Staging Lives in Latin American Theater

Bodies Objects Archives

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Chapter 3

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Shadows of the Real

Teatro Línea de Sombra

> There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.
>
> —Harold Pinter

Many theater groups use documentary methods to create significant and impactful work onstage, but few of these groups explore intersections between art and political action as deeply as the Mexican theater collective Teatro Línea de Sombra (TLS). Founded in 1993, TLS consistently works in liminal zones, between "the real" and the fictional, always mindful of its commitment to social and political causes. Composed of a diverse group of visual and digital artists, musicians, actors, sociologists, and anthropologists (Jorge Vargas, Alicia Laguna, Eduardo Bernal, Zuadd Atala, and Raúl Mendoza), they explore theater and theatricality through research, political activism and artistic creation. As artists based in Mexico City, they have traveled to a variety of international festivals, and more recently they have been invited to work as artists in residence at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA)—the first artists in residence the MCA has hosted with the goal of creating a brand-new work.

Their work and international reception stem from participatory research. In other words, they create work through their own experiences, studying—relying on their anthropologist members—the nuances of the city or place they inhabit, and exploring how art can intercede in these spaces. In this respect, their work usually combines research in carefully chosen locations, where TLS members explore the connections between place, history, and the possible reinterpretations of space that acting bodies can provide. While they strive to be a politically and socially committed group, their attention to aesthetic beauty and the creation of an artistically attractive work becomes an important aspect of how they operate, something that I will analyze at length later on.

During their residency in Chicago, it was clear that their creative work coalesced as they read, researched, added and discarded possible paths. At the time of my various visits of about two weeks each to the MCA in 2016 and 2017, they were developing their play now titled *Filo de caballo(s)* (*Poppy Trail*).[1] Their point of departure was a journey that had been undertaken by director Jorge Vargas in order to experience the long forty-eight hours on a bus linking the cities of Iguala, Mexico, and Chicago via the *camino de amapola*, or the Poppy Trail. The inherent danger of this trip was clearly the experience they wanted to underscore, but only as a generator of ideas and possibilities. It was certain that the haunting story of the forty-three young students from a rural teachers' college in Ayotzinapa who had disappeared in the southwestern city of Iguala, Mexico, on the nights of September 26–27, 2014, was a real-life referent for Vargas's own travel.[2] This story of disappearance, heard and seen all over the world, had revealed once again the unbridled violence plaguing Mexico. On the nights of their gruesome and still unresolved disappearances, about a hundred students decided to steal buses to travel to Mexico City. They planned to hold a march to commemorate the 1968 student massacre that took place in Tlatelolco, where hundreds of students were murdered by the police because they were demanding freedom of political prisoners and more transparency about other government repression.[3] The tradition of stealing buses had been tolerated by the bus companies for many years, as they allowed students from a college known for its activism to perform this ritual. On the nights of September 26–27, however, different buses were intercepted by police; shots were fired; six people died, three of them students; and forty-three student teachers disappeared. There are different narratives and testimonies regarding why these buses were targeted, but according to ongoing studies by the Forensic Architecture Team (commissioned by Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team and Pro Human Rights Group), which examined thousands of testimonies, videos, and phone records compiled by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), there was a coverup between state agents and organized crime, and the final official account diverges from the one presented by the IACHR.[4] With digital graphs and data points, Forensic Architecture builds an interactive platform with possible outcomes to investigate crimes committed against the forty-three students, as well as to confront the failures of Mexican law enforcement. Their investigation is now part of the permanent collection at the University Museum of Contemporary Arts, at Mexico's National Autonomous University in Mexico City. Relying on Forensic Architecture's digital platform, TLS has explored theories positing that the intercepted buses may have been used in the drug route from Iguala to Chicago and thus that the students were in the wrong place at the wrong time.[5] In this way TLS had to consider and acknowledge that some of their own research might have to take place on a bus that could be carrying drugs across the border into the United States.

During their residency in Chicago, the group was deciding whether to use the well-known Chicago stockyard as part of their story, to explore the testimony of a longtime Mexican museum worker, or to go in search of other stories of women working in factories around the area. Their creative process to think about a play that deals with a highly charged contemporary issue, such as re-creating particular drug trafficking routes, pushed the group to attempt to also understand the lives of those migrants already living in Chicago, as well as the immigrants' struggles and dreams. This process of witnessing attests to TLS as a collective of artists, who not only investigate, document, and explore the many literary intertexts in their own work, but also dig into and collect the layers of possible stories to tell, layers that sometimes depart from their own concept of documentation.

In this chapter, I turn to the impact of a socially committed group that brings contemporary and difficult topics to the stage by speaking directly about immigration, femicide, and human rights atrocities. Thus, I study their work not just as artistic production but in conjunction with and in relation to their committed social and political work. In doing so, I privilege a performance studies approach to consider them as artists and activists whose tools are education as well as information. In other words, I take into consideration how they put their lives in danger, how they study and research their work in order to call attention to matters beyond the theatrical, closely relying on anthropological methods, and how they use site specificity in their work when needed.[6]

Their exploration of aesthetic beauty through ethnographic studies of the people and places they want to stage makes their work one of the most important artistic contributions within contemporary theater. In other words, TLS has a unique and original approach to studying and connecting people and places to their historical and political pasts through a documentary mode by also bringing out the beauty of any story they face, even those with gruesome content. I connect the study of documentary theater as it took a new form beginning in the twenty-first century together with the many relational aesthetics (to borrow Nicolas Bourriaud's term) that encompass art and politics. If, for Bourriaud, "art is the place that produces a specific sociability" and develops into a political project when it moves into the relational realm,[7] then this chapter argues that documentary theater, as a political artistic genre that convenes sociability, illuminates the possibility of imagining and understanding our present and our future as social beings. My research is grounded in theories of affect, in a sense "how we are touched by what we are near," as Sara Ahmed succinctly explains when she speaks of how emotions are "intentional in the sense that they are about something."[8] In theater, where we usually share a common space for a determined period of time, affective response to what we see, hear, smell, and sometimes even touch convenes the multisensorial in personal ways. In fact, TLS strives to explore the connectivity between affect, sociability, and relationality as important foundations in their work.

At the same time, this chapter analyzes how TLS and their repertoire manipulate the onstage role of the "real" to address issues of immigration with the assistance of border and migration studies to examine the cause and effect of human behavior and survival. Specifically, I study the intricacies of the use of documentary objects as well as a documentary mode in the retelling of stories for an audience. And while their work does not focus on the authenticity of the object as document, their study and approach to creating an artistic product is informed by documentary research. This information is then simultaneously portrayed as authentic material that allows the audience to learn and immerse itself in the story. As I wrote in the introduction to this book, studying documentary practices of twenty-first-century theater calls for attention to be paid to collection and to process as well as to invention.

Documentary theater, particularly in Mexico, has a strong tradition. The best-known example is the influential work of Vicente Leñero (1933–2014) and his true-to-form documentary plays from the 1960s and '70s. Leñero was highly influenced by Peter Weiss, and his plays were key examples of what Latin American documentary theater was at the time: "a critical manifestation of reality based on authentic events."[9] Leñero's constant search for the political, the value of the authentic, without fictional intervention, resulted in plays that often explored the tribunal form to heighten tension and authenticity for their audiences. In 1968, a year connected to violent riots around the world, including the massacre in Tlatelolco, Leñero premiered *Pueblo rechazado* (*Rejected People*) in Mexico City, which appeared only three years after Peter Weiss's innovative 1965 production *The Investigation* in Germany, the play that epitomized the documentary theater of that decade.

While Leñero made a name for himself through the use of documentary theater, other practitioners in Latin America also engaged in documentary practices.[10] Most notable among them were Colombian groups like Enrique Buenaventura's collective, Teatro Experimental de Cali (TEC), and Santiago García's La Candelaria, as well as the Peruvian group Yuyachakani, which approached group participation and political activism through documentary work.[11] Stimulated by the ongoing influential work by Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, and Peter Weiss, Latin American artists sought political expression on the stage. And while European tendencies were key for many Latin American practitioners, it is important to point out that collective group work, theater groups, and participatory performance practices were even more evident in many of these documentary groups. Augusto Boal and his *Teatro del oprimido* (Theatre of the Oppressed) method were paramount to his own work of 1960s and 1970s, as well as that of others influenced by him. This connection is evident in groups like Yuyachkani and TEC, among others, that sought to make Latin American theater a serious player in political theater.

In Mexico, Leñero was a pioneer through his dramaturgy, his research and his constant search for what he saw as authentic. With *Pueblo rechazado*

and many other works, he solidified a tradition in Latin American theater in which the political stage became an important genre within theater. His Mexican disciples, including Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, Tomás Urtusástegui, Leonor Azcárate, Sabina Berman, Hugo Salcedo, Enrique Rentería, and Antonio Zúñiga, helped consolidate Leñero's legacy as well as develop other documentary theater techniques by creating plays about historical events while simultaneously advancing the understanding of documentary theater as a more playful genre from which invention, irony, and doubt began to emerge.

Yet while Leñero was an influential playwright producing documentary theater in a traditional vein for which he achieved great success, twenty-first-century theater practitioners pursue a more nuanced and creative expression. Among the most prominent groups and playwrights working in this genre is another renowned Mexican collective, Lagartijas tiradas al sol (Lizards Lounging in the Sun). Founded in 2003 in Mexico City, these artists led by Luisa Prado and Gabino Rodríguez "develop projects as a mechanism to link work and life, to erase borders . . . and to provide meaning, articulate, dislocate and unravel what everyday practice fuses and overlooks."[12] Prado and Rodríguez add that their work is not entertainment; instead, they create "a space to think."[13] Many of their plays take into consideration the autobiographical, the role of the witness, the ambiguity of retelling someone's story, and the ongoing questions about what documents might or might not show.[14] Documentary theater practices, like the ones employed by Lagartijas, have encouraged many other groups and Mexican playwrights to tackle similar issues through the use of documentary modes. Authors like Antonio Zúñiga, Hugo Salcedo, Humberto Robles, and Perla de la Rosa show how the current issues of immigration, femicides, and drug violence lend themselves to exploratory work through theater. And although Leñero paved the way for bringing archival research to the stage, it is in the work by new theater groups and practitioners that questions how to treat fiction and authenticity that takes center stage. This is especially true for TLS.

