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# Catalunya invisible: Contemporary Drama in Barcelona

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Cela est bien dit [...] mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.  
—Voltaire, *Candide*

During the winter of 2000, Lluís Pasqual staged a Catalan version of Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* at Barcelona's Teatre Lliure, the historic home of Catalonia's most stable, accomplished, and distinguished repertory theatre company. In Chekov's play, Madame Lyobov Andreyevna Ranyevskaya, an emblem of the fading elegance and dwindling supremacy of the Russian aristocracy, is compelled by her situation of financial despair to sell her estate and cherry orchard to the *nouveau-riche* Lopakhin and then return to Paris on the eve of the Revolution. The orchard that was once admired for its beauty eventually will be destroyed in order to pave the way for a series of homes that will be occupied by the rising working-class.

Those who witnessed the premiere of Pasqual's *mise en scène* of *L'hort dels cirerers* on the evening of 17 February 2000 might still recall with emotion the moment in which Anna Lizaran, in the role of Madame Ranyevskaya, stood before a small-scale replica of the Teatre Lliure, which Pasqual had incorporated into the set design, and made a resounding plea in defense of her cherry orchard. It was a powerful metatheatrical moment, one likely to remain engraved in the collective memory of the Barcelona theatre community for several years to come, for as Lizaran, one of the *grandes dames* of the Catalan stage and a founding member of the Lliure's resident company, embraced



the replica of this eminently symbolic theatrical space, she seemed magically to localize, and even domesticate, the geographic and spatial parameters of Chekov's play, to fuse in a sweeping allegorical gesture a series of concepts at once very distant and very close to home. It was a moment imbued with nostalgia and self-conscious reflection in which Pasqual, always attentive to the parallels that intertwine fiction with reality, offered his spectators, and specifically, the Barcelona theatre community at large, the opportunity to contemplate where they had been and how far they had come since the Lliure's first opening night on December 1, 1976.

On that winter evening, nearly twenty-five years earlier, just minutes prior to the debut of Pasqual's *Camí de nit*, the audience had stood before an empty stage and burst into spontaneous applause in recognition and anticipation of what was to follow. The ovation, as Joan-Anton Benach recalls, was dedicated to "la nada que no había ocurrido. Al todo que intuíamos iba a ocurrir [...] a unas paredes, a un campo de operaciones que estaba por estrenar" (52). In Pasqual's production of *L'hort dels cirerers*, the doubly coded image of Lizaran/Ranyevskaya wistfully embracing her Lliure/home represented a farewell of sorts and a subtle homage to the theatrical space that the Lliure's repertory company had occupied for nearly a quarter century. The Lliure's original home, unlike the cherry orchard, though, managed to avoid any danger of loss or destruction; in fact, it is still in use today. But on the night of the première in February 2000, the future of the space remained unclear as the Lliure prepared to embark upon a new stage in its artistic evolution.

The Teatre Lliure was founded in 1976 under the direction of Lluís Pasqual, Pere Planella, Fabià Puigserver, and Carlota Soldevila as a private collective with public aspirations. Its original performance space, the site of Pasqual's production of Chekov's play, is located in the Gràcia district of Barcelona, in a late-nineteenth-century building that once belonged to the Catalan workers cooperative La Lleialtat. Faithful to its name and establishment during the democratic transition, the Lliure—both the building and the resident company—has always stood as an emblem of freedom of expression and a vindication of Catalan-language theatre productions (many of these drawn from an international repertoire). The Lliure, to this end, has played a key role in the process through which the post-Franco Catalan stage has struggled to recover and reconstitute the professional legitimacy and visibility that it had lost during the period of the dictatorship. It has also functioned as a creative laboratory and training ground for many of the most talented members of the Barcelona theatre profession.

In 1988, the Lliure finally became a public entity, the Fundació Teatre Lliure-Teatre Públic de Barcelona, with the support of the municipal government. One year later, through the perseverance of the late director and scenic designer Fabià Puigserver, the Barcelona City Council granted the Lliure its dream of a new world-class theatrical space, the Palau de l'Agricultura, a building situated at the foot of Montjuïc, originally constructed for the International Exposition of 1929, and today, a major component of the contemporary public theatre project known as the Ciutat del Teatre. Barcelona's mu-

nicipal and provincial governments, the Generalitat de Catalunya, and Spain's central government all provided funding for the new Lliure, motivated by cultural-political aspirations to transform Barcelona into a European theatre capital (the paradigms being London, Paris, Berlin, and Milan). It did not come as a surprise, therefore, when mayor Pasqual Maragall, in 1997, invited Lluís Pasqual, one of the most internationally recognized Catalan directors, to return to Barcelona from his position in Paris (as director of the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe) to coordinate the Ciutat del Teatre project. Pasqual, who accepted Maragall's invitation, was to serve as artistic director of the new Lliure upon completion of the Palau's restoration, but a series of administrative disputes prompted his controversial exit from the project during the summer of 2000. While the Palau de l'Agricultura did undergo a spectacular, state-of-the-art transformation, when its doors finally opened to the public in November 2001, Pasqual was notably absent.

