

Voicing the Self, Performing Collectives: *Testimonio* in Contemporary Argentine Theater

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Abstract - Voicing the Self, Performing Collectives: *Testimonio* in Contemporary Argentine Theater

This article looks at the relationship between theater and the literary genre of *testimonio*, particularly the ways the *I* and the *we* take on corporeal and vocal existence onstage to enact new ways of being, together. To exemplify its observations, the essay turns to the work of Lola Arias and Compañía de Funciones Patrióticas and Corda-Doberti and argues that by audibly replaying the past in the present (through recording technology or verbatim reenactment), testimonial performances direct audiences toward more ethical futures.

Keywords: Testimonio. Voice. Collectivity. Subjectivity. Real-Fiction.

Resumo - Vocificando-se, performando coletivos: testemunho no teatro argentino contemporâneo

O artigo investiga a relação entre o teatro e o gênero literário do testemunho, em particular as maneiras pelas quais o *eu* e um *nós* se fazem corpóreos na *performance* por meio da voz e alcançam novas formas de convivência. Para exemplificar suas observações, o ensaio toma a obra cênica de Lola Arias e da Compañía de Funciones Patrióticas e Corda-Doberti, e argumenta que, ao repetir audivelmente o passado no presente (por meio de dispositivos de gravação ou reconstrução oral), o teatro testemunhal remete a suas audiências a futuros mais éticos.

Palavras-chave: Testemunho. Voz. Coletividade. Subjetividade. Ficção-Real.

Resumen - Vocificándose, performando colectivos: testimonio en el teatro argentino contemporáneo

El artículo indaga la relación entre el teatro y el género literario del testimonio, en particular las formas en que el *yo* y un *nosotrxs* se hacen corpóreos en el escenario a través de la voz y devienen en nuevas formas de convivio. Para ejemplificar sus observaciones, el ensayo toma el trabajo escénico de Lola Arias y el de Compañía de Funciones Patrióticas y Corda-Doberti, y argumenta que al repetir el pasado de manera audible en el presente (a través de dispositivos de grabación o reconstrucción oral), el teatro testimonial remite sus públicos a futuros más éticos.

Palabras clave: Testimonio. Voz. Colectividad. Subjetividad. Ficción-Real.

Voicing Bodies

Testimonios capture a speaking *I* and evoke a collective *we*¹. The best-known example of this activist genre in Argentina would be *Nunca más* (1984), CONADEP's essential compilation of survivor accounts from clandestine detention centers during the last civic-military dictatorship of 1976-1983. Because a *testimonio*'s speaker seeks to communicate an injustice that is part of a collective problem, and not just a personal grievance, John Beverley argues that the speaker's transcribed text evokes "an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences" (2004, p. 34). An immediately recognizable instance of polyphonic testimony in contemporary Argentine theater is Patricia Zangaro's *A propósito de la duda* (2000), for which the playwright assembled transcripts from many interviews, trials, and depositions in order to advance the humanitarian cause of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. This salient example of solidarity demonstrates Beverley's assertion that "*testimonio* constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode" (2004, p. 35) and that *testimonios* could come from anybody advancing the same social cause (2004, pp. 40-41).

While literary *testimonios* transcribe an oral account into writing, thus valuing a silent and visually static mode of transmission, theatrical testimonies revert this act of transcription and emphasize both the aurality and physicality of speech. In some cases, actors say the words of others: this staging mechanism and dramaturgical conceit comes across clearly in *A propósito de la duda*, in which the ensemble plays a cross-section of Argentine society, but also Elizabeth Mía Chorubczyk's *Effy ofrece sexo oral* (2012), in which her singular body hosts a polyphony of voices that denounce their abusers². In other cases, performers recite what they themselves have spoken: this autobiographical approach structures Patricio Ruiz's performance work with his drag band Putite de Mamá, in which he sets his own life stories to trap music, and that of Vivi Tellas, whose collaborators originate the monologues they recount in her biodramas. Consequently, by returning to the scene of transcription - the time of telling and, thus, a telling time - testimonial theater asks spectators to watch as they listen:

¹ *Testimonio* appears in Spanish to refer to the literary genre and avoid the more general sense of the word *testimony* in English (that is, a document submitted to an official court of law).

² In this performance, Chorubczyk kneeled at spectators' feet, had them hold onto her hair, and pressed play on a tape recorder she clenched defiantly between her teeth. Testimonies of sexual abuse poured out from the recorder and therefore, literally, from Chorubczyk's mouth. Placed in a compromising position that reenacts a dominant sexual dynamic, spectators witness in themselves the realities the audios denounce.

here and now, the witnessing audience attests to the power and responsibility of (re)constructing reality or life as it is lived.

Pamela Brownell and Ezequiel Lozano theorize this double-act of seeing and hearing as a product of performance art's "being voice" and documentary theater's "giving voice" (2014, p. 3)³. One mode calls attention to its own presence (performance) and the other makes an absence present (documentary). Like in Fernando Rubio's *Todo lo que está a mi lado* (2012), a site-specific intervention in which an audience member shares a bed with a performer in a public setting, during testimonial performances, "the voice that gives its testimony provokes a tension in the body of the person who lends their ear" (Brownell; Lozano, 2014, p.6)⁴. This suggests that the speaking body confirms its presence through what it says, and therefore the listening body reaffirms that presence through what it hears. Sometimes, the audience hears voices that cannot be present, like Juan Perón's verbatim speeches in Susana Torres Molina's *Un domingo en familia* (2019), and yet these pronouncements manifest themselves physically through their onstage surrogate(s) who give them voice⁵. Discursively, then, the voice makes the body appear, since it is part of a body. As Wania Storolli observes, "the voice always reminds us of its relationship to the body" and "bears the physical, psychic, emotional, social, symbolic, and political characteristics of the body, that is, of the being who emits it" (2020, pp. 105-106)⁶. Therefore, in this relational sense between bodies and voices, performers who testify *are* voice and *give* it, using the *I* to speak about a self implicated in a group of others. These testimonial performances are political, because they "welcome a troubling of subjectivity that evinces the multiple dimensions involved in constructing an identity. In these experiences, the self exposes itself as a place where voices intersect" (Brownell; Lozano, 2014, p. 10)⁷. If the *I* in testimonial performances reveals itself to be made up of other voices, then this crisscrossing of competing o/auralities also applies to society at large, where people battle to be heard and therefore "seen" as political subjects. Crucially, then, testimonial performances arrive at a polyphonic crossroads where individual testament must be tested by collective belief.

