the play continues, Rodríguez takes on a Joe Friday reporting style, referring to an interview conducted with his father, José Rodríguez, on April 21, 2011. He narrates the deposition, using the verb "to maintain" ("sostener") over and over to refer to his father's claims, as in "*Sostiene José Rodríguez, mi padre, que conoció a Montserrat en 1975, mismo año en el que pasaron juntos la navidad en Cancún,*" "José Rodríguez, my father, maintains that he met Montserrat in 1975, the same year in which they spent Christmas together in Cancun" ; or "*Sostiene también que le encantaba hacer fiestas,*" "He also maintains that she loved to throw parties" (Rodríguez 7-8). The impersonal nature of the narrative is almost comical, until the end, when Rodríguez arrives at his mother's death. Here José becomes suspect, and his actions are, in some ways, unjustifiable. It is as though Gabino Rodríguez has taken down his father's confession:

GABINO. Sostiene que a Montserrat le amputaron un seno en 1984. Sostiene que no le anunció a Gabino de la muerte de su madre hasta 3 días después, una vez que había sido velada, cremada y las cenizas habían sido esparcidas. Sostiene que se arrepiente de eso. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. He maintains that Montserrat had a mastectomy in 1984. He maintains that he did not tell Gabino about his mother's death until three days later, once the vigil was over, and she had been cremated, and her ashes had been scattered. He maintains that he regrets that.

The impersonal tone continues, as Rodríguez speaks of himself in the third-person, as though he were the victim of a crime being investigated. And, indeed, as will soon be revealed, the play is the investigation of the crime, the loss of his mother. The people closest to her will be questioned, her personal effects become evidence, as Rodríguez sets off on a wild goose chase. This deposition marks the turning point in the play, in which Rodríguez the historical person completely separates from Rodríguez the character, while history and fiction intertwine confusingly.

The fulcrum on which the balance between reality and fiction rests is a letter that Rodríguez supposedly finds drafted in one of his mother's diaries. This letter, never revealed or produced for the audience, is the catalyst for the conspiracy theory. It inspires Rodríguez to give in to childish hopes that his mother did not die, that she is alive, somewhere, where he can find her. The play becomes the reconstruction of such fantasies, presented with the utmost earnestness to an audience prepped to believe in the reality of the play's events. The magical thinking is therefore transferred to the audience, while Rodríguez coldly leads them on.

The conspiracy theory is planted in the following scene, in which Rodríguez describes the incomplete draft of a letter Montserrat wrote in her diary in 1981, two years before Gabino was

born. He then links that letter to another one, written eight years later, in 1989. His discovery of the second letter is shrouded in illegitimacy: the single letter was hidden inside of a suitcase which was stuck behind a bookshelf in his aunt Guadalupe's house (his mother's sister-in-law) in Durango, twenty-nine years after Montserrat wrote the original draft in her diary.

This letter, addressed to Gabino's father, José, is quoted, while the other is merely mentioned as pointing to a rupture. Photographs of illegible, handwritten pages are projected onto the screen as Gabino tells the audience that

GABINO. Terminaba así: Puesto que con tu desprecio has conseguido perder mi afecto, ahora pienso fríamente de ti que eres un pobre desgraciado y puedo irme a la noche por la cama y levantarme por la mañana varias veces y seguir pensando lo mismo, lo que he descubierto que es una excelente prueba para saber si realmente me creo algo o sólo finjo que me lo creo.

Durante la carta, la palabra en la que más hincapié hacía para acusar a mi padre era "ingritud", para mí, la más triste de las palabras.

Me quedé viendo la carta durante horas, estaba fechada en mayo de 1989, mayo de 1989 era solo dos meses antes de su muerte.

Pero había algo en la carta que dejaba entrever una posibilidad de futuro, no me parecía que fueran las palabras que usaría una mujer que está a punto de morir. El tono en general de la carta, la caligrafía, la extensión, no sé.

(Rodríguez)

GABINO. It ended like this: "Given that with your contempt you have managed to lose my affection, I now think coldly that you are a poor devil and I can go to bed at night and get up in the morning several times and continue thinking it, which I have discovered is an excellent test to know if I really believe something or if I only pretend to believe it."

In the letter, the word that she most emphasized to accuse my father was "ingratitude", for me, the saddest of words.

I sat there looking at the letter for hours. It was dated May 1989; May 1989 was only two months before her death.

But there was something in the letter that allowed a glimpse of a possibility of the future; they didn't seem to me to be the words that a dying woman would use.

The overall tone of the letter, the handwriting, its length, I don't know.

Given the tradition of theatre of the real, and its use of verbatim language,<sup>30</sup> the mention of the diary is an obvious overture towards establishing fact in Montserrat. This especially when the context in which the play is presented is taken into account.

It was previewed as part of a cycle of documentary plays, *La invención de nuestros padres* by Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol in Mexico City in 2012, and presented alongside *Se rompen las olas*, in which Margarita Villegas dramatizes her parents' relationship and her conception against the backdrop of the 1985 earthquake; and the extremely popular *El rumor del incendio*, in which Rodríguez' directing partner, Luisa Pardo, plays her own mother, representing the guerrilla movements of 1960s Mexico, against the backdrop of historical footage and narrative. It would premiere in 2013 as part of Chile's Santiago a Mil theatre festival, also alongside *El rumor del incendio*.

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter Three for more on the use of verbatim to create a pact of credibility with the audience.

Given the constellation that *Montserrat* joins, this use of documentary evidence, Montserrat's diary and letters, is a deliberate signal that the real is being represented. However, in the case of Montserrat, these objects may be completely falsified or, at the least, their implications are the products of a grieving son's imagination. The deliberate misuse of personal objects, of Montserrat's autotopography, however, is not just a cruel prank or an outright lie. Gabino's misdirecting the audience not only puts them into the position of the magically thinking son; it also makes a statement about the ethics and possibilities of representing the real on the stage.