It is not unusual for Pasqual to play out elements of his professional autobiography in the selection and staging of theatrical works. Audiences are by now accustomed to these veiled references and allegorical renderings. In 1999, when renovations to the Palau appeared to linger on indefinitely, he staged Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the Lliure's Gràcia locale. In July 2002, he staged *Edipo XXI*, his contemporary reading of the tragedy of Oedipus, at the Teatre Grec, only steps away from the Palau. The production, derived from the Oedipal dramas of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Genet, marked Pasqual's long-awaited return to the Barcelona stage. His homecoming, nevertheless, was shadowed by

the peculiar irony that *Edipo XXI* originally had been scheduled to be staged months earlier, along with Carlo Goldoni's *La casa nova*, to celebrate the inauguration of the Lliure's new center of operations at Montjuïc. Oedipus had returned to Thebes, but at least for the moment, he had chosen to remain outside "the new house."

What is perhaps most intriguing about Pasqual's *mise en scène* of Chekov, as well as the other productions mentioned here, is that his ironic evocations do not merely reference his personal artistic trajectory; rather, he has managed to weave into these works a series of allusions to Barcelona, to the cultural-political milieu of the theatre. Pasqual's appropriation and recontextualization of Chekov's discourse of home is especially worthy of note in that seldom has Barcelona—or Catalonia, for that matter—as an image, notion, rhetorical figure, or poetic trope, made an appearance on the contemporary Catalan stage. There are Catalan performance groups, such as La Fura dels Baus, Comediants, and Sèmola, whose references to the culture of the Mediterranean are evocative of Catalonia in varying degrees. Other companies, such as La Cubana, Teatre de Guerrilla, and Els Joglars, have portrayed Catalonia and Catalan identity through the lens of parody and caricature. In the literary realm of text-based drama, however, rarely in recent decades have Barcelona or Catalonia been addressed or even subtly invoked.

In the copious outpouring of Catalan plays written during the post-Franco period, Barcelona and/or Catalonia are conspicuously absent from the fictional landscape. What one finds in these plays is not the Catalonia grounded in the symbolic geography of Àngel Guimerà's late

nineteenth-century *Terra baixa* or *Mar i cel*; nor does it resemble the popular-*costumbrista* portraits of Barcelona that surface in Josep Maria de Sagarra's *La plaça de Sant Joan* or *La Rambla de les floristes*, both written during the 1930s. The traditional geographic place markers of a Catalan imaginary have all but vanished from the settings of contemporary drama. Catalonia, it would seem, is seldom even referenced in a metaphoric or allegorical sense, as was often the case in the politically committed theatre of, for example, Salvador Espriu, written during the years of dictatorship and censorship. While the theatrical politics that frame the production of contemporary Catalan drama appear obsessed with cultural identity and its international projection, the dramatists themselves have eluded any sort of cultural specificity in their work. Barcelona is continually reimagined and envisaged in the minds of architects, politicians and urban planners, and yet, it has taken on a nearly invisible, ghostly presence on the contemporary stage. In the pages that follow, I shall consider the possible causes of the disappearance, which I shall refer to as *Catalunya invisible*. I shall also examine the artistic and political implications of an aesthetic of invisibility. In particular, I am interested in how some of the most prominent contemporary playwrights have negotiated this void and the striking exceptions in which a new image of Catalonia, or Barcelona, has begun to emerge.

In 1985, Peter Book traveled from Paris to Barcelona in search of an empty space in which to stage *La tragédie de Carmen*. His decision to appropriate the vacant Mercat de les Flors, another surviving structure from the 1929 International Exposition, would prompt the

Barcelona municipal government to transform this locale into a major point of reference for visiting performers and companies from the contemporary international stage. The Mercat has since served as a showcase for several works by Brook and has also been the site of memorable appearances by a series of luminaries who have left a lasting imprint upon the evolution of this city's contemporary theatrical avant-garde: Pina Bausch, the late Vittorio Gassman and Tadeusz Kantor, Lindsay Kemp, Robert Lepage, Harold Pinter, Ariane Mouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, and Simon McBurney and the Theatre de Complicite [sic]. Historically, modern Catalan drama has always exhibited, since its origins in the nineteenth century, a type of transnational impulse, engaging in an artistic dialogue with international theatre traditions of both past and present, forging its identity *vis-à-vis* its intercultural associations.