³ Translations into English are my own; footnotes include original Spanish and Portuguese texts. "ser voz"; "dar voz".

⁴ "la voz que testimonia lo hace provocando una tensión en el cuerpo que presta oídos".

⁵ For more on the concept of surrogation, see Joseph Roach (1996).

⁶ "a voz nos traz sempre sua relação com o corpo"; "carrega as características do corpo físico, psíquico, emocional, social, simbólico, político, enfim, do ser que a emite".

⁷ "invitan a cuestionar la subjetividad, evidenciando la multiplicidad de dimensiones que intervienen en la construcción identitaria. En estas experiencias, el yo queda expuesto como un espacio de intersección de voces".

The subjective and therefore worrisome category of personal memory can destabilize fact, which is why an epistemological skepticism surrounds *testimonio*. As Beatriz Sarlo contends, how can testimony be proven true if it cannot be read through the usual systems of objective fact-checking (2006)? The ensuing battle over memory confirms Elizabeth Jelin’s postulation that “actors have the intention or drive to present *one* narrative of the past; thus, these battles come about because they are trying to impose *their* version of the past as hegemonic, legitimate, ‘official,’ normal, or commonly accepted sense by all” (2020, p. 344)⁸. Yet moral outrage ensues when somebody questions the veracity of someone else’s identitarian expression. What gives someone the right to contest what someone else says they’ve gone through, especially when uttered from the margin? Those who think about testimonials in a skeptical way, and therefore from the center, like Sarlo, want testimonial non-fiction to be true to an impartial degree that recreates the alleged objectivity of history and science. In a twenty-first century of edited images and videos, as well as conspiracy theories that when voiced aloud and repeated enough times can disenfranchise voters and nearly overthrow elections (i.e., the United States in 2020), the stakes of the real are ablaze.

But *testimonios* never confuse memory with fact: they operate within the realm of affect in order to move the status quo ethically and encourage it to produce the material evidence it withholds to right an ethical wrong. When David Stoll and the *New York Times* took Rigoberta Menchú to task in the late ‘90s for perceived inconsistencies in her Nobel-Peace-Prize-winning *testimonio*, they insisted on the indivisibility of her individual character: they asked if it really all happened to her in the way she describes in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983). Overwhelmingly, however, Stoll and company ignored that Menchú’s statement wasn’t meant to encompass only her life but also account for the experiences of many others in her K’iche’ community. She wasn’t trying to describe and benefit an autobiographical self. She was trying to solve a dire collective problem of consistent human-rights abuses in the Indigenous communities of Guatemala. Stoll’s and even Sarlo’s handwringing on details encourages a search for errors of memory to disprove suffering, to question its legitimacy, even when the subjects expressing that truth already express it from without official systems of legitimation, from the subalternized margins to the subalternizing

⁸ “hay por parte de los actores la intención o voluntad de presentar *una* narrativa del pasado, y las luchas son por intentar imponer *su* versión del pasado como hegemónica, legítima, ‘oficial,’ normal, o parte del sentido común aceptado por todos/as”.

center⁹. *Testimonios* therefore argue that this kind of false equivocation can never advance change, and, as a genre, ultimately trouble the fictions of “fact-based” evidence, impartiality, and objectivity to which Stoll and Sarlo cling.

Consequently, *testimonios* aren't claiming that they're real in the sense that the status quo understands factual reality. Instead, according to Beverley, citing Roland Barthes, a *testimonio* produces the “effect” of reality. He explains, “What is important about *testimonio* is that it produces, if not the real, then certainly a sensation of experiencing the real that has determinate effects on the reader that are different from those produced by even the most realist or ‘documentary’ fiction” (2004, p. 40). Because the reality that *testimonios* try to surface remains forcibly hidden, like the bodies of the disappeared and other material evidence of state wrongdoing, *testimonios* must, according to Hal Foster, “reconstruct an occluded reality, or [...] point to an absented one, by means of representation” (2020, p. 155). Foster outlines that this return to the real in the twenty-first century pursues an affective reality, in which the real becomes “felt again, as such” (2020, p. 155). Through fictive strategies, then, the real is reconstructed in such a way as to point to what's being occluded. It's not just a real that's meant to surrogate a traumatic absence, but it's a fictive real that allows new ways of moving forward to emerge. It's a reconstructionist endeavor that relies on feeling. That is, the audience must feel what it's like, even when they've never felt it before, and the feeling reverberates, as Brownell and Lozano make clear, through the voice (2014, pp. 6-7).

To speak together in the theater from the *I* invites a reading of a ritual, communal attempt that brings together a variety of voices into the same space. It is in this way that the testimonial performances borrow from *testimonio*: the *I* and the *we* take on corporeal and vocal existence onstage to enact new ways of being, together. This essay looks at two examples of this phenomenon in contemporary Argentine theater and argues that, by audibly replaying the past in the present, the testimonial performances of Lola Arias and Compañía de Funciones Patrióticas direct audiences toward new potential futures. Their respective works explore ways of living together and arriving at a collectively formulated set of truths that are put into practice during the time of performance. Taken together, these theatrical interventions reveal the coexistence of facts, emotions, and fantasies necessary to sustain

⁹ This conceptualization borrows from Gayatri Spivak's work (1988).

political truths, and a study of voicing bodies in performance concludes that testimonial memory is not anecdote that remains separate from objectivity; rather, it is subjectivity itself that allows the illusion of objectivity to emerge.

Speaking from the I: Lola Arias

In the documentary work of Lola Arias, actors reenact their lives or those of others in order to play with important sociopolitical issues of the recent past that continue to have an impact in the present. Arias's work evinces Foster's claim that "repetition is not on the side of simulation, but neither does it circle around a traumatic past. Rather, its purpose is to produce an interruption, a crack or a gap, that might allow a different reality to emerge" (2020, p. 158). By reenacting the self - a self with dreams, emotions, history - the performers in Arias's plays show the difficulty of creating the self and how this self is consistently at play in larger networks that shape that identity. Arias borrows from the *testimonio* genre to stage real fictions, in the sense that they make the reality of what they speak palpable and affectively experienced by the audience. The real isn't represented: it is reenacted or *remade* toward a new, perhaps more just, version of reality (Graham-Jones, 2019, p. 13). This is not a utopic errand but rather a way of working through real problems, with a bit of fiction.