The implications of sharing personal information in the theatre, especially someone else's personal information, are immediately mentioned in Rodríguez' monologue about his mother's letters. The familial fallout is, for him, devastating, and swings audience attention to the ethics of representing the lives of others in the theatre:

GABINO. Durante varios días permanecí callado, entrando a la biblioteca de vez en cuando a mirar la carta. Un día mientras salía sigilosamente de la biblioteca, sentí una mano que me agarró del brazo:

- ¿La viste verdad?

Mi tía Guadalupe me hizo prometerle que no le diría nunca a nadie lo que había visto. Hace unas pocas semanas recibí un correo suyo:

Rompiste tu promesa. Me traicionaste, Gabino. No me vuelvas a marcar en tu vida. No te quiero volver a ver, eres como todos los demás. Esto no es una obra tuya. Vete a la mierda. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. I kept my mouth shut for several days, going into the library every now and then to look at the letter. One day, as I stealthily exited the library, I felt a hand grab my arm:

“You saw it, didn't you?”

My aunt Guadalupe made me promise her that I would never tell anyone what I had seen. A few weeks ago I received an email from her:

“You broke your promise. You betrayed me, Gabino. Don't call me ever again in your life. I don't want to see you again, you're just like the rest. This is not one of your plays. Go to hell.”

By including his own responsibility, or lack thereof, in breaking the (albeit forced) promise he made to his aunt, Rodríguez shows the audience the conscious decisions the documentarian makes to include or exclude information, and the crises of consciousness that such decisions may provoke.

This conflict also points to tensions when it comes to representing the self or others: who has the right to cover up or reveal personal information? Do letters between Rodríguez' parents form part of who he is automatically and therefore should they be considered pertinent to his own autobiography? If Guadalupe was respecting the wishes of her dead friend and sister-in-law, was she right to demand Gabino's silence? By introducing such ethical dilemmas, Rodríguez troubles the audience's perception and reception of reality in the play. Rather than comfortably observing the unfolding of a mystery and its solution, they must face the problematic nature of representation.

This gesture could be related to what Paul Arthur refers to as the “aesthetics of failure” in documentary cinema, in which the “failure to adequately represent the person, event, or social situation stated as the film's explicit task functions as an inverted guarantee of authenticity”

(Arthur 127), in that Rodríguez demonstrates to his audience his difficulties in securing permission to present his findings. However, there are two glaring differences here.

First, Rodríguez does not fail. Unlike the documentary filmmakers who show their equipment malfunctions or film those who would kick them out of the spaces and events they want to record, Rodríguez gets away with it. He presents the letter, while also presenting its fallout. He may have failed to conserve a relationship with his aunt Guadalupe, but he successfully includes the fraught object in his play. Second, this play, as we shall see, does not guarantee its own authenticity. It becomes more and more fantastical, including documentary evidence all along the way, putting the audience member into the position of judge as well as in the position of grieving child, fantasizing about the impossibility of a reunion with his dead mother.

In the next scene Rodríguez lays his entire conspiracy theory on the table for all to see. Here is where his own falsification begins, ironically, since he is supposedly revealing a falsification through the play. He claims that he went to a notary public and asked him to verify his mother's death certificate; the notary told him that it was false, that the building where it had been supposedly produced in 1989 had been destroyed in the earthquake of 1985.

He states, solemnly:

GABINO. Falsificar un acta de defunción es un delito que está tipificado en el código penal.

En el acta hay dos testigos y un médico que certifica. Los busqué durante meses y nunca nadie supo nada. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. Falsifying a death certificate is classified as a crime in the penal code.

On the certificate there are two witnesses and a doctor that sign. I searched for them for months and no one ever knew anything.

Having dismissed the pesky artifact, an obstacle to his belief in his mother's continued existence, Rodríguez then goes on to present another version of the story, the one that defines the second half of the play. After a half hour of establishing facts, referring to photographs, diaries, and personal experiences, what Rodríguez does next should demolish any good faith he has built with his audience.

It is this very good faith, however, along with putting the audience in the position of identifying with the orphaned child, that causes even the most skeptical observer to doubt the reality of what has been shown. Rodríguez produces a death certificate (even though he claims it is false); he has lived with the idea of his mother's death for the grand majority of his life. His mother suffered from breast cancer, and died from it, according to his father.

All signs point to Montserrat's death in 1989. However, the desire, not only for life to triumph over fatality, but also for a good story, a wonderful documentary exposing a nasty conspiracy, lures the spectator into going along with Rodríguez' charade. He lays out his argument entirely:

GABINO. Fue por esas fechas, casi cuando me había dado por vencido en que a través de una persona a la que no voy a mencionar, conocí una segunda versión:

En 1989 Montserrat Lines Molina, mi madre, se esfumó de la faz de la tierra, desde la ciudad de México, lejos de su natal San José, Costa Rica.

Simplemente nadie la vio más. Un día salió de su casa rumbo a su trabajo y no volvió.

Todos hicieron cosas por buscarla, mi Padre, aunque ya estaban divorciados, sus amigos y su familia. No apareció en ninguna morgue, ni en ningún hospital, ni con la policía. Nadie llamó para pedir rescate.

Yo no me enteré de mucho, tenía 6 años.

Desde entonces no hemos vuelto a saber de ella.

Desde entonces está desaparecida.

Huir.

Escapar.

Mi madre se perdió, pero se perdió de verdad.

Uno se puede perder de muchas maneras estando a plena luz, pero perderse de verdad, quemar las naves, desaparecer, eso es otra cosa.

Es, dentro de todo un acto de gran valentía o todo lo contrario.