As early as the 1890s, modernist painters/playwrights Santiago Rusiñol and Adrià Gual played significant roles in the translation, performance, and dissemination of international drama in Catalonia, and since that time, Barcelona has arguably functioned as the predominant "gateway" to Spain for European theatre (George and London 12). Referring to the post-Civil War period, John London has demonstrated how, from the 1940s onward, it was:

precisely the translation of non-Spanish plays into Catalan which would lead to the re-establishment of the language as a working theatrical idiom, rather than a folkloric tradition. (7)

In effect, throughout the period of the dictatorship, it was often through trans-

lation that the members of the Catalan independent theatre sector—namely the *Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona* (established in 1955) and the *Escola d'Art Dramàtic Adrià Gual* (established in 1960)—were able to introduce, explore, and thoroughly immerse themselves in the dominant currents of the twentieth-century international stage (Gallén, “Catalan Theatrical Life” 19-27). Their non-professional, non-official pedagogical environments would serve as breeding grounds for many of the actors, directors, playwrights and designers who would go on to become the most dynamic members of the post-Franco theatre scene, including those who would one day found the *Teatre Lliure*. These independent spaces made it possible for them to leave behind the historical baggage of the Spanish stage and look outward, toward Europe, in a gesture that Catalan artists and writers had been known to perform for centuries.

For the independent theatre, the employment of the Catalan language on the stage became a sign of resistance, an affirmation of identity and cultural history, and a refusal to yield to the centralizing force of the Spanish language and all its implications. It will always be a cruel and absurd paradox that, during the post-Civil War years, the denial of freedom of expression, in a sense, seemed to fuel creativity and change, and the confining sociocultural circumstances surrounding the independent theatre became a catalyst for aesthetic innovation and internationalization.

During the democratic period, the presence of the Catalan language as a vehicle of theatrical expression has continued to hold symbolic value as a crucial marker of identity and a vindication of

Catalan culture. For many Catalan dramatists, innately conscious of the oppressive realities of the past, the linguistic distinction appears to take precedence over all other thematic or aesthetic indicators of identity. Consequently, if Catalonia is allegedly “invisible” in a thematic or spatiotemporal sense, its presence is nevertheless unequivocally conveyed through language. To write (and, one would hope, to stage) a play in Catalan is, in effect, to inscribe and reclaim a specific cultural space. This alone is often regarded as a triumph, not to mention a significant political gesture.

Ironically, the democratic freedom that afforded the professional theatre unrestricted use of Catalan as a “theatrical idiom” appears to have yielded a certain complacency, ambivalence, or even neglect on the part of some directors and producers with regard to the staging and support of autochthonous drama. Hence, at times it would seem as though Catalan drama itself were in danger of becoming invisible. Barcelona playwright/poet Joan Casas has even dared to pose the provocative hypothesis that the often-cited “new Catalan dramaturgy,” in effect, may be merely a “mirage.” In “*Casa nova, casa vella*,” an article whose title constitutes a subtle allusion to the *Palau de l'Agricultura*, Jordi Coca underscores the importance of recuperating theatrical infrastructures, but also questions the relatively inadequate amount of energy devoted to tending the fields of Catalan drama. Coca detects an inexplicable aloofness among Barcelona production companies with regard to Catalan plays:

ens hauria de dur a tots plegats a ser  
més generosos amb el nostre passat i

amb el nostre present. És imperiós que sigui així si no ens volem concebre com a perifèrics i provincians. (35)

catalans. Es parli de les nostres inquietuds i de les responsabilitats d'un millor futur polític. (11)

Indeed the interest (even obsession) on the part of public entities with infrastructure often has more to do with global aspirations and the international projection of *catalanisme* than with the artistic vigor of the local theatre profession or the cultivation and preservation of Catalan text-based drama.

Possibly the most notorious case in recent years of the disregard for autochthonous drama (all too frequently, in the name of "normalization") is that of director Josep Maria Flotats, who was asked by Catalan cultural minister Joan Maria Pujals to vacate his position as director of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya shortly after the "official" inauguration of the theatre in the fall of 1997. On the eve of the inauguration, the eminent director Ricard Salvat, who was riling against Flotats's decision to launch his first (pre-inaugural) season of programming with Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Stephen Sondheim's *Company*, felt compelled to ask, "Are we in Burundi or in the European Community?" and then to remark that, after twenty-two years of democracy, he had yet to see an adequate model of public theatre that was even minimally compatible with the European Union (9).