The members of TLS could be considered "artivists," those who, according to Ileana Diéguez and Diana Taylor, explore political and cultural ways for the discussion and transformation of community issues and those who "use performance to intervene in political contexts, struggles and debates."[15] As artivists, TLS members compile information from newspaper articles, blogs, and documentary video, and connect that archival base with fictional threads to produce through the intertextuality of fiction—poems, short stories, and novels—complex plays. Their most recent work includes plays like *Amarillo* (*Amarillo*, 2009), *Baños Roma* (*Roma Baths*, 2013), *Pequeños territorios en reconstrucción* (*Small Territories under Reconstruction* 2014),[16] *Durango 66* (2015);[17] large-scale installations like *Artículo 13* (*Article 13*, 2012); the site-specific performances *El puro lugar* (*Nothing but the Place*, 2016–2017) and *Filo de caballo(s)* (*Poppy Trail*, 2018). TLS's participation in community activities takes on major social and political heft in their own development

and creation process. One of TLS's main purposes is to study issues of human rights and immigration, as well as to explore topics of femicide and extermination in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Whereas other important playwrights and theater collectives have staged similar topics on border issues (for instance, the Mexican playwrights Hugo Salcedo, Antonio Zúñiga, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, and Humberto Robles, as well as the Spanish playwrights Angélica Liddell and Juan Carlos Rubio), TLS exposes fragments of the real through revision and documentary creation of the story they stage. In other words, from director Jorge Vargas to different members of the group, including Alicia Laguna, Eduardo Bernal, Raúl Mendoza, and Zuadd Ibáñez, TLS creates and critically examines intersections between the value of the archive and the artistic process of aesthetics.

What brought me to their work was not merely the topics and themes they studied, although that was a driving reason; instead, I was drawn to their approach to the document and the process of documentation via a laboratory setting in which they investigate how theater operates for them and for their audiences. While their methodology can also be attributed to what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls postdramatic, they prefer the term "progression" to describe how they work with real issues through theater. For them, progression manifests in collective creation—a process that relies on what each interpreter or actor brings with them. Although members invest in research and archival work, they also work with objects and their own bodies to process and understand the information in creative ways that underscore a phenomenological approach. This exercise of progression brings each actor's comments and thoughts to a collective forum and will later go through edits of texts and movement. This way, the group takes into account individual as well as group perspectives, along with embodied practices and textual evidence. According to Jorge Vargas, "Our artistic process is collective to bring together different points of view. I, as the director, later decide which pieces tie together better than others." However, he also adds that the group thrives on the independent artistic innovations and that each artist has a voice and a potential for considering materials that the final product will consider as a group.[18] In this way, their work is relational not just to the themes they tackle, but also in the way they rely on each other's work as a whole.

I am indebted to Bourriaud's concept of relationality because it anticipates how TLS works in and toward an understanding of community building theater. Bourriaud states that the focus of conviviality is not so much on the spectacle itself, as Guy Debord had expressed, but more on the experience of "being together" as an affective tool that attracts the audience to other modes of thinking and feeling. The spectators, both as individuals and as a group, are engaged and encouraged to give back to the community. This is made clear when Bourriaud proclaims that "art is a state of encounter" and that artistic practice is "the creation of relationships between subjects."[19] He contends that the relationship between art and the political create a micro–utopian

community.[20] I should also note, however, that contrary to his theory, Claire Bishop expands the notion of how the "structure" of relational aesthetics works when "equating aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of relationships produced by the work of art."[21] Whereas Bourriaud relies on a "criteria of co-existence," Bishop disarms the idea of togetherness and community by questioning how the concept of a relational aesthetics can work in a truly democratic and "antagonistic" society where "relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased."[22] Bishop's questions about the "limits of society's ability to fully constitute itself" focus on what happens when these micro societies do not have something in common and a micro-utopia is not fulfilled.[23] I bring up Bishop's relational antagonism because, although it is true that the utopian ideal of constructing a community is central to how TLS conceptualizes their work, I am aware of the impossibilities and the dangers of falling into thinking that politically committed work can form modes of belonging for all. And Bishop makes the valid point that there is a danger of romanticizing any event as fulfilling something it is not. But I am also cognizant that what is at stake in much of the work of TLS is the need to make the audience mindful of issues that bring communities together and what divides them as well.

TLS members' approach to the idea of encounter not only takes into consideration the ethnographic work done ahead of time; they also pay close attention to ideas about how bodies relate to each other and how their own work progresses through carefully observing bodies react to different scenarios. In this sense, their "progression" encompasses many layers of trial and error, of closely relying on documents and objects to tell a story that will contain some authenticity and some literary and artistic creation. As documentarians, they record their findings, but as artistic theater practitioners, they explore the creative process of imagination. Thus, they work in an ambivalent space—both in the sense of applying ethnographic studies and creating a fictional work—as they acknowledge and dismantle the authority contained in a story or object and juxtapose that practice with social and artistic ones.

Although TLS members do not see their work as postdramatic, similarities cannot and should not be ignored. Lehmann discusses how the irruption of the real has taken the theater to postdramatic forms of expression, where the lines between artistic fiction and the authentic are blurred, creating a new type of documentary theater that is highly attractive to both artists and audiences, since it opens up the possibilities of understanding the blurred lines of creation. According to his own definition, "It's not the occurrence of anything 'real' as such but its *self-reflexive* use that characterizes the aesthetic of postdramatic theatre. This self-referentiality allows us to contemplate the value, the inner necessity and the significance of the extra-aesthetic in the aesthetic and thus the displacement of the concept of the latter."[24] Thus, there is a suspension of a clear distinction between reality and the spectatorial

event. As a result, when groups like TLS use self-reflexive mechanisms in their productions, their spectators are called to become less passive watchers. They instead engage in participatory performances that often force them to take charge or to reassess what they thought they knew. Again, this theater aesthetic blurs the boundaries between fiction and fact, spectator and actor that hundreds of years of theater have instilled in many of us, and instead theater retracts and raises questions when signs are no longer separated from their pragmatic embeddedness.

European postdramatic theater could be thought of as a post-Brechtian ideal to bring the *gestus* back, but instead of the political awakening Brecht stipulated, the "post-" in post-Brechtian explores the many aesthetic possibilities of doubting and questioning the political.[25] As Jorge Dubatti asserts, the "postdramatic theater" concept does not quite fit when speaking of theater in Argentina or elsewhere in Latin America.[26] Instead, Dubatti explores another ontological reading to understand what much of contemporary Latin American theater stages: a marginal and liminal sense tied to *poiesis*, the construction of something new through representation.[27] It is with this idea of the construction of a scene from the marginal or liminal that I believe Latin American theater diverges from the more hegemonic European theatrical discourse. As I indicated in the introduction of this book, the idea of collective creation, of analyzing the archive through objects, documents, and stories, was an important practice in the 1960s and '70s in Latin America. And despite the fact that there is truth in the need to see Latin American theater practitioners as different from their European counterparts and their model of the postdramatic, there is also clear evidence that what Lehmann—who has traveled to Latin America and participated in scholarly exchanges about this topic—has labeled "postdramatic," theater practitioners in Mexico and other countries in Latin America have experienced through a different vein. Their work combines new and innovative approaches to the theatrical with an exploration of the social relations and the affective sites of memory and creation that exist apart from or alongside the stage.

As a socially committed group and as "artivists," TLS centers its work on immersing itself in the topic and in the space, as Vargas did, for instance, by taking the bus from Iguala to Chicago. Some of their on-site residencies are months long, and others are more of a laboratory exploration in their own theatrical space. What remains central to their work, however, is the search to immerse themselves in a community by using theater as a tool to motivate, educate, and confront human rights violations as well as practices of oppression. Again, closely related to Boal's theories of the *teatro del oprimido*, where theater becomes the site of experimentation and possibilities, where voices regain power and where marginal bodies become visible, TLS intends to tap not just a political vein, but an affective relationship with what they create. As a group, they experience the stories they workshop together, and

they exploit many different possible angles to foster that same experience for their audiences. Hence, their work encompasses what Rancière has termed "emancipation," defined as "the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body."[28] It is not that the spectators themselves need to become actors in the Boalian sense; instead, it is about how they can perceive and understand with their own cultural background when confronted with new modes of spectatorship.

TLS employment of these theater mechanics makes us, the spectators, aware of different social, political, and artistic issues at stake in hybrid forms like new documentary theater. TLS is known for its technical approach to creation, using many video cameras to create a panoptic effect that records, repeats, and even distorts images right in front of the spectators' eyes, manipulating and interpreting both the document/archive that they utilize as well as the stories they want to tell. To achieve sophistication in both artistic aesthetics and technical savviness, TLS works with and relies on visual artists, digital technicians, graffiti artists, and musicians who together create beauty through visual and corporeal poetics that destabilize traditional approaches to dividing notions of the authentic, the fictional, and the creative as separate categories. And while their work seems sophisticated, their aesthetics explore a low-tech, hands-on approach to creating natural effects—for instance, in *Amarillo*, when they pierce a red heart multiple times with a lit cigarette and sand spills out, creating a stream of red and movement that is both stunning and technically simple (see fig. 7). Hence, they underscore the impact the visual can have in re-creating a sense of ritual and respect when addressing gruesome topics. As Richard Schechner has stated, "Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions."[29] TLS benefits from exploring the ritualistic value of their performances by adhering to a total sensory experience, where beauty, colors, music, and movement explore ways of relating to difficult topics. In fact, their work invites the emancipated spectator that Rancière imagines, where there is a need for a different type of theater, "a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by the very term is subjected to a different relationship . . . that of *drama*."[30] TLS aims to reveal these processes and thereby promulgate learning. They do this from their laboratory work in situ to their foundation of a theater laboratory called "Transversales," where they invite international artists to engage in conversations with local artists, to plays with less weight on acting and more emphasis on showing and documenting.[31] For Rancière, true theater means a return to action and the participation of the spectator (as opposed to the passive spectator), and his own understanding stems from what both Brecht and Artaud worked to dig out of the theater: presence and political action through movement and, in the case of Artaud, rituals. It is evident that for TLS ritual and action are at the forefront of their work.

Fig. 7. Antígona González. In Teatro Línea de Sombra's *Amarillo*. Teatro El Milagro, Mexico City, 2009. Photograph by Roberto Blenda.

The Real and the Threshold of Fiction

Argentine director Vivi Tellas has postulated that what is at stake when dealing with archives and documentary theater is the creation of the Minimal Threshold of Fiction (UMF; Unidad Mínima de Ficción), a type of expression that relates to the gray zone created when the authentic and the fictional confront each other. This UMF, in a sense, can be explored through the fragile space that we perceive when a nonprofessional actor, for instance, shows the audience their lives, collecting documentary evidence to build the story onstage, or when someone's life becomes, in a word, theatricalized. This fragile space appears when actual documents are introduced as theatrical props that make us see how fiction and documentary situate themselves at the same level in the aesthetics of the spectacle. In the specific case of TLS, its documentary practices have a strong social and political base. The gray zone they construct is through a constant intertextual relationship between literary pieces, witness reports, and at times autobiography. Unlike Tellas, who explores the everyday lives of regular people through their own storytelling, TLS brings fiction and ethnographic facts to the shared space of theatrical

experience and embodies it with professional actors. For them, documentary practice means exposing the audience to the harsh reality of those human lives labeled as other, immigrant, or marginal but at a distance, and often with humor, dance, and speculation.