No lo sé,

no lo he hecho,

no lo haré. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. It was around that time, when I had almost given up, when, through a person whom I won't mention, I learned of a second version:

In 1989 Montserrat Lines Molina, my mother, vanished from the face of the earth, from Mexico City, far from her birthplace, San José, Costa Rica.

No one ever saw her again. One day she left her house headed to work and didn't return.

Everyone searched for her, my father, although they were already divorced, her friends, and her family. She didn't appear in any morgue, or in any hospital, or with the police. No one called to ask for a ransom.

I didn't know much about it; I was six years old.

Since then we haven't seen or heard from her.

Since then she is disappeared.

To flee.

To escape.

My mother got lost, but she really lost herself.

One could get lost in a number of ways in broad daylight, but to lose oneself for real, to burn the ships, to disappear, that's something else.

It is, all in all, an act of great valor or the complete opposite.

I don't know,

I haven't done it,

I won't do it.

The first hint of the implausibility of this second version is the fact that Rodríguez will not name his source. He himself has "burned the ships" by making the play, causing his aunt to cut ties with him. Why, then, after such careful documentation and naming of names, would he suddenly, with no explanation, leave out an important detail of the origin of this second version? The hidden source, which should sound alarm bells, gives way to a logical leap that is also entirely without backing.



Rodríguez goes from the speculation, the existence of a second version, to utter conviction without filling in the audience on the process of arriving from A to B:

GABINO. Desde ese momento supe que estaba viva, desaparecida tal vez, pero viva. Sabía también, que si quería descubrir algo tenía que ir a Costa Rica. Estaba seguro de que allí habría respuestas. Pero no tenía muy claro con quien tenía que llegar. Mis dos abuelos maternos habían muerto, y con Nuria su hermana, no tenía contacto desde hacía varios años. Mi única esperanza era encontrar a Eufracia, una tía abuela de Montserrat que vivía en un pequeño pueblo cerca de Cartago. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. From that moment I knew that she was alive, perhaps disappeared, but alive. I also knew that if I wanted to discover something I had to go to Costa Rica. I was sure that there would be answers there. But it wasn't clear to me with whom I needed to arrive. My maternal grandparents had died, and I hadn't had contact for several years with Nuria, her sister. My only hope was to find Eufracia, one of Montserrat's great aunts, who lived in a small town close to Cartago.

The absolute certainty with which Rodríguez “knows” that his mother is still alive is unsubstantiated but understandable, given the attractiveness of such a possibility. However, as Rodríguez leads his audience down the garden path he also gives the skeptic plenty to work with. Why on earth would it be easier to find a great-great aunt than an aunt, especially if one hasn't had contact with either of them in years? In the age of the internet, Nuria is much more likely to be easily located (and alive) than Eufracia. But the audience, as the character of Gabino, ignores these indications in chase of Montserrat, and the story.

What follows is a Sam-Spadesque recounting of following Montserrat's trail. Rodríguez tells of how he went to Costa Rica in search of Eufracia, and found her house, but was informed that she had been dead for five years. He returns to the capital, finds an ad for a detective, and goes to see him. Again, hints at the fantastic punctuate the narration:

GABINO. El detective me cito en su despacho al día siguiente. Me lo imaginaba distinto, ni siquiera tenía gabardina. Me cobró mucho dinero, pero me dijo que los primeros resultados los tendría a más tardar en dos semanas.

Lo que él llamaba el levantamiento del caso. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. The detective asked me to come to his office the next day. I imagined him to be different; he didn't even have a trench coat. He charged a lot, but told me that he would have results for me in less than two weeks.

What he called the presentation of the case.

By populating the audience's minds with the Socratic ideal of a detective, one, that is, wearing a trench coat, Rodríguez is able to create a cinematically informed image for the audience to hold on to, even as he admits that it doesn't correspond to the alleged reality he is describing.

This technique of describing what something is *not* only brings all of that negated substance to the forefront. Moments of tension like this are where the play does its work of ethical criticism of the documentary genre, or theatre of the real. The stock detective character, a representation, is put into contrast with drab reality, a detective with no trench coat. This corresponds to one of the major problems of representing the real, which is that there must be some production and entertainment value in order for the play to be a success. Even as he

negates the stereotypical, he is still bringing it to mind getting, at the least, a laugh, and at best an audience that has been hooked on a good, old-fashioned detective story.

The detective turns up interesting information, if not Montserrat, within the promised two weeks. He tells Rodríguez that he found another María Montserrat Gerardina Lines Molina. She turns out to be the child born to Montserrat's parents two years before her own birth, who died after only five hours. "*Mi madre ya había muerto una vez antes de nacer,*" 'My mother had already died once before being born' (Rodríguez 13), is Rodríguez' interpretation of the fact. Such an interpretation would seem to echo the real death of Montserrat in 1989, casting an ominous gloom over the search, but the detective reassures Rodríguez that Montserrat is alive and that he can find her.

Line after line in Rodríguez' monologue plays this push-and-pull game of referring to truths that are too hard to believe, and to self-delusion. Reflecting on how he had not spoken in years to his mother's sister, his aunt Nuria, Rodríguez refers to these phenomena:

GABINO. Las familias se especializan en dejar de hablarse o de verse: como si siempre quisieran confirmar que pueden deshacerse, aunque en el fondo saben que no pueden, que lo más que pueden es hacer como si sí pudieran, por vicio, sin ninguna esperanza. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. Families specialize in quitting speaking to one another or seeing one another: it's as if they always wanted to confirm that they can undo themselves, although deep down they know that they can't, that the most that they can do is act as if they could, out of habit, without any hope.