Salvat called for:

una 'lectura' de la nostra dramaturgia nacional i, a la vegada, de la dramaturgia internacional. Un repertori que expliqui la 'nostra història', la dels Països Catalans, en relació a la Península Ibèrica i a Europa [...] i que a través d'aquest repertori es defineix [sic] el nostre ésser aquí, en el món, com a

In effect, Salvat was expressing the same concerns with international projection, self-determination, and protectionism that would later land on the agenda of the new administration of the Teatre Nacional following the departure of Flotats. In recent years, this theatre, under the direction of Domènec Reixach, has launched several initiatives designed to cultivate and showcase the work of Catalan dramatists, directors, dancers, choreographers, and companies, young and old. In 2002, the Teatre Nacional introduced a new project known as "T-6," under the supervision of playwright-director Sergi Belbel, with the intention of nurturing and staging the work of six young Catalan dramatists and directors per year.

But the definition of the "we" (*nosaltres*) to which Salvat (and, also, Coca) was referring (as in "our national drama," "our history," "our place here, in the world, as Catalans," and "our concerns") is a rather imprecise construct, part of a contemporary *nostreficació*, which has infiltrated popular discourse and political rhetoric in reference to an imaginary map of cultural distinctions. Catalonia's status as a stateless nation has given way to overt consciousness with regard to the space of Catalan culture and the curious tendency to define that space through the abstract use of personal pronouns. Performance theory has already shown that the very notion of *catalanitat*, or of any cultural identity for that matter, can be construed as a subjective process. Consequently, for a community to "define" itself on stage, to bring to life a national narrative, the stage

must be conceived as a site of conflict, struggle, and resistance, of cultural, social, and political negotiations and vacillations.

Today, the so-called “new” Europe of evaporating cultural, political and physical boundaries is, like Catalonia, a bewildering entity, rife with tension and uncertainty, which eludes any fixed definition and can be envisioned as a constant flow and substitution of images, peoples, technologies, and ideologies. The contemporary technological revolution, coupled with the deconstruction of the nation-state, the spread of cosmopolitanism, and movements of mass migration have, in the words of Montserrat Guibernau, “transformed the world into a singular place where processes of cultural integration and disintegration take place” (130). Arjun Appadurai points to the formation of ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples as symptoms of a contemporary subjectivity that naturally would inspire us to reflect upon long-established relationships between the local and the global (33). It is also, in a sense, this ambiguous space of reflection that in recent years has enabled Catalan culture in general, and theatre in particular, to question the sovereignty of the Spanish nation-state while inserting itself within a European, and even global, context.

Vincenç Villatoro describes the “terrain” of Catalan cultural hegemony as a symbolic space of emotion, perception, and subjectivity (429). It is a place of individual as well as collective self-recognition whose parameters are established phenomenologically, in relation to different “circles of belonging” (*cercles de pertinença*), which include the Spanish

state and Europe. Within this emotional, subjective space, the image of Europe is regularly evoked, albeit ambiguously, as a point of contrast with Spanish centralism and as a context for a more autonomous Catalonia. Hence, Villatoro situates the issue of cultural identity within a spatial arena, not only a linguistic-political arena, as is so often the case. Such a gesture is particularly relevant to the theatre, for the problem of place, and the relationship between place and theatrical space, are issues that traverse the entire trajectory of modern Western drama. Una Chaudhuri employs the term “geopathology” to describe this problematic, observing how it emerges throughout the realist/naturalist tradition, as a

series of ruptures and displacements in various orders of location, from the micro- to the macrospatial, from home to nature, with intermediary space concepts such as neighborhood, hometown, community, and country ranged in between. (55)

The play with spatial geography, especially with the image of home and the notion of locality, can be remarkably revealing in terms of a playwright’s sense of self, identity, and culture.

Perhaps the most flagrant manifestation of the phenomenon that I have termed *Catalunya invisible* can be found in the theatre of Lluïsa Cunillé (Badalona, 1961). Cunillé, who, in fact, writes in both Catalan and Spanish, and whose *La cita* was staged at the Edinburgh Festival in 1999, has created a series of plays that map out her own idiosyncratic view of the world, what Marcos Ordóñez has called “Cunillelàndia.” It is an unsettling, static universe, where time does not seem to



advance forward; rather, one has the impression that her characters are suspended in an interminable present. In general, all spatiotemporal signs are absent; what dominates is an atemporality and vacuity of space, a vaporous and circumstantial landscape that seems disquietingly devoid of action. Any insinuation of plot or characterization is established through fragments, flashes, and remnants of subjective reality; not through an objective, naturalist, or psychological approach. As Ordoñez observes, “Cunillelàndia” is an enigmatic, indeterminate place whose limits are plotted along the “interstitial passageways” of contemporary urban life:

Sabem que som allí, altre cop, perquè reconeixem les seves llums i ombres (sempre imprecises, sempre canviants), els seus llocs recurrents: les zones de pas, els intersticis. (43)