Visual poetics and the search for beauty are at stake when TLS creates new work. With *Amarillo*, TLS questioned their own hybrid motives as artist-activists by forcing themselves to go beyond being theater practitioners who staged regular plays, to being political artists who could visually imagine other forms of creation. According to Jorge Vargas, their art was highly influenced by the intersection of visual artists like Alfadir Luna and scholars who work closely with them.[32] Alfadir Luna is a well-known Mexican visual artist whose own trajectory emphasizes the relation between artist and audiences by focusing on affective stimuli. Since 2006, his installations have been found in public markets as well as more traditional museum settings. Through these collaborations, TLS began rethinking and recrafting the idea of authenticity that the document bears. Their influences, both as visual artists and thinkers, pushed members of TLS to view the political as well as visible/invisible lines inherent in dealing with issues of human rights and bringing those issues to their audiences.[33] In much the same way that Tellas uses her UMF concept, Luna explores how liminal actions become encoded with symbolic value and thus create a new poetic language. Luna works in the liminal space between affect and enunciation:

> To me, the artwork comes to be in that liminal field between enunciation and action, as a space in which if we stop for a second, we would be able to feel exactly where the figure of speech is employed to say that which did not exist until this symbolic language was created. On the other hand, there is the experience, the performance, the visual attractiveness and plasticity of the piece. Also, in this we can see the artwork taking form. But, for me, what really matters is to explore the space between the two of them, which is an open field and allows us to imagine and propose other possibilities. It not only raises the notion of living something as if it were already happening, as a world that has just appeared, but suddenly this field loses all correspondence with its surroundings, making us wonder why this is happening, why here? where does this belong? what is this?[34]

One of Luna's installations, *El hombre de maíz* (*Maize Man*, 2008; see fig. 8), shows the connectivity between people and art, between merchants and commerce, and between ritualistic forms and the present.[35] Its title is a clear reference to the 1949 novel *Hombres de maíz* by Guatemalan Nobel Prize–winning author Miguel Ángel Asturias, which itself recalls the Mayan myth recounted in the *Popol Vuh*. Luna's *El hombre de maíz* describes the

Fig. 8. Alfadir Luna, *Hombre de maíz*. Installation in Mexico City, 2008. Photograph by Brenda Anayatzin Ortiz Guadarrama.

indigenous world as a humanlike sculpture made in three parts: head, torso, and extremities. Ten different merchants are given the chance to glue seeds and grains to cover the whole body. Seven days before a procession that connects all the markets and merchants, the sculpture gets dismembered, and each of the ten merchants cares for their respective piece. On the day of the procession, the sculpture gets re-membered and unified in a celebration. Audience members take part in this project to experience community and the essence of being together. As Luna suggests, the action of coming together and of gluing together different extremities of this sculpture creates a living object in the present.

Bourriaud speaks of the "community effect in contemporary art" that propels a "political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue" while foregrounding the human interaction and the "collective elaboration of meaning."[36] The focus on human relations and the collaboration of many to create art reinforces the idea that art is political and the political can be viewed through art. Luna's idea of coming together by bringing a merchant community together resembles how TLS also envisions their work. For these artists, conviviality, the idea of closeness and being together, reinvigorates the performative nature of the ritual. It is not just the fact that the audience becomes more participatory, which in a sense it does; it is also about the human and personal attribute of making art and how artists expose their work as a process.

Process, immersion, research, and participation are key not only in conceiving new theatrical works, but also in thinking how human rights are linked to the political and to the convivial. Teatro Línea de Sombra relies on a variety of avenues for telling a story and ways to relate to their audiences as well as to understand the people and communities within these stories. In what follows, I will analyze two specific examples of TLS's work, *Amarillo* and *Baños Roma*, as well as the methodology operating in the collaborative site-specific installation of *El puro lugar*.[37] These works examine the real through the ambiguous space of an archive while at the same time exploring historical evidence related to the present. TLS's approach to documentary aesthetics is not just another search for something novel; it is, instead, a way for the company to broach discussions about immigration, human rights, and their own overall social commitment.

Amarillo and the Route of the Desert

The title of TLS's play draws from Amarillo, the name of a town in Texas, with a history of interconnected train tracks and meatpacking plants that made this city a desirable destination for migrants from Mexico and, more recently, Central America. According to U.S. State Department data for Texas, in 2016 roughly 7,800 immigrants arrived in that state alone. Amarillo has become Texas's leading safe haven for those crossing into the United States, accepting nearly four hundred refugees in 2016—the most per capita of any city in Texas.[38] The play *Amarillo* marked a change in TLS as they began focusing on contemporary social and political issues through documentary theater techniques. Until *Amarillo*, the group had concentrated on staging plays written by other playwrights. However, their shift to a more collaborative and political venue catalyzed new work and the group as one of the leading politically committed forces in contemporary Latin American theater. Thus, their process became geared toward a laboratory workshop that explored documents, testimony, and staging from their own immersion in border towns as well as through experimentation with theatrical forms and digital cameras.

Amarillo is, in simple terms, a play that exposes a migrant's journey from somewhere in Mexico to Amarillo, Texas. The perils of the border-crossing journey are recorded through a multimedia performance via a documentary technique (letters, film, and clothing) that touches on issues of cultural identity, human suffering, and human rights. And while the play has traveled to many different international festivals, TLS stages *Amarillo* to bring awareness of the dangers of the journey of border crossing into the different migrant shelters (*albergues*). More recently, in January 2017, as part of TLS's own project "Amarillo on the Migrant Route," the group took *Amarillo* to Saltillo, Mexico, one of the many shelters for migrants seeking to cross into the United States. There they staged *Amarillo* for hundreds of people, many of

Fig. 9. A "chapel" built by TLS members in Altar, Sonora, Mexico, at the shelter Centro de Ayuda al Migrante y al Necesitado CCAMYN, 2017. Photograph by Alicia Laguna.

whom were migrants making the journey across the border. Together with talk-backs and community work (they donated a bread oven and brought in a baker to teach them how to make bread with more natural ingredients), the group used the production to foment education about the journey, its possible perils, and what the migrants can expect in the desert. A year later, the troupe traveled to Altar and Caborca, two border towns about twenty miles apart on the Mexican side, to stage *Amarillo* in Caborca and to conduct community work in Altar.[39] Known at one time as "a migrant oasis," Altar has become both a hub as well as a trap for thousands of migrants seeking refuge before crossing the border through the Arizona desert. As organized crime has taken over, the city has become what reporters call "a high stakes gamble."[40]

TLS pushed for solidarity and togetherness, reigniting how theatrical interventions might speak to audiences in dire situations. Their community-focused work ethic motivated TLS to build a simple place where migrants could meet: a shelter baptized as a chapel by Father Cipriano, the priest overseeing it (see fig. 9). This construction is part of their work with the Centro

Comunitario de Atención al Migrante y Necesitado (Community Center for Attention to Migrants in Need), a free shelter for migrants in Altar, Sonora, run by the local Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, founded in 2000. As the matron of all border crossers, the Virgen de Guadalupe holds an important if not key space in the configuration of the border town. Her image can be found everywhere: tattoos, cups, posters, pillows, and so on. Historically, "she has symbolized the power to overcome barriers, from Mexican Revolutionaries to Chicana feminists."[41] As Luis D. León suggests, "A borderlands or mestiza consciousness . . . nurtures and becomes the birth place of the poetic impulse in religious practice throughout the Mexican Americans and beyond."[42] Consequently, her presence becomes ubiquitous, not in the strongest Catholic sense, but as a liberating figure who gives authority and power to those in need.[43]

The shelter's main objective is to assist migrants both crossing the border north and returning from their travels in the United States and looking for ways to go back to their lives back in Mexico or Central America. Although the center offered the migrants beds, showers, meals (breakfast and dinner), medical attention, human rights education, and general orientation, it lacked a chapel. TLS's commitment to the community, the migrants, and the community center plays a key factor in their artistic and human rights work. In this case, their intervention consisted of two separate projects: building "the chapel" and funding a permanent paid position for the administrator and the cleaning person, as well as a printed book with memories of the community center.[44] Through the construction of the "chapel," designed by TLS member Eduardo Bernal and visual artist Alfadir Luna, a strong borderland connection to ritual, spiritualism, and hope took center stage. Migrants who risk their lives to find a better chance on the other side cling to whatever rituals they can hold onto, and a "chapel" in Altar can be the last place of comfort before their journey.

The border town, whose agricultural economy was displaced by a mercantile one with "border crossing" merchandise, such as slippers that leave no footprints, water jugs, and backpacks, is now seeing a decrease in its business and rapidly becoming a ghost town. While the citizens of Caborca and Altar have an ambiguous relationship to migrants—they do not really want them there, but at the same time they depend on their crossings for their own livelihood—their town is now also ravaged by criminal gangs run by the narco-traffickers. Thus, fewer and fewer migrants cross the border through Altar, and the city has become a gruesome and dangerous place. According to border scholar Jason de León, since the U.S. government's Prevention through Deterrence policy was established in the 1990s, migrant crossings have been consciously rerouted through the desert and other dangerous areas, exponentially increasing the number of migrant deaths. This retrafficking "set the stage for the desert to become the new 'victimizer' of border transgressors."[45] It is striking to understand how the implementation of this

policy "also illustrates the cunning way that nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim."[46] Thus, the desert becomes the enforcer, and the terrain essentially transforms itself into a grave for many migrants. The desert also presents a new understanding of how to deal with immigration: now the Border Patrol can absolve itself of any blame for accidents and deaths and instead grants the desert the role of actant; agency is now shifted onto the natural elements.[47] Migrants, then, are mere pawns in a game of hide-and-seek, where as long as other border cities do not see migrants crossing, then the problem lies somewhere else: the highly dangerous and punishing desert. Altar, a city that borders the Sonoran Desert, becomes the last refuge for many seeking to cross. TLS's intersectionality between art and social commitment exposes a deeper understanding of the border, the journey, and the perils that the natural setting of the desert may bring to any human who tries to cross it—especially as migrants are dehumanized in the political and geographical space of the Sonoran Desert.

