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# Imagining Europe: Carles Batlle's *Combat* (*Landscape in the Aftermath*)

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IMAGINING EUROPE  
Carles Batlle's *Combat*  
(*Landscape in the Aftermath*)

Sharon G. Feldman

We are rooted in a place, we are rooted in the absence of a place.  
Herbert Blau, *Take up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*

At the end of *Suite* (1999), an award-winning play by Catalan dramatist Carles Batlle i Jordà, there is a memorable scene in which the spectators observe the collapse of a doll house upon the living room floor.<sup>1</sup> It is a metaphor of domestic, as well as global, instability—not to mention, an ironic reference to Ibsen—in which the audience is left to wonder whether the character of Berta, confused and disoriented in the suite of an old hotel, will return to the mirage-like image of bourgeois European domesticity, to a home and marriage without foundations, or whether she will flee to the more exotic space of Essaouira, in North Africa, the space that has invaded her dreams and memories.

The preoccupation with place, space, and geography that Batlle foregrounds in *Suite* is, in effect, a fundamental component of his theatre, a recurrent feature in a trajectory of ten plays that includes *Combat* (*Paisatge per a després d'una batalla*) (*Combat* [*Landscape in the Aftermath*], 1995), *Les veus de Iambu* (*The Voices of Iambu*, 1997), *Oasi* (*Oasis*, 2001), and *Temptació* (*Temptation*, 2003).<sup>2</sup> In these works, Batlle constructs allegorical spaces of transcultural desire upon which there is engraved an aspiration to transcend the local and the particularities of “home.”<sup>3</sup> His treatment of space coincides with the emergence of a contemporary theatre that attempts to imagine a “new Europe,” one that engages all its ambiguities, indeterminacies, and exigencies.<sup>4</sup> Today, the contemporary Europe of vacillating cultural, political, and physical boundaries is, like Catalunya (or even the living room of *Suite*), a bewildering entity, rife with tension and uncertainty, which eludes any fixed definition and can be viewed as a constant flow and substitution of images, peoples, and cultures. It thus seems fitting that Batlle, who is also an accomplished critic and scholar, would be one of a handful of contemporary dramatists from Catalunya who, in recent years, have begun to establish a profile reaching far beyond the immediate geopolitical borders that they call “home.” To date, Batlle has seen his works staged in France, Luxemburg, Germany, and Austria. In keeping with the type of transnational impulse that has characterized the evolution of modern Catalan

drama since its nineteenth-century beginnings, his plays ponder the issue of cultural identity *vis à vis* a series of intercultural associations.

A great deal has changed in the Barcelona theatre scene since the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 and Spain's subsequent transition to democracy. The Catalan stage has recovered the professional legitimacy and visibility that it was denied during nearly forty years of dictatorship, and Barcelona is presently immersed in the most dynamic and prolific period of its modern theatre history. The road to recovery has necessitated the construction and reconstruction of theatrical infrastructures and institutions throughout Catalunya. It has also entailed the revitalization of text-based drama, which never vanished completely but was acutely impaired by the presence of a regime that sought to stifle the Catalan language and its correspondingly vibrant literary and cultural traditions. Since the mid-1980s, the Barcelona theatre community has witnessed a hysterical outpouring of new playwrights and plays, and within this new wave of Catalan dramaturgy, Carles Batlle represents one of the most experimental and innovative voices.

Batlle has sipped from the same fountain as several other prominent Catalan dramatists of his generation: the waters of the Sala Beckett, the experimental theatre laboratory founded by Valencian playwright/director José Sanchis Sinisterra, in 1989. Today, under the artistic direction of Toni Casares, the Sala Beckett is one of Spain's most prominent and prestigious alternative theatre venues. For those playwrights who are the creative offspring of this locale (Sergi Belbel, Lluïsa Cunillé, Josep Pere Peyró, Mercè Sarrias, and many others), Beckett, Pinter, Bernhard, Mamet, and Koltès have served as frequent points of reference. Batlle, who was once a student enrolled in Sanchis's influential seminars, now regularly leads his own workshops in playwriting and dramaturgy at both the Beckett and the Institut del Teatre (the Barcelona conservatory of theatre and dance). Through this pedagogical role, as well as his work on the advisory board of the National Theatre of Catalunya, he has become a leader in preserving and cultivating the tradition of text-based drama in Catalan. His most recent accomplishments include participation in the National Theatre's "T-6" program, a theatre workshop, under the supervision of Belbel and director Ramon Simó, designed to nurture and stage the work of six carefully selected dramatists per year.

*Combat (Landscape in the Aftermath)*, which premiered at the Beckett under Simó's direction in 1998, puts into practice a theory of relativity, or so-called "relative drama," which Batlle has elaborated in essays concerning his own dramaturgy and, most especially, that of Cunillé and Sanchis Sinisterra.<sup>5</sup> The relativism of "relative drama" refers to the subjective, phenomenological process through which meaning is constituted on stage, always through a relationship of mutual dependence and implication. Batlle, hence, never provides a sense of closure regarding questions of truth, identity, and space (both scenic and geographic). The spectator is only offered partial, ephemeral, and even conflicting visions, an elusive, intangible, portrait of reality.