Arias blends reenactment with wish-fulfillment and personal monologues. From *Mi vida después*, which takes on the subject of militant activism and military suppression during the 1970s, to *Campo minado* (2016), which features Malvinas/Falklands ex-combatants, she turns to the real through the I. This I takes centerstage along with (and not in spite of) national history. The multiplicity of Is narrating their respective experiences in her work contest a hegemonic understanding of historical events without upsetting the democratic belief in evidence necessary to achieve legal justice. Her theater pieces and others like it serve as Argentina's alternate and interactive history books. They show how history comes to be, a process that includes facts but also fictions.

This real-fictive interaction can be best defined through the premises Vivi Tellas lays out in her description of *Ciclo Biodrama* (2002-2009)¹⁰, her curatorial project at Teatro Sarmiento, where *Mi vida después* premiered. According to Tellas, a biodrama examines life (bio) in theater (drama), particularly at the level of the personal, quotidian, and (auto)biographical. She says these plays investigate “how the facts of each person’s life - individual, unique, private facts - shape History. Is a testimonial documentary theater possible? Or does everything that appears on stage inevitably turn into fiction? These projects propose a tension between fiction and truth” (Brownell; Hernández, 2017, p. 14)¹¹. This tension emerges when the spectator becomes aware that what takes place on stage bears a relation to the world outside of that stage, but that relation itself is at question throughout the biodramatic performance. Oftentimes, biodramas feature the life stories of people in Argentina performed by those selfsame people (and on occasion others). The documentary, archival project of biodramas, then, investigates the place of the individual in national narrative.

Arias’s immersion in the archive and repertoire¹² of the Southern Cone’s militant/military past began with *Mi vida después*, the first of a series on the intersection of national history and personal biography, including *El año en que nació* (2012), which documents the Chilean dictatorship of 1973-1990, and *Melancolía y manifestaciones* (2012), which explores Arias’s childhood as affected by her mother’s depression. Like its trilogy companions, *Mi vida después* contends with the legacy of dictatorship-era parents, what remains, and how Arias’s generation creates its own legacy for future Argentines. In this particular play, six actors, born during the dictatorship, examine their childhoods. They profess secret family histories they’ve pieced together from personal memory, conversations with others, photographs, video footage, trinkets, letters, books, files, and even trips into their wardrobes. Instead of dwelling on the individual, however, Arias stages a collective reckoning with national trauma that transcends categories of involvement. *My Life After* is a paean to an imagined and

¹⁰ Pamela Brownell and Paola Hernández refer to the original *Proyecto Biodrama* as *Ciclo Biodrama* to distinguish between the initial eight-year run of plays at the Teatro Sarmiento and Tellas’s ongoing biodramatic oeuvre, which should rightly bear the name of *project* (2017, p. 12).

¹¹ “cómo los hechos de la vida de cada persona - hechos individuales, singulares, privados - construyen la Historia. ¿Es posible un teatro documental testimonial? ¿O todo lo que aparece en el escenario se transforma irremediabilmente en ficción? Ficción y verdad se proponen en tensión en esta experiencia”.

¹² For Diana Taylor, written historical documents form the *archive* and all aspects of oral, bodily tradition passed from one generation to the next makes up the *repertoire* (2003).

imaginative future in which bodies diversely affected by history work toward a new ethics of non-dehumanizing togetherness.

Parenthood, legacy, and journeys dominate the thematic and visual content of the play from its beginning. As the lights gradually come up in the prologue, garments rain down from the ceiling, slowly at first, then torrentially, piling up on the stage. In the twilight dimness, the cascading clothes resemble drugged and bound prisoners shoved off airplanes into the ocean. Liza, a young woman, daughter of parents exiled to Mexico because of her father's political beliefs, tumbles down with the clothes. She emerges from this colorful sea and picks up a pair of jeans. Holding them to her waist, she approaches a microphone and addresses the audience: "When I was seven years old, I would put on my mother's clothes and walk about the house, stepping on my dress, like a miniature queen. Twenty years later, I find a pair of my mother's jeans from the '70s, Lees, and they're exactly my size. I put on the pants and begin walking toward the past" (Arias, 2016, p. 21)¹³.

Liza's statement surpasses metaphor. She and her fellow performers literally step into their forebears' clothing and "*touch the actual past*, at least in a partial or incomplete or fragmented manner" (Schneider, 2011, p. 9). They act out iterations of their parents' deaths, mimic their gestures, handle their household items, and intone their words. Being and giving voice to their family pasts, the shamanic actors of *Mi vida después* channel the departed and envision possible futures with/out them.

After Liza talks about her mother's jeans, she plays a rock tune on her electric guitar for the rest of the prologue. A fan blows wind on her face, her hair flying back like a diva at a concert. Meanwhile, upstage, her cast mates pitch themselves against the pile of clothes like children at a ball pit. They throw pants and shirts and skirts up into the air, whirling them about, creating an analogous visual representation of the fan blowing on Liza's face. The shamans dance in a self-created storm, the winds of time transporting them and the audience to the play's main event - the past voiced through the present, directed toward the future.

A short man, Blas, steps out from the mosh pit and draws a chalk line at the front of the stage with years ranging from 1972 to 1983. As Liza ends her strumming, the cast approach their respective years of birth on the timeline. All stand before the audience as equals; their joint stories document a dark period in Argentine history, filling it with

¹³ "Cuando tenía siete años me ponía la ropa de mi madre y andaba por mi casa pisándome el vestido como una reina en miniatura. Veinte años después, encuentro un pantalón Lee de los setenta de mi madre que es exactamente de mi medida. Me pongo el pantalón y empiezo a caminar hacia el pasado".

subjectivity, personality, humor, candidness, and imagination. As a work of art, collectively created and curated by Arias, *Mi vida después* confesses nagging doubts about family history and expresses them with a newfound democratic vision for the country.