The dry, bare space of the desert transited by many migrants as the Goliath to be conquered instead turns out to be a potential stage for their own death. Gloria Anzaldúa has argued that "a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants."[48] It is precisely this contentious space encapsulating the anxiety and the misgivings of a town that is in between, or, in Anzaldúa's words, a place "where the third world grates against the first and bleeds."[49] But the strain in this town is created not only by the ambiguous relationship between the inhabitants of Altar and Caborca vis-à-vis the migrants, but also by a powerful, ever expanding criminal group that has made these towns their base for drug trafficking. The border is also an open wound, or, in Giorgio Agamben's words, "a state of exception in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law" that "marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference."[50] In more recent studies, Sayak Valencia examines the (in)visibility of bodies on the Mexico-U.S. border. Referencing to the title of her book, *Gore Capitalism*, she signals that bodies become "targets of necropolitics," as they are part of what she sees as a "critical commodity, since this is what gore capitalism advertises."[51] As such, she posits that "there is a hyper-corporalization and a hyper-valorization applied to the body," and the market has made a profit off this commodity.[52]

There is an emptiness the desert leaves behind through the migrants' journeys that we never know about, or that we might only hear if a body is ever found. Giving voice to these unseen migrants has been a key element of TLS's artistic and community work. Through the design of a "memory book," Luna collects migrant narratives, memories, pictures, and interviews

to create a depository of the lives of so many that go unnoticed. This book serves as an artistic manifestation of witnessing, bringing more information to the community, the migrants, and those interested in learning about the dangers of border crossing. Luna's work consists of a participatory event in which the community and TLS elaborate a visible and tangible production of memory by exploring what they want to keep in the book. Through this event, they bring forth the shelter's encoded memory via the visual arts. The book transmits knowledge and a connection to the community as a collective memory taken from the refugees that pass through the shelter. The participatory nature of this project exposes the agency and empathy of those involved in the center and through their own lived experiences a new narrative is formed. Thus, this memory book combines the voices of those migrants who have gone by the shelter and serves to tell something about the ephemeral transition of their lives.[53]

Can You See Me? Do You Really See Me?

Staged for the first time in 2009, *Amarillo* has now been performed in national and international festivals, and TLS has been invited to attend multiple premiere theater festivals.[54] As a result, the piece has also gained recognition for its production quality and longevity, although it has barely been studied by scholars. Centered on documentary evidence gathered from fragments of films provided by the Centro de Documentación de Voces contra el Silencio (Documentary Center for Voices against the Silence), an open and free platform to access documentary film about human rights atrocities in Latin America, TLS begins the performance by introducing audiences to their laboratory stage.[55] The voices and images from the films are projected while members of the troupe prepare their working tables at the sides of the stage by arranging photographs, cameras, clothing, and other documentary props. Influenced by Etienne Decroux and his methodology with the corporeal mime, director Jorge Vargas makes the body the center of expression. Similar to Jerzy Grotowski and his approach to "poor theater," the props are few and the actors' ferocious movement is key.[56] However, Vargas's exploration of the props or objects goes even further than that of Grotowski and Decroux. His own development of a constant synergy between objects and actors, what he has called the "intensively live object" or the "raw object" conveys a new language to relate to how bodies communicate onstage. Thus, it is not just the actor's body or the energy of the object that he centers on; rather, it is the symbiotic relationship between the two that makes his work compelling. This is an important note, because according to Vargas, his actors do not act; they "actuate" (*actoran*). In other words, bodies speak onstage through movements and pauses, accentuating their presence and their powerful relationship they build with objects onstage.

Fig. 10. Raúl Mendoza (projected on the screen) in TLS's *Amarillo*. Berlin Gastspiel Studio-FIND Festival, 2019. Photograph by Gianmarco Bresadola.

While bodies are central to how they relate to objects, spatial setting conveys the surroundings necessary for the extra surfaces carried by makeup, lights, costumes, what Grotowski characterizes as the *via negativa*. Poor theater is a technique to use the actor's body and craft as the central method onstage. He explains that "the acceptance of the poverty of theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form."[57] However, beyond Grotowski's assertions, TLS understands that each physical action is born from a real stimulus, where the drain on the body is intensified by the interaction between the space and the object by the energy that is shared. Thus, the physicality in *Amarillo* centers on the highly affective ways of driving movement: we see the actor running, crushing his body against the wall, we sense his desperation, and we hear the eerie sounds coming from the rancher. As the pace quickens, we listen to the core questions from those marginalized voices: "Who am I?" the Everyman-like actor asks, which he answers over and over: "I am nobody." "Who do you look at if I am no one?" "No one. My name is Juan, Pedro, Fernando, Manuel, Isabel . . ." (see fig. 10).[58]

The affective role of this plea compounds Judith Butler's weighty questions about whose lives count as human and whose lives are invisible to society: "Who, in her own words, counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And what makes for a grievable life?"[59] In a visceral and almost explosive

fashion, the character's questions suggest hesitation at the core of issues surrounding the meaning of humanity and what it means to be invisible. In her illuminating research on affect, Lauren Berlant affirms that our learning to be optimistic can be devastated by cruelty and the failure to attain it. She studies how the optimistic attachment to something we may want—say, upward mobility, or in this case a fair immigration process—becomes a frayed fantasy. This cruel optimism gives way to "the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine. Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived."[60] Affect studies help us rethink how artists' relationship to theatrical audiences can have a more profound and direct impact on the idea of togetherness, or what Berlant terms the "affective rhythms of survival."[61]

Berlant defines optimism as "not a map of pathology but a social relation involving attachments that organize the present. . . . Optimism is a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently."[62] Berlant's approach to the affective is instructive because time and again Latin American theater and visual culture artists, such as TLS, demonstrate a continuous search for beauty, even in the darkest of times and spaces. They confront social events and situations from a distance, allowing themselves and us a way out, through art and the construction of beauty. But beyond what one might understand about audience response, what is central here is the way artists utilize the real and documentary frameworks as multisensorial practices that resemble our agitated lives. Multisensorial practices are also helpful for TLS when thinking about feelings and the plural perspectives on which they rely. This strategy of using affect and artistic creation to bring a sense of beauty to these stories can have different outcomes. On the one hand, theater and art make the stories bearable and, in a sense, optimistic.[63] On the other, aestheticizing violence and suffering trivializes the experience of the sufferer. It is perhaps in their methodology to documenting the lives of the invisible "others" that TLS is careful not to make a spectacle of the suffering.

In *Amarillo*, the Everyman is the only interpreter with a certain protagonist function, while the throat-singing rancher wanders around and four other women exchange roles as stage scenographers, camerawomen, dancers, and letter readers. In a desert that is sometimes enchanting and at other times deadly, it also becomes an allegorical space in nature. For instance, many migrant stories are embodied in this Everyman who takes us on a visually attractive journey through this desertscape with tragic overtones that haunt every story. Onstage, actors employ sandbags that hang from the ceiling, while the water from jugs is illuminated in an attractive, dreamy, aquatic blue, shimmering and reflecting on the floor. Throughout the play, these natural elements mark nature's persistent threat, pushing the multisensorial forward by hearing water, seeing the sand spilling out of the bags, and imagining the

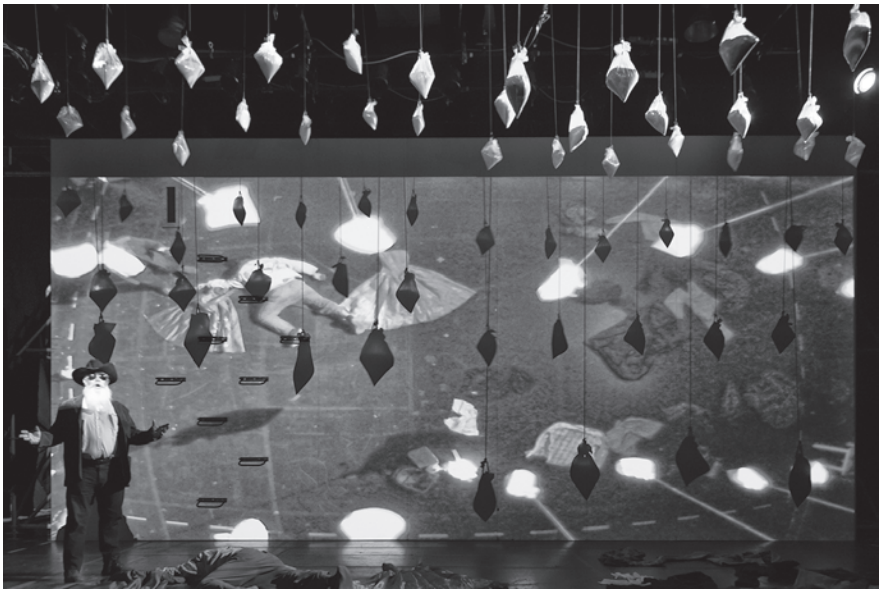

Fig. 11. Jesús Cuevas in TLS's *Amarillo*. Berlin Gastspiel Studio-FIND Festival, 2019. Photograph by Gianmarco Bresadola.

ocean close by, even in a desert. The ongoing Mongolian-like throat singing together with the fluidity of the falling sand and the water make *Amarillo* a play that encompasses the act of rituals while the desert becomes beautiful, the lives of "others" become, in a sense, visible. Actors search for answers while trying to climb up the wall or engaging in lonely solo dances, exposing the real threat and desolation of this journey. The multisensorial is borne out through the vivid, colorful dresses that evoke Mexican quinceañeras, and the train whistle blowing as "La Bestia" (the train on which many Central Americans risk their lives by climbing aboard as cargo to be transported through Mexico) brings to light an omnipresent danger that the audience can both see and hear in the documentary. The screen displays the *patronas* (volunteer women who hand food to the many migrants riding atop these freight trains), while sounds of sand and water fill the enchanting space.[64] There is certainly a poetic beauty in the representation of how this play underscores the concept of hope and optimism. The use of natural objects like water and sand highlighted by hues of blue and yellow/orange colors creates an inviting atmosphere, one where, in Jill Dolan's words, "there is the possibility of a better future that can be claimed and captured in performance."[65] Not everything is hopeful and not everything we see is optimistic, but the creation of beauty from objects that usually have a different semiotic value (the lack of water, the agony of sand) makes this space enchanting, while still exposing the tragic overtones. (see fig. 11).