As in all Batlle's "relative" dramas, there is a special relationship in *Combat* between memory and desire and an interest in what he has termed the fictionalization, or "literarization," of reality; that is, the human inclination to superimpose past experiences upon the present, to reimagine the present as a function of fantasies, dreams, or other fictional constructs.<sup>6</sup> Filtered through the subjective lens of memory, the past—or even, the present—is manipulated, idealized, subjectified, fragmented, and fictionalized. It is grounded, in Cervantine or Flaubertian fashion, in the artistic imagination of literary works, photographs, paintings, and even comic books. In *Combat*, the ekphrastic evocations of John William Waterhouse's pre-Raphaelite painting *The Lady of Shalott* (1888) and the allusions to Alfred Lord Tennyson's eponymous poem (1832), both of which are based on a female figure of Arthurian legend, serve as inspirations for a description of a "landscape in the aftermath."

*Combat* is structured as a series of alternating monologues, interspersed with dialogue, whose continuous present tense imbues the play with an air of atemporality. Here, there are several timely themes that have garnered increasing prominence in Batlle's work; namely, the notions of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious identity, as well as the blending of cultures, languages, ethnicities, and religions, which, in Catalan, is frequently referred to as *mestizaje*. The allusions in the text to the presence of occupying troupes, of ethnic cleansing and civil war, and the reluctant use of a language that is not one's own are evocative of the brutal violence and oppression that ravaged the Balkans throughout the 1990s. It is also possible to associate many of these allusions with Batlle's native Catalunya, a fluid, transcultural space of migration, with a complex cultural and even ethnic identity, devastated by civil war during the last century and struggling to rescue its language and culture from a continuous threat of extinction.

Yet the place that is conjured in Batlle's landscape remains unnamed. Cultural identity here is inscribed *not* through location, but rather through its avoidance or displacement. Spatial geography is dislocated, occluded, or even erased, reflecting, as it would seem, a desire for transcendence. It is, perhaps, a reflection of the ontological and aesthetic implications of a contemporary Europe of disintegrating borders and transnational crossings, a "landscape in the aftermath."

## NOTES

1. *Suite* (Intro. Enric Gallén, Barcelona: Proa, 1999) was a finalist for the Born Prize in 1999 and was awarded the SGAE Prize that same year from the General Society of Spanish Authors and Editors. It premiered, under the direction of Toni Casares, at the Sala Beckett, Barcelona, January 2001 and has had staged readings in Spanish (directed by Francisco Vidal, Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, October 2000), English (Bonner Biennial, July 2000), and French (XXI<sup>e</sup> Festival Théâtre Franco-Ibérique et Latino-Américain," Bayonne, October 2001).

2. *Combat* (Intro. Josep M. Benet i Jornet, València: Tres i Quatre, 1999) has been staged in Catalan (directed by Ramon Simó, Sala Beckett, Barcelona, February 1998), French (directed by Nicolas Steil, Théâtre Ouvert de Luxembourg, November 2001), and German (directed by Bitta Schreiber, Augsburg Festival, June 2003) and has had staged readings in Catalan (Sitges Teatre Internacional Festival, June 1995) and French (directed by Philippe Macaigne, Théâtre 13, Paris, March 2002 and Théâtre du Rond Point, Paris, October 2002). *Les veus de Iambu* (Intro. Joan Castells, Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1999) premiered, under the direction of Thomas Sauerteig, at the Sala Beckett, Barcelona, January 2004. *Oasi* (Intro. Sharon G. Feldman, Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2003) was a finalist for the Born Prize in 2001, was awarded the Recull Prize in 2002, and has had staged readings in French (directed by Agathe Alexis, Théâtre de la Cartoucherie, Paris, December 2003) and German (Bremen Theater, February 2004). *Temptació* (Barcelona: Proa/Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, 2004) has had staged readings in Catalan (Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, January 2004) and German (Berlin Stückemarkt, May 2004) and is scheduled to premiere, under the direction of Rafael Duran, at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, November 2004 and the Burgtheatre, Vienna, December 2004.

3. My view of Batlle's use of space is, in part, inspired by my reading of Una Chauduri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

4. See Janelle Reinelt, who observes this tendency in relation to the contemporary British stage, in "Performing Europe: Identity Formation for a 'New' Europe," in *Theatre Journal* 53.3 (2001): 365–87.

5. See Batlle's essays "El drama relatiu," in *Suite*, 17–23, "Notes de l'autor," in *Les veus de Iambu*, 69–76 (also published with slight variations as "A manera de manifest: Lluïsa Cunillé i Maeterlinck," in *El Pou de les Lletres* K-11/12-L (Fall 1998–Winter 1999): 46–47; "Pròleg" in José Sanchis Sinisterra, *El lector por horas*, Barcelona: Proa/Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, 1999, 7–20; "El darrer teatre de Benet i Jornet: un cicle," in Enric Gallén, ed., *Josep M. Benet i Jornet i la fidelitat al teatre de text*, Barcelona: Eumo/Universitat de Barcelona, 2001, 93–119; "La nouvelle écriture dramatique en Catalogne: De la 'poétique de la soustraction' a la littérisation de l'expérience," in *Écritures dramatiques contemporaines (1980–2000): L'avenir d'une crise*, Paris: Études théâtrales, Université de Paris III/Université Catholique de Louvain, 2002, 134–43.

6. See Batlle, "La nouvelle écriture."

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