Of course this reflection could just as well apply to the desire to believe that one's mother is alive, even if deep down one knows that she is long dead; or the desire to believe that a play truly represents reality, even though deep down one knows that it is a rehearsed, repeatable creation, even if it is inspired in reality, memory, or fact. Rodríguez brings this fact home, hitting the audience with the fact that he is not looking for his mother, he is looking for a story to present onstage, just as they are not looking for his mother, they are looking to satisfy their desire for catharsis, or a good story, or whatever motivates theatregoers:

GABINO. A los siete días, cuando estuve frente a la puerta del detective otra vez, tuve miedo. Me dijo que contra todos sus pronósticos no había encontrado nada más y que lo mejor sería que buscara en otra parte, que en Costa Rica no la iba a encontrar. Salí decepcionado y cerré la puerta tras de mí, y me quedé parado sin saber a donde ir, fue en ese momento que me dí cuenta de lo ridículo que era todo, de lo improbable que era que Montserrat estuviera viva, de lo inmaduro que era estar parado afuera de la puerta de un detective que no había encontrado nada, de todo el dinero que había gastado, de que yo ya no tenía final para mi obra. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. Seven days later, when I was outside of the detective's door again, I was afraid. He told me that against all of his predictions he hadn't found anything else and that the best would be to look somewhere else, that I wasn't going to find her in Costa Rica. I left disappointed and closed the door behind me, and stood there not knowing where to go. It was in that moment that I realized how ridiculous it all was, the improbability that Montserrat was alive, the immaturity of standing outside of the door of a detective that hadn't found

anything, of all the money I had spent, of the fact that I no longer had an ending for my play.

Such a revelation is shocking; Rodríguez betrays his motives, which are the very ones his aunt accused him of having: that he is more interested in fame, or his art, than in actually finding his mother.

Rather than feeling disappointed about the loss of hope or the dead end when it comes to finding Montserrat, he is upset that the play, as he had projected it, has not turned out as he expected. This means that he was going about shaping reality with the end goal of theatricalizing it, rather than making a play about an unadulterated reality, untainted by directorial and authorial intent. The cart before the horse, the tail wagging the dog; there are metaphors galore to describe the problems evident in such an activity, and while in this case the issue is grossly and directly revealed within the play, it points to a criticism of all auto/biographical theatre.

In the extra-theatrical world of the play, which includes a blog where Rodríguez published poems, photographs, snippets of Montserrat's diaries, and personal reflections as part of his research for the play, the industrious, digitally-minded spectator will find more evidence of such intentions. In an entry marked as a conversation between Gabino and a woman identified as Ana Livia, and adorned with a screenshot of the video chat window in which both she and Gabino appear (see fig. 14), the dialogue revolves around his impending trip to Costa Rica.

She insists that if Montserrat is indeed alive she probably doesn't want to be found and, in the final lines of the reproduced chat, accuses him of caring more about the story than about actually finding his mother:

- Tu familia no está angustiada, a lo más tiene curiosidad, que no es lo mismo. El más interesado en todo esto eres tu y, sé sincero, te atrae la historia, el personaje. Que este viva o muerta, te afecta, pero no tanto. Vas a seguir vivo. Tu vida nunca se ha congelado o se ha vuelto intolerable por la incertidumbre. Lo que tu necesitas es un final para tu historia. Cualquiera de las dos, este viva o muerta es un final. ¿Sí o no?

- Si.

- ¿Viste? Te conozco: todo esto es para ti una historia. Y la quieres vivir, está bien, pero todo esto tiene que ver contigo. (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol "Montserrat XIX")

-Your family is not in anguish; at the most they are curious, which is not the same. The one who is more interested in this is you and, be sincere; you're attracted to the story, the character. Whether she is alive or dead affects you, but not much. Your life will go on. Your life has never frozen up or gotten intolerable because of the uncertainty. What you need is an ending for your story. Either of one of the two, if she's alive or dead, is an ending. Am I right?

-Yes.



Figure 14 Screenshot of Gabino's videochat, posted on the blog. Source: Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, "Montserrat XIX", *Teatron*, 1 July 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

-See? I know you: all of this is a story for you. And you want to experience it, that's fine, but all of this is about you.

These same lines are projected onto the screen during the play during the detective scenes. Her taking him to task seems to have been inserted directly into the play, with his frustration over a lack of an ending. Neither dead nor alive at this point, Montserrat remains an unresolved case and therefore unacceptable for Rodríguez' project.

An obvious, problematic issue with the representation of the real is the director's hand in the selection and arrangement of the factual evidence that gives the illusion of objectivity and reality while serving a particular agency.<sup>31</sup> What Rodríguez does here is pull back the curtain a little further and demonstrate another possible problem with theatre of the real. It is one thing to take already existing information and remix it into a play; it's quite another to influence events and outcomes in the hopes of creating a more entertaining or thought-provoking play.

If Rodríguez were not involved in documentary theatre and didn't have the idea of a play about his parents on his mind in the first place, would he even have gone looking for Montserrat? The question, planted by Rodríguez himself with the mention of the play in the detective scene, points to possible ethical dilemmas within auto/biographical theatre. Just as Rodríguez lets the audience flinch with the distastefulness of his self-serving comment, he reels them back in with a juicy plot twist. He says that as he stood outside the office he heard a voice from inside, and stuck his ear against the door to listen:

GABINO. Me sentía estafado, escuché un murmullo en la puerta y me imaginé al detective burlándose de mí. Oí un murmullo y pegué la oreja a la puerta y escuché la voz del detective que comenzaba a hablar por teléfono en el interior del despacho, guarde silencio y oí como decía:

Se acaba de ir.

No yo creo que está a punto de darse por vencido.

Le dije que en Costa Rica no la iba a encontrar.

No, no se preocupe señora.

No señora Nuria, no hay nada de qué preocuparse.

Yo le aviso cualquier cosa.

Hasta luego. Adiós.

Escuché como colgó el teléfono y salí caminando del edificio, tratando de ordenar mis pensamientos, sin saber qué decisión tomar. ¿Qué quería yo en ese momento? ¿Qué quiero ahora? (Rodríguez)

GABINO. I felt like I'd been had; I heard a murmur at the door and imagined the detective mocking me. I heard a murmur and stuck my ear against the door and heard the detective's voice, which was beginning to speak on the phone inside the office. I kept silent and heard as he said:

"He just left.