The poetic connections and relations that director Vargas and his team explore bring a human aspect to this multimedia play. Once the protagonist finally succumbs to the deadly desert, the women who remain as witnesses to his passing begin to speak using words from Harold Pinter's poem "Death," a poem he read as part of his 2005 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature:

> Where was the dead body found?
> Who found the dead body?
> Was the dead body dead when found?
> How was the dead body found?
> Who was the dead body?
> Who was the father or daughter or brother
> Or uncle or sister or mother or son
> Of the dead and abandoned body?
> Was the body dead when abandoned?
> Was the body abandoned?
> By whom had it been abandoned?
> Was the dead body naked or dressed for a journey?
> What made you declare the dead body dead?
> Did you declare the dead body dead?
> How well did you know the dead body?
> How did you know the dead body was dead?
> Did you wash the dead body?
> Did you close both its eyes?
> Did you bury the body?
> Did you leave it abandoned?
> Did you kiss the dead body?[66]

When Pinter read this poem, accepting his Nobel Prize, he did so within the context of twentieth-century world atrocities committed by the United States and Britain during interventions in different international affairs. Paying close attention to Latin American countries that suffered dictatorships sponsored by the U.S. government, his speech proclaims the lack of moral sensibility with regard to human life. In the same vein, TLS uses fragments of this poem as poetic ritual in a Greek chorus fashion, exposing what happens in many deaths that go unnoticed. With clear references to the protagonist's words, where the Everyman character openly questions if we, the audience, see him, if we, the audience, know his name, *Amarillo* relates Pinter's poem to the ongoing tension between lives that matter and lives that are invisible to others. Emphasizing this tension, and in a theatrical manner, the female actors look at the audience pointedly as they walk around, and as they approach the proscenium, they keep asking, "Who was the body?," "Have you seen the body?," "Was the dead body found"?[67] This scene mirrors the opening act

of the play, where the Everyman actor watches the spectators as they enter the stage, watching us watching him. This time, though, the questions are a direct punch aimed at the audience, making us hear those words, making us see the situation.

In its essence, *Amarillo* is a performance of failure to cross the border; however, it is a new way of telling through documentary means (testimonies on video, photographs, letters, poems, and blogs) but also through the creation of a dramatic story arc that is never fully realized. There are no characters, not even a story of one person, nor even a particular event. No one actually makes it to the other side of the wall at the back of the stage. What we find are endless numbers of truncated stories, fragments, and pointless deaths, retold through a visual poetics. This combination of unfinished documentary and narrative arcs makes this play more than a political statement on immigration rights. Instead, it becomes a way to show how art and the aesthetic hope of creation and its social relation might stimulate us to understand one another, to see each other, to make the cruelty of life bearable, to be affected, in a way, by optimism.

TLS relies on its artistic and digital methods to seek other ways of communicating information about border crossing, trauma, and accidental deaths. Through the combination of sounds of water, sand, and the ambiguous figure of the throat singer, the last scene explodes with an artistic collage of fused images that play with our perception of colors (yellow, blue, orange, green) and shapes. Bodies become shortened and elongated shadows, water jugs are a beam of blue light that seems to invite us with the hope of life. In a darkened space, the use of only a few of these colors and shadows encourage the audience to imagine other ways of visualizing the border. In this darkened room, the back screen turns a bluish green with yellow stains, resembling a painting by Jackson Pollock. With the help of digital and graffiti artists, digital distortions manipulate what cameras on the ceiling record, combining images in such a way that the landscape becomes fluid, welcoming, yet extremely abstract and imaginary. Ultimately, images are bright, colorful, and attractive, yet the depiction of death hangs subliminally in this collage because the body of the Everyman lies at center stage. While the collage is not always the same, digital artists bring out different possibilities by playing with photographs, paintings, and visual distortions.

Since 2012, the company has incorporated photographs from Cadillac Ranch, suggesting a cemetery-like space. Cadillac Ranch is a public art installation in Amarillo, Texas, created in 1974 by Ant Farm visual artists Chip Lord, Hudson Marquez, and Doug Michels. It consists of ten mid-twentieth-century Cadillacs half-buried in the ground, nose-first, in angular fashion. The automotive relics stand in the middle of an open field, visible from the highway and approachable by car. Today, they continue to evolve as an artistic center even though they are stationary, because graffiti is allowed on the cars, and anybody can leave their imprint on them. The image of the Cadillac

Ranch, then, becomes part of TLS's ensemble of colors, patterns, and shapes, and they distort photographs of the buried Cadillacs, which are transformed into circular headstones. This distorted collage of a tombstone is accompanied by a beautiful ritualistic sound. The cemetery-like space becomes even more emphasized when the throat singer gives the audience his last salute while sand resonates as it falls from the many bags that hang above the stage. Amid this eerie beauty, the body of the dead migrant lies on the stage, darkened by shadows. Through this culminating scene, visual and digital forms of display combine with aural stimuli to ritualize the death of those unnamed and unclaimed immigrants who still lie in the desert and to pay them respect.

It is noteworthy to emphasize that this play has been performed since 2009, with the same crew. Even as actors physically push their bodies to extremes moving, jumping, dancing, running, and throwing themselves against the back wall, they remain committed to this project and to being and staying together. As a play that has become a symbolic artistic product of a story about immigration, *Amarillo* is TLS's central and most prolifically produced work. Thus, when compared to other documentary plays discussed in this book, it becomes the most polished and visually elegant example. In a variety of personal interviews, both actors and producers of *Amarillo* have made a point about understanding the important messages that it fosters and how they are now more interested in taking *Amarillo* to the migrant routes as a production that creates connections and interrelations. Raúl Mendoza, the main actor in *Amarillo*, made clear that at one point, this play had lost its meaning for him after seeing that the migrant cause had been worsened by the Trump administration's politics. While he considered leaving the troupe because of personal issues with this topic, Mendoza decided to return to his role once TLS made more of a political and social commitment to migrant needs and issues. And although his body aches from the physical demands of this play, where he constantly throws himself against the wall with fruitless effects, he sees it as his own embodied contribution to a much-needed debate on the rights of migrants.[68]

Baños Roma and the Depths of Ciudad Juárez

If with *Amarillo*, TLS focuses their attention on the migrants' journey, *Baños Roma* explores the current ghostly state of the border town of Ciudad Juárez, a center of unresolved femicides and drug traffickers.[69] Since the early 1990s, thousands of women have been kidnapped, tortured, raped, and/or killed in Ciudad Juárez and the surrounding areas. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, in 2016 alone, 2,813 women in Mexico were murdered, the highest number in the last twenty-seven years. In 2002, the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights wrote a special report about the murders in Ciudad Juárez, stating that two hundred women had been

brutally killed since 1993 and more than five hundred other women had disappeared without a trace. Their study concluded that the majority of the victims were *maquila* (factory) workers who had to take buses late at night or in the early hours of the morning, making them vulnerable prey. This investigation spurred over five thousand people to sign a petition stating that "since 1993 women who live in Ciudad Juárez are afraid. Afraid of going out on the streets and walking back and forth to work. Fear at ages 10, 13, 15 or 20; it doesn't matter if they are girls or women."[70] Some bodies have been recovered, with marks of rape, mutilation, and torture. Others have never been found. Marcela Lagarde, former Mexican government representative and chair of the Special Commission on Femicide (created in 2004 to address murders of women in Cuidad Juárez), highlights femicide as a genocide and a crime of the state. Influenced by theorist Diana Russell, who coined the term "femicide" through a feminist lens, as to conceptualize gender violence through power relations, Lagarde contributes to the term "femicide," defining it as

> a minimal visible part of violence against women and girls, and it occurs as the culmination of a situation characterized by a systematic and repetitive violation of human rights against women. The common denominator is their gender: women and girls are cruelly violated solely because they are women.
>
> [una ínfima parte visible de la violencia contra niñas y mujeres, sucede como culminación de una situación caracterizada por la violación reiterada y sistemática de los derechos humanos de las mujeres. Su común denominador es el género: niñas y mujeres son violentadas con crueldad por el solo hecho de ser mujeres.][71]

As a legal term, "femicide" exposes the marginal status as part of an oppressed gender. According to sociologist Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, the subaltern state of these *fronteriza* women and girls allows to become victimized through a patriarchal culture that perpetuates a state of impunity and illegality.[72] Sergio González Rodríguez links what he calls "femicide machine" to the U.S. militarization of the border and the constant drug wars between cartels. He defines the term as "an apparatus that didn't just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls but developed the institution that guaranteed impunity for those crimes and even legalized them."[73]

To compound these femicides, in 2006, then president Felipe Calderón, headed one of the strongest fights against the drug lords, which fomented an all-out war between the state and the narcos. Ciudad Juárez, the headquarters for some of the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels became a city at war. So, whereas we know that most women killed in Juárez worked in the *maquilas*, without a family to protect them from assassins, it is difficult to know whether the

narcos were responsible for some, any, or all of their deaths. What is known is that many women have disappeared, and that violence and crime have increased because of the drug trafficking. As a result, Ciudad Juárez became a ghost town. Thousands of families fled the town fearing violence, abandoning the city as their last resort, and criminals made their way into the city. In her illuminating study, Patricia Ybarra sees the long-lasting neoliberal practices to the ongoing femicide as a "condition with a profound genealogy and a durational obstinacy that refuses to end."[74] While she explores work done by Latinx theater practitioners that for the most part evade documentary practices and instead choose more nonrealistic plays, she analyzes how artists employ misogyny as a provocative tool onstage.

TLS was first attracted to a 2009 newspaper story written by Juan Manuel Vázquez for Mexican daily newspaper *La Jornada*. Vázquez interviewed Cuban Mexican boxer José Angel Mantequilla Nápoles, now deceased, about his life, his gym for teenagers named Baños Roma, and what it was like to live in the gruesome state of Ciudad Juárez.[75] Captivated by his life story and by the fact that one of their actors was a former boxer, TLS decided to travel to this border city. As a group they spent six weeks researching and documenting stories in Ciudad Juárez, as well as spending hours interviewing Mantequilla Nápoles. In a similar fashion as they did with constructing a chapel in Altar, TLS's research for this play involved a social aspect. To theatricalize Mantequilla Nápoles's story, they felt they needed to give back by renovating his gym (which was in utter ruins at the time). They also created a small booklet titled *Non Negotiable*, more like a fanzine, an amateur publication, with pictures from Mantequilla's life as a boxer as well as a compilation of the before-and-after pictures of the renovated gym. This booklet also serves to record and document their research and social intervention. Mantequilla Nápoles, who suffered from dementia and had long memory lapses, is himself a ghostly figure that fades in and out of different video fragments that TLS uses to frame the performance. Thus, his presence takes on allegorical overtones of what Ciudad Juárez represents today, an absent, empty city that cannot remember its own past and identity. When the audience enters the theater, we see a graffiti artist erasing Mantequilla Nápoles's face with white paint. His face fades away in front of us while the artist calmly coats the back wall with white paint. Employing their laboratory technique, actors Alicia Laguna and Zuadd Atala use live cameras to record, project videos on screens, and physically move props while they tell us the "true" story of Mantequilla Nápoles's life.