Cunillé’s circumstantial landscapes include the large vacant warehouse that, in *Accident* (1994), functions as a storage area for thousands of portable ventilation fans; the vacant apartment that, in *La venda* (1994), one character tries to sell and the others try to fill with their desires; the bedroom of a hotel in a anonymous coastal city where, in *Privado* (1996), the true identity of a mysterious man vacillates among multiple possibilities; the elevator of an urban apartment building that, in *Apocalipsi* (1998), seems to take an infinite amount of time to travel down to street level; and the empty lot situated in a peripheral zone of a large city where, in *L’aniversari* (2000), a man and a woman have a chance encounter. Cunillé’s spaces, barely defined, practically bare, lacking in distinguishing characteristics, have a provisional, tenuous, fleeting nature,

whose very constitution is, in a phenomenological sense, always contingent upon the bodies, desires, and anxieties that inhabit them. The situation was skillfully captured by director Yvette Vigatà and scenic designer Tobia Ercolina in their *mise en scène* of *La venda* in 1997, where large sheets of semitransparent plastic were used to invoke the walls of the empty apartment. The combination of the plastic sheeting with carefully diffused lighting (designed by Nuccio Marino) suggested the presence of an evanescent, ghostly reality, on the verge of slipping away.

Julià Guillamon has described, in *La ciutat interrompuda*, a tendency among Catalan (and even Spanish) narrative of the 1990s to evade literary representations of Barcelona, transferring the “real” map of the city to a personal-mental imaginary. He borrows the notion of the “interrupted city” from an essay written by Giulio Carlo Argan, who observed in the late 1970s that Rome was no longer on the minds of writers and artists, but instead had passed into the hands of technocrats. For Guillamon, contemporary Barcelona is also an interrupted city, in that there is a vast gap, or inconsistency, between the fictionalized representations of the city and the images conjured during the post-Franco reconstruction (before and after the Olympic games) by politicians, urban planners, and architects. Faced with the difficulties of portraying an urban landscape that is changing so rapidly that it practically eludes description, these writers, which include Quim Monzó, Sergi Pàmies, and David Cirici, have given preference to interior “psychogeographies” or incomplete fragments drawn from the exterior urban scenery, to anonymous “no-places” that are seemingly lacking in signs of identity. Reflecting upon this absence, Guillamon

wonders if it might be possible at some point to reclaim these lost spaces: “¿Es poden reconquerir els espais de l’anonimat, es poden convertir en espais d’identitat i de record?” (279-86).

Cunillé’s indeterminate voids, I would suggest, are paradoxically instilled with identity and meaning, for cultural identity in her plays is inscribed not through location, but rather through its avoidance or displacement. Cultural identity is established elliptically, in such a way that its flagrant non-presence acquires strong connotative powers. Spatial geography is dislocated, occluded, “interrupted,” or even erased, reflecting a desire for transcendence, a desire to avoid the confining pitfalls of—to paraphrase Coca—peripheralism and provincialism.

These dislocations are conceivably indicative of the quandary, described by Guillaumon, of depicting from a realist perspective the rapid transformations of Barcelona’s urban landscape. But, in an even broader context, Cunillé’s elliptical inscription of identity can be taken as a reflection of the ontological and aesthetic implications of our existence within a contemporary technological culture of disintegrating borders and transnational crossings and migrations. Chauduri, effectively, attributes the “erasure of spatial particularity” that is so prevalent in contemporary drama to the so-called postmodern condition (5).

The strategies through which Cunillé, as well as other contemporary playwrights, inscribe Catalonia, its inclu-



Rosa Maria Sardà, Joan Anguera, and Carme Molina in *Olor*, by Josep M. Benet i Jornet. Directed by Mario Gas. Scenic design by Jon Berrondo. Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, 24 February-9 April 2000. Photo by Pilar Aymerich.

sion and exclusion, do not offer an essentialist vision; instead Catalonia vacillates, it hovers and drifts in the background, undergoing continual formulations and reformulations. Josep Miquel Sobrer poses the notion of *aporia*, a “being at a loss for where one is, or where to begin or how to proceed,” as an apt way of conceiving this problematic sense of Catalan nationhood, which he traces to the cultural *Renaixença* of the 1890s and the “reinvention of Catalonia as nation” (173). It is this same geographic loss, or sense of displacement—the paradoxical presence of an invisible Catalonia—that has become a defining trait of contemporary Catalan drama.