The play's six performers collectively mourn six different, individual pasts with a shared traumatic origin. To put the past to rest, they reckon with their family histories as well as what it means to be Argentine in a postdictatorial context. Looking backward to move forward, *Mi vida después* wonders what happens next: its final destination is the future. The title itself captures the post-ness of postdictatorship theater, implying a direct, causal relationship to a catastrophic moment that continues to shape all future Argentine discourse. *Mi vida después* could well be "My Life After the Dictatorship." It also could be "My Life After Democracy Returned" or "My Life After I Was Born" or "My Life After I Found Out the Truth About My Parents," or "My Life After This Personal/National Trauma." The play and its characters continuously seek an afterlife beyond the afterlives of dictatorship, pushing past the present moment, always anxious to resolve the question of what is going to happen, even during its production process: as the show toured, the actors would discover new information about their parents, which they'd add to the performance text.

For example, Carla knows the military government executed her father, a sergeant in the People's Revolutionary Army, and supposes they interred him in a mass grave at the infamous Avellaneda Cemetery in Villa Domínico, Buenos Aires province. By the last leg of the run, the forensic investigation underway confirmed Carla's suspicions (Sosa, 2014, p. 112). Meanwhile, her symbolic counterpart Vanina - the daughter of an intelligence officer responsible for torture, murder, and kidnapping - reported developments in the ongoing trial against her father as she and her castmates rehearsed, performed, and travelled (Blejmar, 2016, pp. 187-188). In form, content, and mode of production, *Mi vida después* embodies "moving on" or, according to Arias, how life itself moves one along, as it does the play itself: "As long as *Mi vida después* continues to be performed, life will continue to rewrite the play" (Arias, 2016, p. 12)¹⁴.

In one of the play's final gestures, Mariano draws a new timeline on the stage with dates ranging from 2016 to 2060. Like at the start, the six actors face the audience, standing behind a date. Unlike the beginning, they depart from nonfictional history and journey on to

¹⁴ "Mientras *Mi vida después* se siga mostrando, la vida seguirá reescribiendo la obra".

an imagined future. Mariano's three-year-old son Moreno squirts them all with a water gun as they predict how many children they'll have and how they, the narrators, will come to die in pedestrian and fantastical manners. They imagine their deaths intersecting with a series of reasonably fictional national events, including environmental cataclysms, social revolutions, and political stasis. Arias plays the ending for laughs to dispel some of the work's harshest revelations, but she stages within it a collective way of sublimating the past's violence. Moreno, the future, shoots at the performers, the soon-to-be-past.

Both firing squad execution and redemptive baptism born of a water-pistol-totting toddler, *Mi vida después's* finale reveals its core focus: while a play dealing with parenthood in the retrospective sense, it is also a play that deals with the anxiety of parenthood to come. The figures onstage undertake their revisitation of the past, because they, too, are worried about their own legacies. Who and what will their afterlives be? Toward the latter half of the play, Mariano takes out a reel cassette tape and plays back a recording of his father saying his name. Toddler Mariano babbles on the tape; toddler Moreno wriggles next to his listening father. Past, present, and future fuse in an emotionally charged moment that emblemizes the drama's concern with parenthood.

When Mariano's disappeared father's voice emanates from the cassette tape, the past enters the scene viscerally. These are sonic remnants of the body, once emitted in the past, now playing in the present. As Storolli remarks, recorded voice "breaks the barrier of time" (2020, 113).¹⁵ Something very intimate is taking place as Mariano sits down with his own son, whose ad libs add joy to the play's sonic landscape. While Mariano's voice has the discursive task of narrating and psychologizing a complete itself, the father's voice comes through the cassette tape with fragments of a conversation that include Mariano himself as a child:

Mariano...come on..."Dad," say, "dad." How about I show you a car... What's this? What's this? (*We hear the voice of Mariano as a child answering something inaudible.*) What? What? And the car? Dad... No, that one's for talking, not for listening. Is listening the only thing you know how to do? Mariano... Mariano... What is it? Are you going to talk a little bit? Say: Hello, hello. Hello Mariano. Hello Mariano... Hello Ma... How are you, Mariano? Hello. Mariano, are you there? Turn it off...off, turn it off. Off, off (Arias, 2016, p. 55)¹⁶.

¹⁵ "rompe a barreira do tempo".

¹⁶ "Mariano...a ver... 'Papá,' decí, 'papá.' Por ejemplo, si uno te muestra un auto... ¿Qué es esto? ¿Qué es esto? (*Se oye la voz de Mariano niño contestar algo que no se entiende.*) ¿Qué? ¿Cómo? ¿Y el auto? Papá... No, es para hablar ése, no para oír, ¡lo único que sabés vos es oír? Mariano... Mariano... ¿Qué es? ¿Vas a hablar un poquito? Decí: Hola, hola. Hola Mariano. Hola Mariano... Hola Ma... Mariano, ¿cómo te va? Hola. Mariano, ¿estás...? Apagá... Apagá, apagá. Apagá, apagá".

The taped voice reminds Mariano that his father once raised a little boy, too. These men - the father in the past and Mariano in the present - share a commitment to the future. This future requires people to listen but also to talk. Mariano's father tells him to speak up, which again surpasses metaphor. The past asks the present to speak up for what happened but also speak up for what needs to take place. The future depends on voicing the self.

Mariano's father collected and repaired old cars in his garage. He also concealed and traded weapons in said garage for Peronist Youth militants and wrote for the short-lived erotic magazine *Adán*. One of his articles, published in 1967, is called "Autobiográfica." In Argentine Spanish, the word *auto*, apart from meaning "self," also means "car" (think, "automobile" in English). Mariano reveals his father's pun: the article is about his father's life story as well as his love of cars. Vehicular imagery recurs throughout the play (Carla's reenactment of a potential car crash, Liza's song about jumping on a motorbike with her parents into the past), suggesting a simultaneous forward and backward displacement through *autotransportation*.