Featuring live music, three working tables, boxing bags, five actors, and one live musician, *Baños Roma* explores the theatricality and performativity in telling this retired boxer's story, stating from the beginning that "when a story is retold, it is already altered."[76] Although the group relies on authentic documentary material, this evidence does not guarantee veracity, as the quote suggests. Moreover, what appears to be a first-person narration of

documentary material, such as "These are the shoes that Mantequilla's wife gave me" or "This is the letter that Mantequilla received," is destabilized by the artist-actors as they toggle between fact and fiction. As a result, this strategy of putting fact and fiction into tension destabilizes our faith in the archive, making the document a piece of evidence that becomes instead a questionable prop.[77] Mantequilla's loneliness is palpable when on the video screen he states, "I don't exist anymore," while a chronology of his life and the successes of his career are superimposed with photos, graphics, and statistics.[78] The group focuses on his well-known 1974 fight with Argentine boxer Carlos Monzón. Under the auspices of French actor Alain Delon, Monzón and Matequilla Nápoles met for a historic and highly anticipated fight. This encounter caught the attention of Julio Cortázar, who wrote a short story titled "La noche de Mantequilla," in which the fight takes place in the context of disappearances that were occurring in the 1970s in Argentina under the military repression. The explicit intertextuality of Mantequilla's life, as it is shown through photos, video, and performance onstage, is augmented by Cortázar's own literary intertext, written about another time and space. Fact and fiction intermingle as TLS stages a story within a story within a story.

The heft of this play can be seen in the combination of testimony acquired during their residency, their use of intertextual literary pieces like Cortázar's short story, fragments of Miguel Delgado's film *Santo y Mantequilla Nápoles en la venganza de la llorona* (*Santo and Mantequilla Nápoles in the Revenge of the Crying Woman*, 1974), as well as Argentine Spanish theater artist Rodrigo García's take on a boxer's life in his play *Prometeo* (*Prometheus*, 1984), and Myrna Pastrana's testimonial short novel *Cuando las banquetas fueron nuestras* (*When the Sidewalks Were Ours*, 2011), about the current violent state of Ciudad Juárez. The intertextual fusion of these literary and visual pieces conveys the imagination and glorious past of both a boxer and a once flourishing city like Ciudad Juárez. It also confronts the current issues of desperation and desolation in that city. *Baños Roma*, then, is a way to connect ideas, facts, and fiction about a city surrounded by violence. Alicia Laguna states that "all of a sudden, to us everything seemed to have a similarity, an affinity with the ex-champion's city. Paris, Ciudad Juárez, the ex-champion, Ciudad Juárez, Baños Roma" (De pronto, todo nos pareció que había una semejanza, una similitud con la ciudad del ex campeón. París, Ciudad Juárez; el ex campeón, Ciudad Juárez; Baños Roma).[79] There is an obvious globalized aspect to this exposure of Ciudad Juárez, where boxing, Paris, and literature come together to tell another story, one, perhaps, of a more humane and successful past. Consequently, this entangled approach to scripting Mantequilla Nápoles's life shows how documentation and creation can blur. And while the main narrative arc seems to focus on reconstructing the events of Mantequilla Nápoles's life and boxing career, Ciudad Juárez becomes a central character as well.

The (In)Visibility of Bodies

In documentary theater practices, autobiographies and staged biographies abound. TLS relies less from using witnesses as interpreters, or people telling their own life stories, as other playwrights and theater groups have done. However, the autobiographical mode is brought in through the interviews conducted with Mantequilla Nápoles that we hear through letters and we see through video fragments on the screen, as well as a photograph that actor-boxer Jorge León found of his own young mother with Mantequilla Nápoles. The real-life connection to this famous boxer is yet another technique to documenting lives onstage. The same newspaper clip written by Juan Manuel Vázquez for *La Jornada* in 2009 is mentioned by actors on the stage as a catalyst for their work. In this news story, his life, his fight against Argentine boxer Carlos Monzón in Paris and the imminent decay of Ciudad Juárez were tied together, linking Paris to Ciudad Juárez, and linking Mantequilla Nápoles to his own ghostly memories of himself and of the city where he used to live. Mantequilla Nápoles's portrayal of himself as a boxer who helps Santo, the *lucha-libre* style (freestyle) masked Mexican hero who ends the curse that La Llorona has placed on the Mexican people, marks his popular cultural appeal in the 1970s. While the audience can see fragments of this film, a sign stating "Heroes are needed here" adds a haunting image to the situation being portrayed. The image of boxing, then, becomes a frame for the film's actors. We see this frame in fragments of Mantequilla Nápoles's life and fights, and also on the physical stage, through an increase in the number of punching bags that populate the stage, as well as scales that constantly carry and record the weight of the boxer while a computer screen marks the time each round lasts. At the same time, songs by Johnny Cash (such as "The Beast in Me") played and adapted by musician and saxophonist Jesús Cuevas contribute a sonic representation of the effect of physical violence on a human body.[80] Interestingly, the visual poetics of this play use the perpetual presence of the boxing bags in a way that makes this violence visible and accepted; in the meantime, the "invisible" violence against women goes unnoticed. There is constant tension between recounting Mantequilla Nápoles's boxing days and revealing Ciudad Juárez's spiral into violence. In a first-person narration, actors come forward as witnesses to offer their own perceptions about the danger they experienced during their residency (being constantly questioned by the police, being followed by police cars and by people driving or walking behind them). The retelling of their own stories is framed by the addition of boxing bags around them, augmenting the proliferation of violence. These bags hanging lifelessly onstage, symbolizing bodies, invite further interpretation. As the performance progresses, images of boxing become darker and more violent.

Documenting the life of a once successful boxer whose own body shows the aches of age and fighting brings to light the dark impact boxing can

have on a person. However, his story also serves to explore a life of boxing portrayed as "accepted violence onstage," whereas violence against female bodies goes unmarked, unprocessed. The life of the boxer is narrated through the exploration of what the body can and cannot sustain in the ring. With a clear intertextual addition from García's play *Prometeo*, the actors relate the world of boxing through weight and characteristics. With a rhythmic sequence, they toss around scales, and they repeat how their weight designates them into each category: "Light Flyweight, up to 106 pounds; Flyweight, up to 112 pounds; Bantamweight, up to 119 pounds," to which another actor adds "In boxing, a man is just a body. For fight promoters the man is just a body. The boxer isn't a man; he is his weight class: welter weight, straw weight, full weight, light weight" (Para el boxeo el hombre es un cuerpo. Para los promotores de combates entre hombres, el hombre es un cuerpo. El boxeador no es un hombre, es un wélter, un paja, un peso completo, un peso ligero).[81] Although *Baños Roma* opens up an intertextual dialogue with García's play, it does not delve into the world of the boxer himself. Instead, the world of boxing becomes mixed and blurred through the biographical lens of Mantequilla Nápoles's story. By viscerally focusing on the idea of the body, its weight, and the mere onstage presence of scales, the group calls for the actual essence of a body to take center stage. Thus, the constant repetition of the boxer's weight and class exposes a system of how bodies are seen and labeled in the official world of boxing, contrasting it with the bodies of women, which seem to evaporate, as they are given little if any weight.

The weight of bodies relates to more than just boxing. In a highly aesthetic way, TLS makes a point about how bodies can perpetuate and instigate heavy violence, especially that of gender violence directed toward women. One scene centers on how two males tell jokes, share beers with the audience, and make audience members laugh through mundane sports stories. Simultaneously, a woman dances in the distance. After the laughter dies down, they watch her and encourage each other to "go dance with her."[82] As soon as one of them approaches her to dance, the scene quickly changes to grotesque, unwanted movements, and the violent rhythms end with her body on the floor. Although their symbolic violent movements never become actual violence and are instead framed as a dance, in the end the female body lies heavily breathing, suggesting and amplifying both distance and proximity to fact and fiction. A spotlight moved on a pulley by one of the actors is lowered and focuses attention on her body while the two men smoke and watch her closely without shame. Two, maybe three minutes transpire between the laughter and this last scene. A camera zooms in to capture her shoe, and multiple screens show various fragments of this shot. This graphic scene demonstrates how staged biographies reveal to us different patterns of the real in the theater and how the audience relates and reacts to these patterns. Susan Sontag, who has written about the consequences of violent images in our virtual times, states that "something becomes real—to those who are

elsewhere, following it as 'news'—by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation."[83] Through a photographic scene, TLS invites us to see an image frozen in time, to make us see. In this way, photographs "record the real," and the recording, itself made and played through a machine, "bear[s] witness to the real."[84] A still frame of a shoe that semiotically connects to the heavy weight of the many disappeared women in the desert freezes the image. Nothing else happens onstage, except for the breathing body of the actress that we see outside the frame of the screen and the actors who smoke and focus their gaze on her. Thus, TLS connects the idea of "less polished pictures . . . [that possess] a special kind of authenticity" and opposes it with the act of watching a live scene as an audience member.[85] This binomial between screen shots and staging creates a dynamic for how the audience actually sees and where its attention is focused. If the search for the authentic comes out of an unpolished frame, then this scene exploits this medium to bring together the visual and the visceral.

Necrotheater and the Visual Culture of Death

In Mexico's violent context, artists have used the image of death in various ways. Playwrights Hugo Salcedo and Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda have been more graphic at times in their work to call attention to atrocities.[86] Teresa Margolles, a Mexican conceptual artist and photographer, has relied on strong images of death, even to the point of utilizing body parts in her installations. Similarly, scholars in the field of theater have studied how some practitioners rely on "necrotheater" by which "an act of death is constructed in a spectacular fashion looking for terrifying effects."[87] In her illuminating study, Ileana Diéguez links the so-called period of death during President Felipe Calderón's government (2006–2012) to what she dubs "necro-theater" in a general sense, a visual brutality where bodies were staged in public spaces, producing "bodily texts of terror."[88] The visual catastrophes that Mexico has undergone after Calderón declared "a war on drugs" expose the strong, and I would dare say furious use of the spectacle of suffering as a demonstration of power. Sadly, in Mexico death scenes are not just part of the artistic performance field; rather, they are heinous public demonstrations, where bodies hang from bridges, headless torsos are found on the streets, and decapitated heads show up in Acapulco and other tourist cities. In this light, Diéguez astutely studies how these atrocities invoke a visual spectatorship that brings horror and fear to public spaces and public behavior. However, what is most striking, perhaps, is not the visual component of the gruesome bodies we see, but what this type of hypervisibility also implicitly posits about those bodies never seen—the ones that disappear without a trace, many of them without a name.[89]

While TLS does not create "necrotheater" as Diéguez describes it, it does borrow from the concept by compiling a montage of images about death that at once expand and challenge the audience's imagination. At the same time, however, TLS shies away from the spectacle of death to produce an opposite effect. In *Amarillo*, for example, TLS employs *poiesis* as a creative method to reveal possible angles and multivalent power structures. The spectacle of death is absent in their work; instead, they provide the audience with glimpses, fragments, staged photography, letters, and testimonies of the society that has been left behind. Through their documentary technique, they animate a story within a story, thus framing for their audiences the larger unanswered questions about Ciudad Juárez, the women of Juárez, and who was and still is behind the many disappearances. The audience gets "punched" with this information through their ritualistic sense of theater—their artistic manifestation of optimism in music and dances that portray the beauty of the lives of others takes place, after all, in a space of violence and death. At the end, together with a saxophonist, the graffiti artist closes the play by redrawing Mantequilla Nápoles's face on the white wall, so his print, art's imprint, refuses to give up its space and instead makes a mark on us, those who watch the creation and erasure of images before our eyes.