The strategy of displacement is often portrayed on the Catalan stage, and elsewhere, through the figure of America. As Chaudhuri notes, America is “the hinge, the turning point in more than a century-long neglect of the very principle that it seems to erase: space” (4). Such a strategy can be observed in *Després de la pluja*, by Sergi Belbel (Terrassa, 1963), a play that was awarded France’s Molière Prize for best comedy in 1998. Here, the setting, the lofty rooftop of a skyscraper owned by a transnational corporation, alludes to an uncertain abstract urban geography, reminiscent of North America and resembling, in particular, New York City. In the play, which premiered under Belbel’s direction at the Centre Cultural de Sant Cugat del Vallès in 1993, “America” is reimagined as a placeless metaphoric space of idealism, and also of decadence, a “heterotopic” realm of desire, comprising, as Chaudhuri would have it, “many different, even incompatible places” (5).

Carles Batlle attributes this so-called “Americanization” of Catalan drama in part to the contemporary fascination with

the theatre of David Mamet, whose critical views of American society have provided Barcelona playwrights with a paradigmatic portrait of post-industrial decline. In addition, as Batlle notes, the influence of North American cinema has been a crucial element in the creation of a generic “collective imaginary” that entails abundant Hollywood film clichés, such as the presence of skyscrapers and evening mist wafting off a set of broad city streets (“La nueva dramaturgia” 46).

Batlle (Barcelona, 1963), who is a dramatist as well as a critic, was selected to represent Catalonia at a workshop for new European playwrights, held at the Bonn Biennale during the summer of 2000. In plays that include *Les veus de Iambu*, *Combat*, *Suite*, and *Oasi*, Batlle constructs allegorical spaces of transcultural desire upon which is engraved an aspiration to transcend the local and the particularities of “home.” His plays put into practice a theory of “relative drama” (“el drama relatiu”), which he has elaborated in articles concerning his own theatre and, most especially, that of Cunillé. Meaning in these plays is established “relatively,” or in relation to other scenic elements. The relativism of the “drama relatiu” thus refers to the subjective, phenomenological process through which meaning is constituted and reconstituted on the stage, always through a relationship of mutual dependence and implication.

At first glance, *Suite*, which won the SGAE Prize (from the Sociedad General de Autores y Editores) in 1999 and premiered at the Sala Beckett in January 2001, under the direction of Toni Casares, is a play of intimate dimensions and domestic affairs. As the plot develops, the

audience bears witness to an intense and enigmatic relationship between two married couples: older (Anna and Marc) and younger (Berta and Pol). The spectators, as well as Marc and Berta, are compelled to confront the possibility that the older woman, Anna, may be romantically involved with her younger son-in-law, Pol; however, Batlle never provides a sense of closure regarding the truth. The spectator is only offered partial, ephemeral, and even conflicting visions, an elusive, kaleidoscopic portrait of reality.

*Suite* is also a play about the relationship between memory and desire within the context of what Batlle has referred to as the fictionalization, or "literarization," of reality; that is, the human inclination to superimpose past experiences upon the present and to reimagine the present as a function of fantasies and dreams ("La nouvelle écriture"). Filtered through the subjective lens of memory, the past is manipulated, idealized, subjectified, and fictionalized in such a way that reality, or the real, never emerges as fixed or closed. Signifiers are suspended in a tenuous mode of deferral. Ambiguity and opacity emerge as both cause and effect. In *Suite*, it is never entirely clear whether Anna's rapport with reality and her relationship to past events (a possible sojourn in Essaouira, a possible love affaire with a young sailor) is grounded in the fiction of books, paintings, and the cinema, or might even be derived from a set of memories that are not her own.

Batlle deconstructs the privileged setting of modern drama that is the family home, the same setting found in the realist/naturalist works of Chekov and Ibsen. According to Batlle's text, the set

design is composed of two contiguous spaces. The first is a typical bourgeois living room, the home of Marc and Anna. The second is a more peripheral, transitional, undefined space, the hotel suite occupied by Berta. Both spaces, though, share a window and the sunlight that streams through it, a metaphor of the confusing, undiscovered, exhilarating world situated beyond the confines of the home. The presence of the shared window (situated, in theory, upstage) creates an indeterminate zone of slippage between the two spaces, suggesting to the spectator that neither space is really what it seems to be. The degrees of openness and closure are relative to one another. Casares emphasized this spatial deconstruction through the bed and the telephone, which were situated in such a way that the two spaces seemed to intersect.