"No, I think he's about to give up.

"I told him that he wasn't going to find her in Costa Rica.

"No, don't worry, ma'am.

"No, Ms. Nuria, there is nothing to worry about.

"I'll let you know if anything comes up.

"Okay, until then. Goodbye."

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<sup>31</sup> Please see Chapter One for discussion of the director-witness relationship in auto/biographical theatre.

I heard how he hung up the phone and I walked out of the building, trying to put my thoughts in order, without knowing what decision to make. What did I want in that moment? What do I want now?

The conspiracy grows, as now Rodríguez claims to have proof that his aunt Nuria knew he was in Costa Rica, knew he was looking for Montserrat, and was working to stop him.

He decides to call her and she, feigning surprise, invites him to breakfast at her house the following day. Gabino walks into a mystery novel trope, meeting the housekeeper who, unsurprisingly, knows more than she is able to let on. Doña Ofelia tells him that she took care of him when he was a baby, that she was his mother's and aunt's nanny, and that she is very happy that he had come to San José. After testing his aunt at breakfast [and including another mystery trope with the line "*Yo sabía que ella sabía que yo estaba buscando a mi madre y no me dijo nada al respecto, pero ella no sabía que yo sabía que ella lo sabía,*" 'I knew that she knew that I was looking for my mother and she didn't say anything to me about it, but she didn't know that I knew that she knew' (Rodríguez 15)]. As he's about to give up and leave, Doña Ofelia catches him at the door, hugs him and wordlessly presses a piece of paper with an address into his hand.

The denouement comes rapidly, as Rodríguez tells how he took a taxi to the address, which turned out to be on the outskirts of San José. He finds a white house with a green door, and an older man opens it, welcoming Gabino by name, saying that they had been expecting him. As he recounts the visit, pictures flash once again on the back wall of the stage. This time, however, they are devoid of humanity. They are photographs of a house, a living room, furniture, but there is no picture of a reunited mother and son; this imagery, in contrast with the snapshots whose subjects were always people at the beginning of the play, gives silent witness to the unreality of the narration.

Gabino claims, addressing the audience, that

GABINO. Fue en esa casa donde 22 años después volví a ver a mi madre, ella se sentó en el sillón y yo corrí la silla que está al fondo y me senté frente a ella. Hablamos y nos miramos. No sé cuánto tiempo estuve con ella, pero creo que fue mucho. Nos miramos y nos volvimos a mirar, durante largo rato casi sin decir nada. Todo estaba dicho de antemano. No hubo reclamos, ni gritos, ni lágrimas.

Salí de esa casa despidiéndome de mi madre con un abrazo. Salí caminando.

(Rodríguez)

GABINO. It was in that house where, 22 years later, I saw my mother again. She sat on the sofa and I scooted the chair that's in the back of the room over and sat down in front of her. We spoke and we looked at each other. I don't know how long I was with her, but I believe it was a long time. We looked at each other and we looked at each other again, for a long time, without saying anything. Everything had been said beforehand. There were no appeals, nor shouts, nor tears.

I left that house, saying goodbye to my mother with an embrace. I walked away. The emptiness of the photographs against such an emotive, intimate description create a contrast that, like the other moments hinting at the impossibility of Rodríguez' claims, suspends the spectator in a space between disbelief and a desire for resolution. However, when Rodríguez claims that he never saw his mother again, never heard from her again, after that visit, the audience is forced to recognize the obvious: the meeting did not occur.

In keeping with the use of documentary evidence as props in the play, Rodríguez claims that he wrote his mother a letter after their meeting and that she never answered it. Rounding out the play, which also begins with a letter from Gabino to his family, the letter, in this case, is out of place. It reads like a suicide letter, which is dissonant with the fact that its author is alive and well onstage. It is also, some research reveals, plagiarized.

The letter is, with some important variations, an adaptation of a 1975 letter from the Colombian writer Andrés Caicedo Estela to his mother. He would commit suicide two years later, but the epistle serves as an excellent farewell from son to mother, which, it seems, Rodríguez recognized and therefore adopted it. It serves as a prologue to a posthumously published collection of Caicedo's autobiographical writings, *Mi cuerpo es una celda: una biografía*. Caicedo who, unlike Rodríguez, did commit suicide at the age of 25, writes from Cali the words that Rodríguez will utter on the Mexican stage:

Mamacita:

Un día tú me prometiste que cualquier cosa que yo hiciera, tú la comprenderías y me darías la razón. Por favor, trata de entender mi muerte. Yo no estaba hecho para vivir más tiempo. Estoy enormemente cansado, decepcionado y triste, y estoy seguro de que cada día que pase, cada una de estas sensaciones o sentimientos me irán matando lentamente. Entonces prefiero acabar de una vez.

De ti no guardo más que cariño y dulzura. Has sido la mejor madre del mundo y yo soy el que te pierdo, pero mi acto no es de derrota. Tengo todas las de ganar, porque estoy convencido de que no me queda otra salida. Nací con la muerte adentro y lo único que hago es sacármela para dejar de pensar y quedar tranquilo. (Caicedo Estela 16; Rodríguez)

Mamacita:

One day you promised me that no matter what I did, you would understand and tell me that I was right. Please, try to understand my death. I wasn't made to live longer. I am enormously tired, disappointed, and sad, and I am sure that each day that passes, each one of these sensations or sentiments will go along killing me slowly. So I prefer to get it over with.

For you I have nothing but affection and sweetness. You have been the best mother in the world and I'm the one that's losing you, but my act is not out of defeat. I have everything going for me, but I'm convinced that there's no other way out for me. I was born with death inside and the only thing I can do is get it out so that I can quit thinking and be still.