"In my life, I've heard so many versions of my father's death that it's as if he'd died several times or never died at all," Carla says. "If my father's life were a movie, I'd like to be his stunt double" (Arias, 2016, p. 43)¹⁷. In *Mi vida después*, the actors onstage stand in for the absent figures of the past that live on in stories, objects, and bodies. Through the amplification of performance, the production refuses to give up the past and instead makes it speak and take up space. Arias and her ensemble stitch together fragmentary remains with the cohesive thread of oral narrative and the live presence of theater to materialize that which was disappeared into oblivion's silence. They achieve their thematic introspection on national themes through direct contact with the audience, confessing inner thoughts, feelings, dreams, regrets, questions, and desires that speak to the Argentine public body. If the nation needs to change in order to achieve a future beyond its trauma, then *Mi vida después* suggests that change involves collective action, understanding, and reanimation of a seemingly defunct past through oral testimony, a process which is as exciting, electrifying, and chaotic as a revolution or hopping aboard "a motorbike toward the past" (Arias, 2016, p. 36)¹⁸.

Walking toward the We: Funciones Patrióticas and Corda-Doberti

¹⁷ "En mi vida escuché tantas versiones sobre la muerte de mi papá que es como si hubiera muerto varias veces o no hubiera muerto nunca. Si la vida de mi padre fuera una película, a mí me gustaría ser su doble de riesgo".

¹⁸ "una moto hacia el pasado".

The democratic value of collectivity in Argentine theater (of individuated people among a greater number of others) counters the ongoing devaluation of coalition politics by a neoliberal consensus machine that produces solipsistic individuality in the name of collective consumerism. One of the main mechanisms of achieving a political dynamic of unison in dissent is the voice. As an emissary wave, the voice vibrates outward from one individual and reverberates inward within another. Its ability to travel long distances, especially through mediation, confirms Elizabeth Grosz's theory of the unbounded body or a body as a point of view, not necessarily restricted to its physical container (1994). It is precisely the voice that negotiates and allows the *I* and *we* to distinguish themselves from one another and also come together. Like a choir, a polyphonic democracy encourages everyone to sing at their own range and in their own way while simultaneously reminding them not to make everyone go off key: it is hard work and a constant practice.

As a concluding example, the site-specific interventions of Compañía de Funciones Patrióticas and their frequent collaborators Corda-Doberti demonstrate the necessity of speaking out and putting these acts of speech into circulation. In their work, the speaking out and the sharing of that verbal action remediates the damning silence of consensus. More importantly, their performances break away from the typical stage-audience configuration in which performers talk to mostly silent spectators. In their work, collectivity is not only a value that's stated but also a value that's put into action or *performed*: audience members become co-participants as they're asked to share their voices and contribute to the mutual enterprise of collective creation.

Compañía de Funciones Patrióticas question official, nationalist narratives and work toward new understandings of shared space made possible through collective action. Their name comes from theatrical events performed in the mid nineteenth century during national holidays or commemorations of key patriotic figures (Seijo, 2015, p. 11); their performance mode recalls public school functions in which students celebrate Argentine history (Seijo, 2015, p. 14). Since their start in 2008, Funciones Patrióticas has made political theater on auspicious dates. What do Argentines celebrate and why? What national values do these celebrations uplift? Should they be perpetuated? These are some of the main lines of investigation for the company, who initially began by performing plays inside theater buildings only to eventually abandon this platform and take to the streets. This transition

from representation to presentation exemplifies the company's anti-capitalist mission: they seek to create a critical distance between the performing arts and the commodification of their products. As such, the time-consuming rehearsal efforts should end up in a short stint of performances with either a small admission price to cover the costs of the food shared during the shows or none at all. In this regard, Funciones Patrióticas's accessibility and conviviality challenges the money-making-oriented status quo and yet doesn't fall into the trap of didacticism.

Company leader Martín Seijo explains, "We're interested in developing a theatrical proposition that's popular, not populist; patriotic, not chauvinist; critical, not demagogic; entertaining, not solemn; pluralistic, not inculcatory" (Seijo, 2015, p. 13)¹⁹. To that end, they've created performances such as *Relato situado: Acción de memoria urbana* (2015). During this site-specific urban intervention, audience members joined actors on an interactive tour of the city's central business district; together, they took part in a performance that refigured their sense of space and time, individually and as a cohort. While traversing busy downtown streets, they heard historical speeches by Eva Perón, discussed the politics of urban planning, read statistics from informational posters, noticed things to which they'd previously never paid attention, and recalled personal memories. They also documented their journeys by taking notes, making sketches, and recording audios of everything they witnessed. Famous Buenos Aires landmarks, like the Obelisco and the former Ministry of Public Works building (now the Ministry of Social Development), loomed over the group, reminding them that public architecture plays an important role in shaping civic discourse just as discourse likewise fashions city landscapes. By relating archival histories to their own memories and sensations, performers and spectator-participants arrived at the civic intersection of the personal, the public, the national, the political, the urban, and the temporal. A vivid, acoustic, and tactile tour-guide performance of the past in the present, *Acción de memoria urbana* reconfigured spatial and social dynamics of the city in order to make visible the gridlines upon which life is raised/razed.

Acción de memoria urbana is the first of five collaborations with visual-arts duo Corda-Doberti, which includes other *Relato situado* interventions in the city of Buenos Aires and surrounding metropolitan area. Since 2001, Virginia Corda and María Paula Doberti have

¹⁹ "Nos interesa desarrollar una propuesta teatral popular, no populista; patriótica, no chauvinista; crítica, no demagógica; entretenida, no solemne; plural, no baja-línea".

been making urban political interventions as Corda-Doberti, a portmanteau of their last names. The visual-arts duo mainly put up posters, graffiti, banners, and other types of signage to establish an inquisitive relationship between a pedestrian and their built surroundings. In *Puente Avellaneda* (2014), for instance, Corda-Doberti's posters document the construction of the eponymous bridge, its legacy in the La Boca neighborhood, and its history with the river it crosses. But the posters aren't meant to be the final word of the urban intervention: these are meant to start conversations with spectators who, with the help of Corda-Doberti, share their memories of the bridge. Thus, the visual arts duo manifests history by interrogating urban architecture through posters, oral testimonies, and a kind of processional or ambulatory performance. This is the format *Funciones Patrióticas* mines for their collaborations with Corda-Doberti, a format that has inspired ten additional versions independent of the visual arts duo, still under the *Relato situado* moniker.