*Suite* contains a dense plot of emotion, betrayal, and infidelity, in which the private, intimate story of these two marriages, when transferred to a broader, more public spatial milieu, establishes a crude allegory of contemporary (postnational) Europe: lost, disoriented, and adrift, without a precise memory or destiny. The opening stage directions situate the action "anywhere in Europe in 1999." At the end of the play, as the spectators observe the collapse of a dollhouse upon the living room floor (a metaphor of domestic and global instability, as well as an ironic intertextual reference to Ibsen), they are left to wonder whether Berta, who remains dazed and confused in the suite of an old hotel, will return to the mirage-like image of a home and marriage without foundations, or whether she will flee to the more exotic space of Essaouira, in North Africa. Batlle establishes the spa-

tial geography of his play through a phenomenological process; not in relation to specific references to Catalonia *per se*, but *vis-à-vis* cultural references to other “circles of belonging”: Essaouira, Morocco, Africa, Europe. In so doing, he positions his play within an ambivalent space of transnational transactions and dislocations, of cultural integration and disintegration in which contemporary Catalonia is implicated. Batlle’s treatment of space also coincides with an observation offered by Janelle Reinelt with regard to the British stage, in which she notes the emergence of a contemporary theatre that attempts to imagine a “new Europe,” one that engages all its ambiguities and indeterminacies.

Curiously, Casares, in his *mise en scène* of *Suite*, imposed a series of concrete spatial connotations through the use of small domestic details, such as the placement of volumes of the *Enciclopèdia catalana* on the living room bookshelves. He also incorporated into his production a series of background songs that were popular in Catalonia during the 1960s and the period of the *nova cançó*: “El testament d’Amèlia,” a folksong of medieval origins, and the music of Guillermina Mota and Francesc Pi de la Serra. Casares’s version of the play offered an alternative, more visible construction of Catalonia, and thereby conveyed a certain self-consciousness with respect to the invisibility imbedded in Batlle’s text.

In *Oasi*, a play that was awarded the Blanes Prize in 2002, Batlle takes his geopathological concerns a step further, conceiving the notion of Catalonia in relation to a clearly demarcated discourse of exile, displacement, homecoming, and migration. Neither Catalonia nor Barcelona

is ever named directly, but they are subtly invoked in relation to other places (Madrid, Cardiff, and the North African desert). In addition, the play contains a concrete reference to the Olympic games of an anonymous city. Batlle’s text is situated in a similarly anonymous rural area of Europe, faintly reminiscent of La Garrotxa (Girona), the pre-Pyrenean zone of Catalonia where he presently makes his home.

The protagonists of *Oasi*, Xavier and Raixid, are two men in their mid-thirties with a shared past. Raixid, a Moslem, who was born on a desert oasis, immigrated with his parents to this rural European environment. When he was a child, he and his family occupied a small house located on property owned by Xavier’s family until Raixid’s parents were killed in a tragic fire. Xavier’s parents took Raixid into their home and the two boys were raised as brothers. While Raixid has remained close to his childhood home, Xavier, in contrast, has embarked upon his own exilic journey, first to a Madrid prison (having been accused of “terrorism” when he participated in the political protests surrounding the Olympic games), and then to Great Britain, where he acquired a teaching position. When the play begins, Xavier has returned “home” following a ten-year absence. While there, he engages in a search, through memory and desire, for his own signs of identity and belonging. But, Raixid, in a sense, has appropriated the space that Xavier has left behind: his land, his former life, and perhaps even his memories. Raixid now carries the pocket watch that once belonged to Xavier (an emblem of the passage of time) and has even married Xavier’s former fiancée, Maria. Moreover, Raixid

tries to persuade Xavier to sell him the family property in order to clear the way for the construction of a reservoir. Xavier's homecoming, then, is imbued with an anguished sense of loss as he faces the impossibility of recuperating the past and reinscribing it in the present. The spatial geography of his past is in danger of being vanquished by the threat of rising water from the reservoir. In his own words:

Quan obro una porta noto com si tots els mobles, com si tos els calaixos, totes les nostres velles andròmines, em tinguessin por, com si l'aire fugís, com si no em fos permès respirar. I em passo el dia tancant armaris, tancant calaixos, tancant caixes, portes, finestres [...]. Sóc un intrús.

Here, through an intriguing reversal of traditional paradigms, the placeless, deterritorialized self is not the Moslem immigrant, but the European who has been living an exilic existence. As in *Suite*, Batlle uses a series of spatial metaphors and descriptions to play out the existential anxiety that is linked to the production of place. According to the stage directions, the opening scene (scene 0), contains the striking image of a large piece of undulating fabric which covers nearly the entire scenic space. In the scene that follows (scene 1), the fabric is hoisted upward, from the center, as though it were a Berber tent, or *haima*. Situated beneath the tent-like structure are traditional objects, such as a grandfather clock, which are strangely reminiscent of a past life and an underlying cultural identity. Thus, with this poetic depiction, a veritable palimpsest, Batlle creates a metaphor that speaks about multiculturalism and the spatial inscription of cultural identity.

Xavier's own "geopathology," his anguished homecoming, his frustrated attempts to remember and recuperate his roots, are indirectly evocative of the situation of contemporary Catalonia, a space of migration and cultural flux. The notion of "home" emerges as a subjective figure that is conjured through fluctuating emotions and relativistic relations, through arrivals and departures.