Up to this point the letter Rodríguez reads is identical to Caicedo's.

Given that we, by this point, have at least a suspicion that Montserrat is, as originally thought, dead, and Rodríguez is obviously not, the letter would seem to be a sort of self-soothing tactic for Gabino. Though the letter is addressed to his mother, it could just as easily (if not more easily) be read as a letter from her to him, and a comfort. In this way the play itself works to console an orphaned child, reconstructing the possibility of her survival and their reunion.

Caicedo's letter differs from Rodríguez' when it becomes personal, naming names. Whereas Caicedo tells his mother, "*Por favor, no intentes averiguar nada de Patricita: ella no tiene nada que ver con esto, y cualquier cosa que hagas en esa dirección sólo aumentará tu pena y mi vergüenza*" "Please, don't try to find out anything about Patricita: she has nothing to do with

this, and anything you do in that direction will only increase your sorrow and my shame. Forget it' (Caicedo Estela 16); Rodríguez modifies the letter to read,

GABINO. *Por favor, no intentes averiguar nada de Diana, ni de Luisa ni de las demás ellas no tienen nada que ver con esto* (Rodríguez)

GABINO. *Please don't try to find out anything about Diana, or Luisa, or any of the rest: they have nothing to do with this.* [. . .]

While the play itself doesn't give any clues as to who the women mentioned are, Rodríguez' directing partner is Luisa Pardo, and it would not be off base to imagine that many audience members will associate the name with her (especially since she plays herself, naming names, in parts of *El rumor del incendio*). The letters go on, with more modifications personalizing it for Rodríguez' use.

Caicedo's version reads "*Acuérdate solamente de mí. Yo muero porque ya para cumplir 24 años soy un anacronismo y un sinsentido, y porque desde que cumplí 21 vengo sin entender el mundo. Soy incapaz ante las relaciones de dinero y las relaciones de influencias, y no puedo resistir el amor: es algo mucho más fuerte que todas mis fuerzas, y me las ha desbaratado,*" 'Just remember me. I die because by turning 24 I am already an anachronism and a uselessness, and because ever since I turned 21 I haven't understood the world. I am incapable with money relations and relations of influence, and I can't resist love: it is something much stronger than all of my strength, and it has drained me of it' (Caicedo Estela 16). Rodríguez' version is almost word for word, only replacing the 24 with 29. For those audience members have gone along doing the math as Rodríguez mentioned dates, the age is his current age in early 2013, when the play premiered.

While Caicedo includes a paragraph as a sort of testament, designating who will inherit his books and Rolling Stones records, and asking that the books he wrote about his adolescence be published and that his body be incinerated, Rodríguez omits such morbid information. He does include, however, the moribund paragraph reading

A mí papá, que perdone todos los inconvenientes que le causé en la vida, y a Clarisolcita que no se olvide de mi pobre alma. Dejo algo de obra y muero tranquilo. Este acto ya estaba premeditado. Tú premedita tu muerte también. Es la única forma de vencerla.

Nellicita querida, de no haber sido por ti, yo habría muerto hace ya muchos años. Esta idea la tengo desde mi uso de razón. Ahora mi razón está extraviada, y lo que hago es solamente para parar el sufrimiento. (Caicedo Estela 16)

To my father, let him pardon all of the inconveniences I caused him in life and to Clarisolcita may she not forget my poor soul. I leave behind some work and I die tranquilly. This act was already premeditated. You premeditate your death, too. It is the only way to vanquish it.

Dear Nellicita, if it hadn't been for you, I would have died many years ago. This is the idea I've had ever since I reached the age of reason. Now my reason is lost, and what I do is only to end the suffering.

Rodríguez, however, omits the clause about Clarisolcita and substitutes "*mamacita*" for "*Nellicita*" in his version.

The adaptation of such a personal letter has several functions in *Montserrat*. On the direct level of initial audience reception, it inverts the roles of *Montserrat* and Gabino, with him being the one who plans to vanish into thin air, or lose himself, or die, as she did so many long years

ago. This is yet another way that the play signals to the audience that her supposed survival is a fantasy. As a suicide note, it works to put an end to the gumshoe Gabino, created for this play, effectively killing off the character and leaving the historical person onstage.

On the level of intertextuality, only discoverable by those who know Caicedo's work or have investigated *Montserrat* online [Rodríguez reproduces Caicedo's letter in its original form on his blog (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol "Montserrat V")], it connects the auto/biographical play to the more traditional form of auto/biography: narrative. And finally, that very intertextuality works once again to disavow the claims made in the play, demonstrating the unreality of the presented events.

And if the surreal description of his meeting with Montserrat, coupled with the extraordinary non-suicide letter were not enough to convince the spectator of the impossibility of the events he describes in the second half of the play, its last line serves as the final nail in the coffin of the illusion:

GABINO. Este es el único recuerdo que tengo de mi madre, pero no se si lo viví o lo soñé. (Rodríguez)

GABINO. This is the only memory that I have of my mother, but I don't know if I lived it or if I dreamed it.

Like the photographs from which he constructed his memories of his mother, mentioned early in the play, the dream, too, works as a substitute memory for an utter lack of remembrance. Where Rodríguez fails to revive his mother in his mind, he must revive her on the stage.

The play must be considered as a whole in addition to the close-reading analysis I've done here in order to understand the way that it criticizes the very objective of theatre of the real. First of all, it belongs to the realm of theatre of the real, defined broadly by Carol Martin as including

documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre. [. . .] The array of terms indicates a range of methods of theatrical creation that are not always discrete, but may overlap and cross-fertilize. [. . .] In this kind of theatre, there is an obsession with forming and reframing what has really happened. (*Theatre of the Real* 5)

Rodríguez' play would fit into the reality-based and autobiographical categories, even though it is not entirely factual. The technique of using his own name for his character, of citing verifiable facts and figures in relationship to his family, and presenting documentary evidence for the truth (and, later, untruth) of his claims, plants *Montserrat* firmly within the terrain of the real.