With *Acción de memoria urbana*, *Funciones Patrióticas* and Corda-Doberti ask audience members to consider the ground on which they stand. As August Wilson reminded U.S. theatermakers during his famous 1996 conference speech, this ground is geographically, socio-politically, and historically constructed (2016). In the given example of site-specific performance, people in the *now* stand in for the long-ago absent of a *then* and thus cross paths with multiple microhistories. This dialectical engagement between past and present projects itself into an unknowable but no less desirable future. That is, what is at stake in rehearsing local history with locals is the (re)making of locality for future locals.

In a way, then, *Funciones Patrióticas* and Corda-Doberti posit that analyzing the ground on which one stands leads someone to eventually take a stand. The process of situating oneself, of mapping out one's coordinates on several ontological and even metaphysical levels, plays a vital role in civic formation; consequently, telling a story *in situ* and treading together in time actively shapes collectivity. Nevertheless, as *Funciones Patrióticas* and Corda-Doberti critically point out in *Relato situado*, it is the way in which this happens and the ways in which we share space that determines what society was, is, and can be. Like crossing the street, it is a process that repeats daily.

According to *Funciones Patrióticas* and Corda-Doberti, "*Relato situado* proposes a participatory reconstruction of urban memory. A way of documenting history where traces aren't only photographic or filmic but also made up of multiple voices that fall somewhere between the fictional, the real, and the testimonial" (*Funciones Patrióticas*; Corda-Doberti,

2015a, p. 13)²⁰. Though very visual, then, the performance event prioritizes o/aurality, since it is the voice that ultimately connects people to one another in their work. The project curators argue, “When a word is spoken and recorded, something about the hard fact, its rigidity, comes into contact with the at-times imprecise personal narrative of each person” (2015a, p. 16)²¹. Consequently, for *Funciones Patrióticas* and *Corda-Doberti*, facts hardly remain “hard.” They are not immutable in the sense that subjectivity always already gives them a personal shape. Because of this truth about data, *Funciones Patrióticas* and *Corda-Doberti* see their *Relato situado* project as a mode of oral history which “conceives the recovery of memory and its transmission as a dual movement that produces social memory in a permanent state of construction” (2015a, p. 16)²². Their interventions therefore ask audiences to acknowledge the construction of history, memory, culture, society, and space as a political project under constant negotiation and edification. Like the buildings raised/razed around them, this construction is a matter of public work, and the way it works, is by talking.

Acción de memoria urbana takes spectator-participants on a one-hour walking trip through eight city blocks of downtown Buenos Aires (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 3). While participants begin and end their site-specific journey in the reception hall/bar of a small, independent theater (Joffe, 2015), they spend the majority of their journey off site²³. Curated yet flexible, the performance follows a set path and structure but also welcomes and reacts to environmental interactions. Audience members receive programs that include featured performance texts, which the actors will then read aloud (from their own copies of the same publication). The performers also speak freely with improvised stories that relate to their personal lives and ask the audience to likewise contribute their ad-libbed responses to their prompts.

At all times, the performance shares space with other aspects, people, and events of the city nightscape, and takes these interventions into account. For example, on one of the

²⁰ “*Relato situado* propone una reconstrucción participativa de la memoria urbana. Un modo de documentar la historia donde la huella no solo sea fotográfica o fílmica si no que también se componga de múltiples voces que se dirimen entre lo ficcional, lo verosímil y lo testimonial”.

²¹ “En el instante de la palabra y de su registro algo del dato duro, rígido, entra en contraposición al relato íntimo, por momentos imprecisos, de cada una de las personas”.

²² “concibe la recuperación del recuerdo y su transmisión como un movimiento dual que gesta una memoria social en permanente construcción”.

²³ According to Bertie Ferdman, the variety of experimental performance work that activates and interrogates sites surpasses the descriptive limitations of *site-specific* as a generic label; Ferdman therefore proposes the more flexible term *off site* to denote dramaturgies that spin off of their base premise in a geographical location or sociopolitical situation and move toward action (2018).

Saturday nights in which this austral spring event took place (October-November 2015), an inebriated man joined the group and spoke to the discourses of health, poverty, democracy, and labor the performance highlighted in the speeches of Eva Perón and the history of the Ministry of Public Works building. The small crowd took the man in, heard him out, gave him a hug, and even left behind a performer to continue the conversation when the rest of the group continued its journey (Verzero; de la Puente, 2016). In this way, the performance confirms its curatorial values as an intervention and reveals how the city itself performs, as a relationship between a group of people sharing space, affect, and words.

At the beginning of the performance, audience members are given the program, receive some information about Corda-Doberti's *Proyecto Manifestar Historia*, and are asked to take photos, record audio, write, draw, put up posters, serve *mate*, or simply tag along; whatever the audience contributes during their journey could appear in future performances (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 3). Some of this material is also sent to their emails in the days following the performance (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 9). With the introductions all made and instructions meted, the audience leaves the theater and walks east, toward the corner of Hipólito Yrigoyen and Lima, where they make their first stop, facing 9 de Julio Avenue.

Before the busy intersection, production team and audience members exchange their associations with the historical avenue. Seijo recounts a brief anecdote about a game he plays with his young daughters whenever they cross 9 de Julio: to get them to orient themselves quickly, he asks them to find either the Obelisco or the Eva Perón sculptures on the Ministry of Public Works building. Doberti then shares an aggregate memory, a “memory of memories” about marching with Abuelas every March 24, the day of remembrance for truth and justice (Funciones Patrióticas; Corda-Doberti, 2015b). Seijo and Doberti then invite the audience to voice their own memories about the avenue and its surroundings. In one of the recordings an audience member made during the performance, three other participants share their stories: a man recalls the shootings in the area during the protests following the financial collapse of 2001; another man talks about the lunch counter of a restaurant long-since shut down; and a woman remembers visiting her father at the central branch of Banco Nación in the nearby Plaza de Mayo when she was a child (Funciones Patrióticas; Corda-Doberti, 2015b).