While the premiere of *Baños Roma* cast actor/boxer Jorge León, the restaging of the same play in 2017 was quite different.[90] The original play based its core content on biography and a documentary method to the plot, so it became an intriguing new play when the main actor was no longer part of the group. The replacement of an actor in a documentary play is rendered more problematic than simple recasting when they explore their own testimony and witnessing, adding to the foundation of the performance. Due to personal issues, León was forced to leave the troupe, but his departure compelled remaining members to search for another protagonist. The new actor, Gilberto Barraza, was definitely not a boxer; he did not embody the same physicality one would expect from a boxer. Instead, Barraza brought a fresh documentary perspective to the play, as an ex–drug dealer who lived in Ciudad Juárez and whose scarred face shows some of the tough choices he made in life. While boxing is still at the center of the plot, and Mantequilla Nápoles's story is still the focal point, the city of Juárez is now brought to life through this new actor. Barraza's life, his endurance, his vivid and personal narrative about the narcos and his own role as a drug trafficker turn this border town into a gruesome ghostly figure, exposing what some of its inhabitants still carry as leftover residue from violent acts.

In an intimate narrative, he talks to the audience about his tattoos, speaks candidly about his drug trafficking, and also reminisces about what Ciudad Juárez was like during his childhood. He remembers how people used to swim in the Rio Bravo and how the city was alive with people walking on the streets. He continues:

> Over the years, in a city that still cannot be named, the streets were abandoned, outside lounge chairs were brought in, doors and windows were closed. Music from the bars gradually disappeared. And in this city of red sunsets, parties were moved inside the houses. Public space was lost, but songs and karaoke flourished inside private spaces.
>
> [En el transcurso de los años, en una ciudad que aún no puede nombrarse, las calles se quedaron solas, metieron las poltronas a las casas, cerraron puertas, las ventanas. La música de los bares paulatinamente se apagó. Y en esta ciudad de atardeceres rojos la fiesta se trasladó al interior de las casas. Se perdió el espacio público pero en el espacio íntimo floreció el canto y se instaló el karaoke.][91]

To emphasize this private space in people's homes, the group echoes Barraza's words by inviting a local band or members of the audience to take part in a karaoke song. Used as comic, audience-inclusive relief, TLS also makes us aware of shifts in community practices that have resulted from the violence and the lack of safe access to the outside, even to one's own front yard. In this way, a major aspect of the play involves making spectators aware of spatial relations and how alert they are to dangers in their own lives.

The loss of public rights to the city, which encompasses daily civic life and activities like walking on streets, or going to markets or parks, reflects the circumstances of present-day Ciudad Juárez's inhabitants. Economic transformations also contribute to a loss of freedom, and fragments from Myrna Pastrana's novel *Cuando las banquetas fueron nuestras* find their way onto the stage through one of the actor's dialogues. Holding and pointing to Pastrana's book, the actor recites the following quote:

> The maquiladoras arrived in the'60s, and they changed the face of the city and movement for its inhabitants, who from then on dressed in industrial uniforms. There were not enough women workers to cover the three shifts; that is why it is no coincidence that in the '90s they began placing big signs at plant entrances offering jobs, bonuses for perfect attendance, bonuses for punctuality, Christmas bonuses, gym memberships, pool memberships, daycare and transportation stipends; incentives to attract the work force.
>
> [La maquiladora llegó durante los años sesenta, cambió el rostro de la ciudad y el movimiento de gran parte de sus habitantes, que de ahí en adelante vistieron con bata industrial. No se daba abasto ni contratando operadoras los tres turnos; por ello, no era casual que, en la década de los noventa, colocaran a la entrada de las plantas mantas con grandes letras ofreciendo: bono por contratación, bono por

> asistencia, bono por puntualidad, bono navideño, gimnasio, alberca, guardería y transporte; incentivos para atraer mano de obra.][92]

In a first-person narrative, actors relate their personal impressions to their experiences in the city by weaving in fragments of Pastrana's novel. In a more direct quote, actors relate to the author's strong conviction when they read, "We lost our sidewalks, and in doing so, we lost every connection between the city and the people" (hemos perdido nuestas banquetas, y al hacerlo, hemos perdido toda conexión con la ciudad y su gente).[93] Another actor provides a grotesque visual summary of what the city is today: "The city is filled with signs of disappeared women. I found it curious that ads soliciting women for table dancing were right next to them, as if done on purpose" (El centro está repleto de carteles de mujeres desaparecidas, lo que me pareció curioso es que al lado de muchos de estos, como si fuera a propósito hay cartulinas solicitando chicas para el table dance).[94] TLS correlates the story that the Juarense actor Barraza witnessed by showing how Ciudad Juárez was an economic hub in the 1990s and later became a death trap and vacant city. As with Cortázar's intertextual short story about Mantequilla Nápoles, TLS surveys the city through literature. Similarly, Pastrana's novel is brought in as another narrative line, fomenting its presence as yet one more document that tells the story of a once successful and energetic city.

The emptiness of Ciudad Juárez is also documented by the remains in the city: its abandoned dogs. Aided by digital artwork and video art, stories of hundreds of thousands of now stray dogs become a visually powerful exploration of what actually occurs to people's pets when they leave. And while the screen distorts drawings of dogs, a voice offstage adds that "we are a hundred thousand, we are on the streets. We are a street gang. We are a pack. The rest packed their bags . . . locked their doors and threw the keys away in the trash. We barked, we howled and we madly paced in circles on the patios. Our collars were useless . . . one hundred thousand of us. That's how this city became filled up with our howls" (Somos cien mil, estamos en las calles. Somos la clica de las calles. La manada. Hicieron las maletas . . . Cerraron la puerta y echaron las llaves en la basura. Ladramos, aullamos, dimos vueltas enloquecidas en los patios, salimos por los agujeros a la calle. Los collares no nos sirvieron de nada. 100 mil. Así se pobló esta ciudad de aullidos).[95] Tribes of dogs now rule the city, and the general sense of abandonment is magnified by the new symbolic power of what these once-pets are now: wild dogs in search of survival.

The abandoned city is the main focus, but Mantequilla Nápoles's story and the changes to Ciudad Juárez offer new perspectives for storytelling as they are transformed by the actors. Theatrically, the change in actor from Jorge León to Gilberto Barranza called for rewriting and reformatting the main connection to Mantequilla Nápoles's story in the play. While the original script invited a kinesthetic link through the boxer's body, his movements,

and his own biographical narrative, a refashioning of the play aligned space and place more closely with the central focus on the city. Scenes that before seemed peripheral to the story now became fundamental. For instance, in one scene, an actress dances over sawdust that comes from the inside of one of the boxing bags. Speaking directly to the audience, she begins to trace streets, avenues, and commercial centers in Ciudad Juárez. She draws and redraws a map of the city she remembers, tapping her shoes and extending her legs from one end to another. Her movements are carefully controlled, but her map, which is also enlarged and seen on the overhead screen, is inexact. Even though she draws a street, she rapidly erases it to show another one, and another one. Names come and go. Her dancing shoes tap on the sawdust, spreading it around. With her legs moving in expanding circular motions, she creates and re-creates her own recollection of the city. Street names are invoked and new movements erase previous ones, as if the same construction of the city gets quickly forgotten by new movements, new sand, and newly vacant places. Thus, Ciudad Juárez gets redrawn and reimagined through theater. This superimposition of layers offers us a view of Ciudad Juárez as an ambiguous city that can only be conceived by way of fragments and secondhand stories. It is an ephemeral city that disappears before our eyes. For Michel de Certeau, "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. . . . It is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian . . . a spatial acting-out of the place."[96] He explains that this system implies *relations* in order to foment "walking as a space of enunciation."[97] Embodying the map by dancing steps over sawdust that clearly marks and erases each drawing creates a haunting relation between the past and the present, fact and fiction, and the understanding of a city that gets both reenacted and lost in the process of performance and violence. And while this mapmaking scene was part of the original play, its centrality in recounting the role of the city is gained through the new actor's biographical link as he tells us his own story of living there.

The topic of Ciudad Juárez as a ghostly city was key in the work of TLS for this particular production. During their residency, team member Alicia Laguna explored the elusive and almost mythical history of a bar called La Brisa.[98] The bar was razed in the 1990s and is currently an empty lot. However, when intact as a standing building, it served as a meeting point for prostitutes who taught lessons about sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS and for intellectuals, artists, and writers who met for *tertulias* and progressive activist meetings. As the actress dances in the shifting sawdust, she mentions La Brisa and wonders whether prostitutes and intellectuals truly met there or if, as with everything else about Ciudad Juárez, it is part of a story that was buried in the sand. Through *Baños Roma*, documentation of Ciudad Juárez becomes the basis for understanding the history behind the city's decay as well as the birth of many myths and stories that will continue to be retold.

Violence becomes the vehicle linking these plays. The violence of migration in *Amarillo* and the violence of Ciudad Juárez in *Baños Roma* compels audience members to see the fragmentation of a society in quite different forms. Another vicissitude of this type of violence is portrayed when TLS joins forces with local artists in Veracruz to speak about the local violence that has wrapped Veracruz in the last decades.

El puro lugar: In Situ Documenting

While documentation for TLS has mainly been a way to research topics they find compelling, works like *El puro lugar* (*The Pure Place*) centers on historical facts through the activation of performance in a tourist-like experience divided into six different site-specific installations that took place between 2015 and 2016. An in situ, urban documentary installation, *El puro lugar* allows for one hundred spectators divided into groups of ten and distributed over four days. While the hope was that the same spectator would take part in all the installments, other spectators could also take their place. Each actor drives and also walks ten spectators at different times and to different locations around the town of San Bruno of Xalapa, Veracruz, a city filled with violent history, as I will detail below. There were three focal and obligatory locations for all spectators to go: the factory of San Bruno, the Zapotito chapel, and a small dormitory room where students were once attacked.

Divided into six different episodes or installations, *El puro lugar* combines archives, testimony, and photographs with a very personal and semiprivate spectatorship experience. All episodes last around sixty to ninety minutes; some take place in the abandoned factories or schools, while others are staged in the small dorm room. Thus, six installations bridge multiple times and places to focus on atrocity and violence of Xalapa. A coproduction between TLS and the Actors Organization of the University of Veracruz (ORTEUV), this work incorporates geographical and historical fieldwork undertaken by director Jorge Vargas, Alejandro Flores Valencia, and Luis Mario Moncada regarding three different instances of historical violence in Veracruz, the largest city on the Gulf of Mexico. In 1924, ten workers from the textile factory in San Bruno, Xalapa, were kidnapped and murdered. Because this was a factory with a history of leftist union workers, this crime was never solved, and the workers were never found. The thematic thread of violence is documented via events all linked to places in Veracruz in various ways: the textile factory where these workers were killed, presumably for having Marxist ideals; twelve actors in Oscar Liera's play, *Cúcara y Mácara*, who were violently attacked by a right-wing group due to the play's controversial nature in regard to religion in 1981; and finally the small dorm where eight students from the University of Veracruz were attacked and beaten by the police in 2015 for being considered radicals. All of these events are

reactivated through testimonials, performances, and visits to the places where these atrocities took place. The intersectionality of violence aligns different temporal and geographical contexts in order to rethink and question history, its archival process, and audience positionality. The three separate incidents are connected by geography, violence, and political antagonism.