The play's critique arises with the final intention that Martin identifies, the "obsession with forming and reframing what has really happened". While the play attempts to do just that, by establishing facts about Montserrat's life and death, providing a second version as an explanation for her disappearance, and the unrelenting, international search for the truth, it also demonstrates the impossibility of representing "what has really happened".

Rodríguez takes an undeniable fact, the death of his mother, and creates an entire reality in which that fact is no longer valid. Using theatrical techniques such as projection of images, music, movement, props, and direct-address monologue, he constructs a parallel universe that excludes the previously established facts with its own version of events. Such a gesture is not



without consequence, especially when understood as part of a larger theatrical and cultural context.

Given that Gabino Rodríguez is well-known for his participation in theatre of the real as part of the company Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol and that the play was presented initially as part of a cycle of autobiographical, reality-based, and documentary plays, and further taking into account his participation in films by Nicolás Pereda in which he plays a character called Gabino and in which José Rodríguez often plays the character's father, it can be expected that a significant proportion of *Montserrat*'s audience will have the expectation of seeing an example of theatre of the real. This expectation is immediately fulfilled through the use of documentary evidence such as photographs of a couple resembling the actor, the reading of a letter mentioning facts about Rodríguez' life and signed "Gabino", and the use of verifiable data such as dates, names, addresses, and occupations. The setting is therefore ripe on the part of both spectator and theatre practitioner to pluck the fruit from the tree of knowledge; to undo the paradisiacal expectation that reality can indeed be represented, if not recreated, onstage.

After spending about a half an hour constructing a penumbral reality, in one fell swoop Rodríguez provides an unsubstantiated, but much more attractive alternative. His mother did not die; she disappeared but is still alive; against all the odds he found her. By presenting two versions of an explanation to Montserrat's disappearance from his life, Rodríguez is forcing the audience to face the fact that he is able to provide documentary evidence for the mutually exclusive stories, and if he is able to do so, then the entire apparatus of representing the real is called into question.

It is important to note, however, that this action, while pointing to the impossibility of representation, does not render the play a lie, nonsensical, or even deny the value of theatre of the real. What it does is force the audience to examine their trust in the plays and their creators, recognize the limitations of any recreation, and also look for a new meaning. If theatre of the real were only designed to reconstruct reality, it would be revealed as an impossibility by this play's critique. However, if theatre of the real is able to create new meaning by representing past events, then it is empowered and empowering to the audience that engages with it.

While *Montserrat* is unable to substantiate its claims that the eponymous figure is still alive, and in that sense fails to fulfill its promised representation of reality, it does provide Gabino Rodríguez with the chance to bid a proper farewell to his mother. Having been told about her death only after her ashes were already scattered, having lost touch with his maternal extended family, having misplaced the tree used as her memorial as the forest grew up, Rodríguez was, in reality, left with unfinished business. The play, while not exactly providing a documentary-style reconstruction of true events, does provide a real space where Rodríguez can ritually and publicly make his peace. The effects are real.

The open ending of *Montserrat* leaves the spectator without firm ground to stand on for reaching any conclusions. Rather than a traditional autobiography, or the investigation into the accuracy of a work of non-fiction, *Montserrat* is a treatise on the ethics and responsibilities of the documentary genre. Onstage, Rodríguez dissects staged reality. As in Knausgård's works, revealed family secrets cause pain and, as in *This American Life*, the exploration of the artist's responsibilities when representing the truth end up being much more interesting than the controversial material itself.

The topics of veracity and the representation of the truth are illuminated in these examples, and in many more that are published or produced with dizzying speed. The traditional

discourses of truth find themselves left behind when it comes to examining their own role in the construction of truth when compared to this type of cultural production, which not only represents a version of the facts, but also dissects and analyzes the possibilities of doing so, the ethics of trying to do so, and the possible repercussions. By openly revealing the mechanisms behind their representations of the truth, contemporary documentary artists expand the critical discussion and leave the reader/ listener/spectator with a consciousness of the responsibility that goes along with representation.

## Conclusions

In this study I have had two overarching objectives that define the goals of each chapter. The first goes back to the philological roots of my field of literary studies, recovering the “archive fever” that spurs the collectors and catalogers of letters. Having observed what I perceived to be a phenomenon I wanted to gather together as many examples of it as I could. From the first time that I saw an auto/biographical play, to talking it over with colleagues who turned me on to another, to actively seeking out examples, the drive to create an archive of contemporary examples of self-representation in Latin American theatre has been a powerful motor for this study.

The second objective is to examine the archive I constructed and learn what the tendency could tell us about theatre in our current moment, and what auto/biographical representation in contemporary theatre can tell us about our idea of the self. To that end, I have asked questions about authorship, the concept of “truth” and its place in the theatre, the role of the audience, the limits of auto/biography, and the ethics of representing the real.

While I draw from various branches of criticism and theory, the relationship posited by criticism on the *testimonio* genre is especially helpful for understanding the complex relationships involved in producing a theatrical auto/biography. While auto/biography studies have long since unpacked the vision of a unitary individual serving as author, character, and narrator in the narrative auto/biography, *testimonio* offers an interesting perspective for analyzing the collaborative nature of auto/biographical theatre. Similarly, its unique position as a Latin American genre rooted in narratives of trauma sheds special light on the particular set of plays I examine here, which represent Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, and generally deal with absence, loss, and trauma of some kind.