The group then crosses the first third of the avenue and goes down a newly inaugurated pedestrian walkway on one of the avenue's two large medians, headed south toward the Ministry of Public Works building. Performers share statistical and historical

information about the avenue, the Obelisco, and the Public Works building; audience members hang up posters that reproduce and further disseminate the data they've just heard (which also appears in the production programs). In the same performance recording mentioned in the previous paragraph, the loud sounds of a parade band compete with the performers for the audience's attention (Funciones Patrióticas; Corda-Doberti, 2015b). Seijo recalls the situated events of that night and others like it during the tense political moments of 2015, a decisive election year:

I remember that every Saturday night we would share 9 de Julio with different events. In that particular instance, I believe it was a parade organized by a Bolivian collective. On another occasion, it was a march in support of Daniel Scioli, who was a presidential candidate [for the left]. When we opened the show, the chances of Macri winning looked slim. By the run-off, the opposite was almost true, which provoked a resignification of all the materials contained within the work (Seijo, 2021)²⁴.

The Seijo within the audio recording, at the time of the performance, tells the audience about how the Eva Perón sculptures came to be placed on two of the four façades of the Public Works building. The audience responds to his observations with casual chat, like any other tour group taking a stroll through the city (Funciones Patrióticas; Corda-Doberti, 2015b). But while similar to touring in some of its aesthetics, *Relato situado* asks audiences to participate as the performance itself intervenes, rather than just watch, which is why they get to ask questions, put up the posters that they feel like putting up, and interact with the street, no matter what's going on (e.g., the exchange with the inebriated man).

The performance's first burst of theatricality takes place in front of the Public Works building. An actor joins the group from among the pedestrians crossing 9 de Julio, and begins to recite Eva Perón's famous renunciation speech from 1951. The actor does not imitate Eva's voice or demeanor, and does not wear a costume that would indicate she's playing that part (Funciones Patrióticas; Corda-Doberti, 2015b). What makes her Eva in the moment is her taking up a printed program and reading Eva's words aloud. As an intervention, *Acción de memoria urbana* contextualizes the history of the Public Works building: it puts into simultaneous action the building's trajectory over time, the different governmental organizations it housed, the famous political rallies in which it served as a backdrop, and the

²⁴ "Recuerdo que todos los sábados a la noche compartíamos la 9 de Julio con distintos eventos. En ese caso creo que fue un desfile de la colectividad boliviana. En otra ocasión, fue una marcha en apoyo a Daniel Scioli, que era candidato a presidente. Cuando estrenamos la obra, se veía lejana la posibilidad de un triunfo de Macri. Luego de la primera vuelta, eso se volvió casi un hecho, lo cual provocó una resignificación de todos los materiales que formaban parte del trabajo".

reasons why the metal statue of Eva facing the northern side of Buenos Aires is portrayed with her microphone. This side of the building, the performance reminds the audience, is a side of 9 de Julio that recognizes the value of free speech in denouncing injustice.

If this first encounter with the building brings up the democratic voice in its classical sense, the eastern façade and main entrance of the building presents the audience with historical silence. While they stand by the newly constructed Metrobus lane²⁵, the performers draw the group's attention to a statue in the building's corner that, according to urban myths, represents the hush-up of bribes. The art-deco statue of a man with an open coffer extends his hand backward, as if gesturing to an offset figure to sneak him some money for public works construction (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 6). Near him, on the building's front door, a silent performer stands before the audience, across the street. She's dressed in a blue and white ruffled dress, the color of the Argentine flag: this is *La Patria* (Homeland), a silent allegorical figure representing the country. *La Patria* points to a graffiti that says, "ABORTO LEGAL YA!" ("ABORTION RIGHTS NOW!") (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 7). Once again, the performance allows the streets themselves to perform their own dissidence. All *Acción de memoria urbana* has to do is signal what might go unnoticed but is already there²⁶.

As the group rounds the Public Works building and passes by the southern façade with the smiling Eva mural, the performance arrives at its halfway point. On their way back to the theater, the group will encounter a series of figures on each block. These figures will interact with *La Patria*, who will never speak but will continue to shepherd the tour group until the very end. *Acción de memoria urbana* reminds the spectator-participants that while the country itself is a silent concept, it is the people that interact with that concept who give it voice. Each voice has a unique point of view, as unique as the experiences that shape the emitting body. For example, in the tiny square behind the Public Works building, the group encounters the actual grandson of a labor-union boss, who reads his grandfather's testimony about the infamous 1955 bombing of Plaza de Mayo in which the navy massacred civilians in a failed coup attempt against Perón (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 7). A block later, heading back north, the group comes across the Eva performer once more. This time she's not reading

²⁵ In a conversation about their next entry into the *Relato situado* series, the company and their interviewers reveal that they were on the Metrobus median for a bit. What's interesting is the correlation the performance is making between the newly inaugurated Metrobus line and the bribery statue. They suggest, in any case, a link between corruption, public works, and money, which is a historical aspect of the avenue that plays out in the present (Verzero; de la Puente, 2016).

²⁶ The long fight for abortion rights in Argentina culminated with legalization in January of 2021.

the words of the historical figure: she's voicing those of a foul-mouthed fictional Evita in Copi's *Eva Perón* (1970). According to Seijo, when read aloud as a text, like the other texts in *Acción de memoria urbana*, Copi's play becomes another document that treats the country's histories and memories. Instead of performing as fiction, the text reveals itself to be "just another bit of discourse" (Verzero; de la Puente, 2016)²⁷. La Patria comforts Copi's distraught Eva and the group moves onto the next block, where they run into a sinister man standing under a graffiti with José López Rega's name²⁸. Funciones Patrióticas and Corda-Doberti did not plan for that graffiti to be there; however, they made it part of the performance. Near this serendipitous symbol of conservative politics, a performer reads headlines from a right-wing Peronist publication in cahoots with the dictatorial government (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 8). La Patria chases him away and moves the crowd to their final stop, a block away from the theater. Here they meet another figure, a guitar player who could be mistaken for a street performer, and in the sense that Funciones Patrióticas and Corda-Doberti are performing in the street, they really are street performers, too. The man sings a Chilean song about the left-wing Popular Unity alliance written during Salvador Allende's presidency (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 8). La Patria seems moved by the performer, and as she takes the group back to the theater, she points out one last street scene: an actual settlement of Indigenous Qom peoples demanding education, health, housing, and the return of their lands (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 9).