Maybe more than the product itself, the call to participants gives us a true understanding of the activist context of this work:

> In spite of the systematic violence perpetrated against the people of Veracruz over the last years
>
> In spite of the institutional production of fear
>
> In spite of the lack of guarantees safety for Mexican citizens
>
> In spite of the fact that it is not recommended that anyone decry injustice and corruption, go out for coffee at night, be in the wrong place, wear a miniskirt, carry a Mexican flag, get into a taxi, go to a protest, stare at the Government Palace for more than five minutes, take photographs (selfies not included), express yourself if you are over sixty years old, promote land rights, celebrate a birthday, chat on the stairs of a church, write, research, report, be a student, be an academic, be a journalist or just a regular citizen.
>
> In spite of all this, the ORTEUV and Teatro Línea de Sombra (TLS) summon an ad hoc community of citizens to collaborate in the making of a theatrical work by periodically going to a space marked by violence: the room where eight students from the Universidad Veracruzana were beaten in the middle of the night of June 5, 2015. We call this artistic and theatrical action Nothing But the Place.
>
> [A pesar de la violencia sistemática ejercida en los últimos años contra la población veracruzana.
>
> A pesar de la producción institucional del miedo.
>
> A pesar de que nada garantice seguridad a los ciudadanos mexicanos.
>
> A pesar de que no sea recomendable enunciar la corrupción y la injusticia, salir a tomar café en la noche, estar en el lugar equivocado, usar minifalda, portar en la calle una bandera del país, subirse a un taxi, asistir a una manifestación, mirar fijamente al Palacio de Gobierno durante más de 5 minutos, tomar fotografías (que no sean selfies), manifestarte si tienes más de 60 años, promover la defensa de la tierra, celebrar un cumpleaños, conversar en las escaleras de La Parroquia, escribir, investigar, reportear, ser un estudiante, ser un académico, ser un periodista o ser un ciudadano común.
>
> A pesar de todo esto, la ORTEUV y Teatro Línea de Sombra (TLS) convocamos a formar parte de una comunidad temporal de ciudadanos que colaboran con la construcción de una pieza escénica asistiendo periódicamente a un espacio marcado por la violencia: el

> cuarto donde 8 estudiantes de la Universidad Veracruzana fueron batidos a golpes la madrugada del 5 de junio de 2015. A esta acción artística y escénica la hemos llamado El puro lugar.][99]

The convocation goes on to explain how *El puro lugar* aims to transform a violently charged space into a place of memory and life. Its mission is to bring attention to the atrocities committed and disregarded, like a conscious act of erasure, to inspire citizens to reclaim their city and their right to inhabit their towns without fear of retaliation by the government or other groups. It is also a call to arms. This temporary assembly of citizens has been summoned to witness and denounce the violation of rights and to demand their restitution.

These installations destabilize the primacy of the written text as a form of cultural expression, emphasizing instead the significance of embodied forms of transmission of meaning and knowledge through temporally and spatially framed "scenarios," as Diana Taylor has succinctly studied.[100] As participants in this performance, spectators ride a car, walk the city, and are trapped in rooms where they see and hear testimony from the actors, some of whom were actual victims of the violence perpetrated in 1981. They are always accompanied by their actor-guide, who gives them maps and historical background to each installation. The three violent events are woven together through the city of Xalapa. As documents are brought in, history is retold and audience members hear firsthand the stories of these actors as they (re)trace their steps in a factory and (re)draw the map of the city with added anecdotes and urban histories from locals. Each episode is related to the others in some way through violence, but they can also stand alone.

TLS's methodology of working with in situ historical buildings, using a ratio of one hundred spectators to ten actors/guides (first episode) and highlighting the sense of space, both in open format and in a small room, delves into speculations of the veracity of the document in the past and today. In Xalapa, Veracruz, a city overcome by narco-violence, this kind of staging brings to the fore an intersectionality of atrocities committed in different times and places. Xalapa becomes a geographical axis for questions regarding how we live with constant and brutal violence. These questions are enacted through sites and installations that use documents of compounded violent acts. *El puro lugar* challenged spectators not only to participate but also to become participants.[101] As theater scholar Marvin Carlson remarks, the activation of the audience is a productive venue to create something new. He states, "We are now at least equally likely to look at the theatre experience in a more global way, as a sociocultural event whose meanings and interpretations are not to be sought exclusively in the text being performed but in the experience of the audience assembled to share in the creation of the total event."[102] Throughout the yearlong, six-episode work, participants were asked to confront their fears and leave them behind, as can be gauged

by the call for participation. This, in turn, increased the cohesiveness among members of the group. Participants were challenged to engage with their bodies in a space charged with violent history to take part in a performance that demanded answers for injustices and impunity. In this way, their bodies perform a political act. For instance, in the first episode, "100 Spectators: 100 Journeys," each audience member rode in a car with a private guide (ten actors took ten participants at different times). They all converged at the textile factory where ten workers were kidnapped and killed in 1924. Here spectators listened to stories, viewed installations about violence, played Foosball, and heard Ignacio Córdoba sing a rap song about the atrocities that occurred in this now abandoned place. People milled about the empty factory where communist murals featuring images of Che Guevara decorated the walls. Politics and space were further conflated when a member of the theater group of the University of Veracruz drove by in a car and announced over a megaphone that "a ghost inhabits San Bruno." This claim established a close link to the *Communist Manifesto* and the idea of the specter of communism in Europe.[103] Calling attention to the ghosts also reinforces the ongoing silence that seems to enable the cyclical violence in this town.

Some installations took place in the dorm where the eight students were assaulted in 2015. Only eight people were allowed at one time to hear testimonies offered by survivors and to see video recordings, clothing, and even the remains of the room that were recovered from the trash and recycled by artists who encapsulated the debris in glass boxes. These boxed artifacts tell the story in yet another format, a museum-like showcase of the remains of a violent intervention against students. Audience members listened to music, viewed video installations, and heard survivors speak, as the tight space of a small dorm suggested the idea of proximity and the desperation these eight students underwent in such a small place. Other installations contained a more private encounter, as was the case with "If the Walls Spoke," where only the same one hundred spectators were permitted to enter the same dorm room one at the time. This dorm room held a collection of different materials used in previous spaces but were now displayed together as a private museum exhibit, in what participant Geraldine Lamadrid Guerrero called an "archaeological autopsy."[104] In her study, she claims that artists involved with *El puro lugar* became historians and archaeologists so that they could collect pieces of historical violence and transform them into art. Whatever artists found in the trash—fragments of clothes, pieces of students' possessions—became part of the archaeological exhibit.

For citizens of Xalapa, fear of violent retaliation for asking too many questions meant participants needed to construct a new space to learn the history and its documents. Antonio Prieto Stambaugh, who participated in this event, wrote that this fear is part of what he refers to as "troublesome memory."[105] As artists bring back the past through live performances in places of trauma, they affect spectators in a visceral fashion. From a Freudian angle, Prieto

Stambaugh argues that this type of remembering in historical places engages spectators in both personal and collective memories through new ways of seeing and engaging an already known place. Stambaugh, a scholar who lives in Veracruz, has a personal connection to the ubiquitous violence in the city and understands why people are afraid. Although hundreds of citizens have left Veracruz due to the incessant violence, he sees this type of work as a public call to action for those who remain. In a sense, exploring place and space, both in a historical vein, as well as in real time with a group of participants, forces the question of who sees and what they get to see. Documentary material exhibited in glass displays in traumatic spaces where victims recount their stories forces audience members to return to these places and probably think of them for the first time through a lens that connects them as spaces of violent encounters for abuse and murder.

A call to action emphasizes the idea of communal togetherness in a live mode in much the same way that theater does. These qualities can help eliminate or attenuate the fear that each individual brings with them. *El puro lugar*, then, forms part of this call to action for its audiences. Spectators view real documents on-site while listening to firsthand survivors relate details from these atrocities. As a part of this temporary community, audience members and TLS walk through a space marked by a violent encounter to see, hear, touch, and in a sense be affected by the stories they hear as they reinvent the space through a live collective performance. In a less staged way, the theatricality of these events comes to life through actors' bodies and voices as they remember the story of violence in Xalapa alongside the audience members.

Cultural production in the context of Mexican violence has taken many forms and includes the well-known examples of *narcocorridos* and narconovels. For TLS, art is at the center of their research, and while they might have utopian ideals of how to best represent violence onstage, they implore their audiences to see anew. Echoing this idea, Ileana Diéguez argues, "We must imagine a narrative about bodies that are never found, a narrative about those bodies that no one knows where they are, or if they are even dead."[106] TLS speculates with the ambiguity Diéguez suggests above to create a poetic landscape not of death, per se, but of the absence and gaps that these lost lives represent. For TLS, morbid images are not the point; rather, they operate within the possibilities the future holds. The real in their work is moored precisely between the fictional setting of a theater stage and the actual stories they tell—a place of ambiguity. Through a relational method, however, they combine the idea of "being-together," as in a communal theatrical encounter, with human interactions in their various social contexts to clearly define a new mode of documentary onstage. This relationality becomes important as an affective tool when purely political documentary methods give way to artistic introspection.

When this occurs, the idea of relationality pushes the boundaries of the senses and can affect audiences in more profound and possibly more

political ways than before. This gray zone—an ambivalent space created by the supposed authenticity of the archive—becomes a productive space that brings art and politics together in more nuanced and critical ways. As Claire Bishop states, "Intersubjective relations serve to explore and disentangle a more complex knot of social concerns about political engagement, affect and inequality."[107] The intersubjectivity or convivial capacities of a community at risk of being detained just for being together becomes a clear form of political engagement where activism propelled by social concerns turns to the affective. TLS's methods shy away from a didactic documentary practices; instead they foment a creative way to think of issues of relationality, both as theater practitioners and as political activists who search for collaboration and participation. In a sense, as their methodologies have evolved into documentary theater, they have pushed TLS to more multivalent and committed practices that involve understanding human relations vis-à-vis political and social situations. Through their poetic exploration, TLS's work stands out, calling for new ways of spectatorship where collaboration and integration are key to artistic practice and activism.