I notice the way that, because of the corporal presence of the auto/biographed actor onstage, the author/director/interviewer is often obfuscated from the scene. The actor/witness is offered up, almost as though the body were documentary evidence of the reality of the represented events, because it was there, a witness to the life story. However, the kinds of questions asked in interviews, the kinds of stories requested, and the enormous amount of editing and directing that takes place in the hands of the dramaturge are often hidden from the final products, creating a fiction that is, paradoxically, partially real. What I mean by this is that the audience, by having the information that the onstage actor is indeed the historical person represented by the play, enters into a pact in which it agrees to accept the play as representative of reality. However, the nature of the theatre also requires the acceptance that it is at best a construct, at worst an invention. Either way, the truth value and authority over the life story would seem to lie with the actor, while the story itself has actually been mediated through an interview process and composition, edition, and direction on the part of the author.

It is the aforementioned pact, which requires the double-belief, the psychic split, that allows auto/biography to exist as a genre at all. If the play does not communicate to its audience that it contains elements of reality, either through extra-theatrical elements such as programs or media buzz or from within the play itself, then its auto/biographical nature is not recognized and therefore adds no special meaning to the play or its performance. However, the plays analyzed here do, via projected disclaimers, program data, announcements to the audience, and websites, for example, get the point across that the plays are claiming some kind of “truth,” which must always be considered as residing within quotation marks.

That psychic split required of the audience, in which it believes simultaneously in the fiction of the theatre and the reality of what is represented, is achieved through an operation not unlike Freudian fetishization. Just as the fetishist separates the fetish from the desired object in a sort of reenactment of the feared castration, the audience member of an auto/biographical play who enters into the pact must accept language in the place of the truth. Rather than witnessing original events as they occur, the audience is satisfied that the representation is a close enough reconstruction or reenactment of the event because the verbatim language of the witnesses is used to create the play's script. In this way language takes the place of reality as an acceptable substitute, often surpassing unmediated reality in its desirability.

The plays also challenge conceptual limits such as what auto/biography entails or what we understand the concept of self to mean. Especially in those plays in which actors play not only themselves, but also their parents, the frontiers of the individual are blurred. Direct corporeal experience is replaced by a sense of propriety over inherited memories or life stories discovered through conversations and investigations. This questions not only the idea of the individual self, by allowing it to expand and include the genetically related, but also the idea of auto/biography as a genre. Actors are staking autobiographical claims over material that would normally be considered to belong to the realm of biography.

Such claims are treated from within the theatre with a critical eye, however. Plays will wink at the audience, letting them know that what is being represented is an impossibility or showing the hand of the director at some point during the production. These jolts of reality, which contrast greatly with the experience of an aestheticized representation of reality, ask the spectator to look critically at their relationship with the play and its claims to truth.

This dissertation is a first foray into unknown territory, a scouting mission whose report assures that there is much fertile ground to be discovered in subsequent expeditions. I am especially interested in expanding the geographical and linguistic scope of the project to include North America, which has also seen a proliferation of auto/biographical theatre in the past decade. Similarly, the subgenre of auto/biographical plays which include the representation of family members has enough representatives that it could comprise a study of its own. Finally, a historical study of the representation of the real in the Latin American theatre from Realism to theatre of the real would be an informative and necessary addition to our knowledge of the history of drama in the region. Future studies of auto/biographical theatre are an important step toward better understanding contemporary notions of representation and reality, and for conceptualizing the self.

From the day in 2010 that I first saw *El rumor del incendio* to the time that I watched *Montserrat* for the third time, just last month, my own understanding of and expectations for auto/biographical theatre have evolved. The astonishment that I felt at the unexpected twist of events that had Luisa Pardo, the historical person, playing her mother, Margarita, another historical person, onstage has been tempered as I have come across new examples of auto/biographical theatre seemingly constantly.

After having thought about, studied, read, re-read, translated, and viewed *Montserrat*, as well as the other plays I have worked on, for months and even years, I sat in the brand new, softly-cushioned benches at the Foro El Bicho in Mexico City and scrutinized Rodríguez. I wondered why he changed his voice to represent the detective; why he decided to hang the various documents he presented as evidence on a clothesline instead of nailing them to a table as

he had in the preview a year before; why the person next to me, another graduate student I had just met and invited to join me, was buying what he was selling.

When he claimed to have found his mother in a house in Costa Rica after a long, detective-aided search, my companion audibly gasped. Sipping mescal after the show I mentioned offhand that I assumed most of the play was fictional and she seemed surprised. I had become jaded. I found out that at the preview of *Montserrat*, Rodríguez' stepmother wept and asked her husband, Rodríguez' father, whether it was true that Montserrat, his first wife, was still alive and hiding in Costa Rica. A woman who intimately knows the real version of the story being presented swallowed her doubt and was deeply affected by the emotion the play represents.

Later that week I read an email from Márcio Freitas, the director of one of the plays I analyze here, saying that after having read my chapter on *Sem Falsidades* he was so pleased that I seemed to have understood the moments where he tipped his hand, letting the audience know how much he had manipulated the testimony. He wondered, though, whether audiences that didn't have the experience that I did would have understood, and whether he should have laid it on thicker.

These experiences remind me of the importance of context to the reception of auto/biographical plays. They must find a way, extra-theatrically or within the play itself, to communicate to the audience that what they are witnessing is fact-based, verifiable, and true. Followers of documentary theatre will come to the plays with certain critical baggage and be, perhaps, more in tune to the winks the directors throw in to point out their manipulation of the facts; spectators new to the genre will be astonished as it dawns on them.

However, in the end, auto/biographical theatre is theatre. At the end of my third viewing of *Montserrat*, Rodríguez pushed a button on the MacBook he used onstage to play video and project photographs and text. The last sound in the play was new to me; it hadn't been a part of the earlier versions I had seen. It was Willie Nelson singing "You Are Always On My Mind". And with that, the theatre brought tears to my eyes. Whether the events presented were real, dreamed, or purely made up, and regardless of my intellectual relationship with the material, the desire behind them was real. That is what provokes the audience's response.

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