A blend of historical discourses that took place on and around 9 de Julio Avenue, and contemporary discourses taking place there at the time of performance, *Acción de memoria urbana's* main intervention is to point things out, to call out what people see, to sound out what others heard, to inform with facts and feelings. The performance weaves a path through these multiple discourses, making them visible, audible, and palpable. *Acción* acknowledges the existing relationships among these discourses by putting them together, by simply presenting them. They're not random or forced discourses: they're very much already there. The performance wakes up the surfaces of things, shakes them from the stupor of neoliberal

²⁷ "un discurso más".

²⁸ Known as *El Brujo*, José López Rega (1916–1989) worked under Perón's third government, negatively influenced Isabel Perón, and ended up collaborating with the dictatorship. Rega was Minister of Social Welfare from 1973 to 1975. (According to a Google Map search, the building where this graffiti used to be is no longer standing).

commerce and the everyday, and brings the pedestrian into greater awareness of their interactions with the city: it is a *living* interaction, in constant process of becoming.

Once back in the theater, the performer-participants share their experiences and choose a poster to take home (Doberti; Lina; Seijo, 2016, p. 9). What's vital about this final moment of sharing is that even if they travelled as a group, it doesn't mean they noticed the same things. The performance's final act proves its hypothesis: collectivity arises from shared experiences involving actions but also the sharing of individual memories in order to create a richer group memory of an event. The more inclusive the sharing, the more democratic the community. Collectivity is not a matter of unanimity but of equal valuing of others' experiences. For example, in a review for *La Nación*, Diana Fernández Irusta confesses what impacted her the most about the event was the moment when her son shared a drawing he made of a tree while on the performance path. She hadn't noticed this tree, and if it hadn't been for him recording what he saw and sharing it, then this enriched experience would not have been possible. Fernández Irusta reflects, "I look at the drawing and tell myself that, most likely, history is also like that: a tree with deep and tangled roots; always the same, but always different. Unpredictable with every new sprout" (2015)²⁹. At all times, the performance breaks away from solipsism and consensus politics. It revels in its discursive plurality and contemplation of contradictions without offering a neat resolution to sublimate these tensions.

The relationship between the *I* and the *we* can emerge in these kind of performance interventions that create a space of reflection through several strategies: a particular set of streets with historical significance, a particular time of day (nighttime, with all of its somnolent connotations), a particular set of graffiti, selected texts of differing political affiliation but dealing with similar subject matter, buildings with building history printed on posters that then blend into the streetscape itself, and a group of activities that a travelling set of spectator-performers have to do as they participate in the performance event. This enables the kind of emotional transformation museums seek in curating exhibits about memory. As Andrea Giunta argues:

A museum doesn't only seek to inform; it also wants to move people, to provoke a state of reflection that transforms one's conscience. Given this observation, we can identify a formal paradigm within the art of memory. Here, memory shouldn't be understood as the capacity to bring to the present a particular aspect of history but

²⁹ "Miro el dibujo y me digo que, probablemente, la historia también sea eso: un árbol de raíces entreveradas y profundas: siempre el mismo, pero siempre distinto. Imprevisible en cada nuevo brote".

rather as the mechanism that changes the conscience of an individual, that particular spectator whom contemplation moves into becoming another: a citizen capable of opposing all violations of human rights (2014, p. 12)³⁰.

Through their architecture, museums and exhibits produce a meditative space that help people think through and transform their political consciousness through a reflection of history combined with personal and bodily memories (Giunta, 2014, p. 13). In Giunta's own phrasing, people have to be "moved in order to know" (2014, p. 22)³¹. Therefore, memory is always already expressed in an affective manner. By making a museum out of city streets through exhibits and signage and docent-like touring, *Acción de memoria urbana* stirs the sociopolitical conscience of spectator-participants. As Lorena Verzero concludes, "the performance multiplies like echoes within the interior of each participant and becomes a trigger of memory, a reanimation of what has been repressed, a reminder of what is at a distance, an awareness of what has been forgotten, an intuition of the future, a critical stance (2020, p. 164)³².

Funciones Patrióticas and Corda-Doberti demonstrate that memories must be told and that, consequently, sharing voices means sharing bodies. Just as a performer can read out the speeches of Eva Perón or a grandson the testimony of his grandfather, sharing a memory of oneself means sharing the memories and discourses of others. It means giving voice to another, in the double sense of saying something that someone else has said before and in the sense of sharing something with someone else, who will carry that new voice with them. According to Ella Finer, "audiences can not only apprehend multiple voices in a single body, but also apprehend a particular solo voice in multiple bodies *and* objects" (2015, p. 181). *Acción de memoria urbana* performs this audible and collective truth that holds *I* and *we* in harmonious tandem.

Conclusion

³⁰ "El museo no busca solo informar, también quiere conmover, provocar un estado de reflexión que transforme la conciencia. En tal sentido puede identificarse un paradigma formal del arte de la memoria. Memoria, en este caso, entendida no tanto como la capacidad de traer al presente un aspecto particular de la historia, sino como el programa de transformación de la conciencia del individuo, ese espectador particular al que la contemplación conmueve transformando en otro: un ciudadano capaz de oponerse a toda violación de los derechos humanos".

³¹ "[hay que] conmover para conocer".

³² "la representación se multiplica como ecos en la intimidad de cada participante y toma la forma de activación de recuerdo, de dinamización de lo reprimido, de reminiscencia de lo lejano, de conciencia de lo olvidado, de intuición del futuro, de toma de postura".

As discussed in the introduction, the literary genre of *testimonios* transcribes oral stories into written narratives; however, the testimonial performances presented in this essay have pushed back on this generic definition, precisely because of the theatrical medium that inflects their expression. In the work of Arias as well as that of *Funciones Patrióticas* and *Corda-Doberti*, the testimonial body presents itself at the scene of transcription. Thus, critical moments of mediated capture, such as a disappeared father's voice playing back on a cassette tape for his living son and grandchild in *Mi vida después*, and audience members creating a voice memo of *Acción de memoria urbana*, activate the archive while simultaneously folding it into the bodily repertoire. Because the performers of *Mi vida después* and *Acción de memoria urbana* account for their own lives in relation to those of others, and because they do so in ways mindful of larger cross sections of society (e.g., the daughter of a disappeared man and the daughter of a genocidal repressor sharing the stage; and middle-class spectators and homeless folks acknowledging their mutual presence on the street), they allow their testimonial voices to participate actively and reverberate widely in a more just, convivial society.

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