In some respects, *Olors*, a play by Josep Maria Benet i Jornet (Barcelona 1940), one of Barcelona's most distinguished playwrights, is enmeshed in an intertextual dialogue with *Oasi*, for both plays intertwine space, culture, and migration. Benet's play, which premiered in February 2000 at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya under the direction of Mario Gas, is an exception to the persistent invisibility of Catalonia in contemporary drama. Here, the dramatist grants Barcelona the role of protagonist and speaks implicitly about the urban transformations and the evolving cultural identity of the city. Specifically, he creates a portrait of the interior "patios" of the Raval quarter of his own youth. *Olors* is the third play in a trilogy, but as Benet is quick to point out in the introduction to the published text, it can easily stand on its own (12).

With *Olors*, Benet returns to a series of characters and to a small parcel of one of the oldest sections of Barcelona (a synecdochal representation of the city), which he depicted for the first time in *Una vella, coneguda olor*, written in 1963, and recipient of the first Josep Maria de Sagarra Prize. Benet had already revisited this fictional world in 1979, with *Baralla entre olors*. *Olors*, therefore, represents the end of a cycle that treats a nearly forty-

year span in the evolution of the city, from the second half of the dictatorship to democracy. Not surprisingly, one of the principal themes of *Olor*s is the passage of time.



Carme Molina, Rosa Maria Sardà and Joan Anguera in *Olor*s, by Josep M. Benet i Jornet. Directed by Mario Gas. Scenic design by Jon Berrondo. Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, 24 February-9 April 2000. Photo by Pilar Aymerich.

The theme emerges in accordance with Benet's interest (expressed in his most recent works) in the relationship between the production of meaning and

momentary changes in perception and subjectivity. He tends to offer the spectator ephemeral, partial visions of reality, in a manner similar to the elusive, fleeting signifiers that inhabit the theatre of Batlle or Cunillé—in effect, Benet's theatre has exerted a substantial influence, direct or indirect, upon the work of these two dramatists. In a phenomenological sense, Benet's plays are underpinned by an interest in capturing, and making visible on the stage, the sensation of temporal flux that characterizes our existence, the subjective transformations relative to the perceptions of each moment.

In *Olor*s, Benet presents a possible way of negotiating, through theatrical representation, the literary dilemma, underlined by Guillamon, of portraying an urban landscape that is in the midst of rapid transformation. The problem of the passage of time in *Olor*s emerges metaphorically through Maria, the protagonist (played by Rosa Maria Sardà), who creates, with her photographs, each day at the same time and in the same place, a portrait of the

changing reality of the patios of the Raval. The play is structured in such a way that the two major plot lines crisscross in time and give way to an encounter between two

generations, that of Maria and that of Joan, the son of her deceased lover.

*Olors* subtly alludes to the secret life of the old city and its entrails: the physical demolition of plazas and entire city blocks, and the construction of architectural “marvels” such as the Rambla del Raval, which are the result of the so-called *esponjament*, or “opening up,” of less prosperous sections of the city. Many of these sections are today inhabited by Moslem immigrants. For Benet, such demolition is also a disfigurement of historical memory, of a section of Barcelona, which, as he explains, is just as representative of the city’s history as the more renowned landmarks that include the Church of Santa Maria del Mar or the buildings of Antoni Gaudí (“Ciutats, sentiments” 10). With her photographic images, Maria will try to seize any remaining vestiges of the past, the fragments of reality that are a reflection of the desires and memories of those who occupy these interrupted spaces.

In *Olors*, the city of Barcelona is bodied forth, constituted and reconstituted within the space of the theatre as a being with a large, gaping wound. The play even can be conceived as a requiem for the older section of the city, as its past falls away and veers toward a state of disappearance, of invisibility, buried beneath the rubble of the wrecking crews. Benet’s lyrical stage directions create a poetic personification of the city being devoured by a monstrous being (a possible reference to the Barcelona city council):

Porta balconera per on es passa a un pati interior, als darreres d’una illa de cases, al barri vell de Barcelona. [...] Galeries, finestres, canonades, ferros i fills d’estendre la roba. Abandó total.

Ni un signe de vida. A les galeries només queden andròmines inútils; alguns balcons no tenen porta i ofereixen a la vista el badall dels seus interiors; d’alguna finestra n’han saltat els vidres. Però a més, i sobretot, els patis han estat ferits, al fons, per un esvoranc enorme, com si un monstre hagués queixalat i devorat cases senceres i d’algunes n’hagués deixat, de moment, restes convertides en munts de runa [...]. (27)

Gas and scenic designer Jon Berrondo created an elaborate, three-dimensional backdrop for the *mise en scène*. The abandoned buildings, half destroyed, were constructed of semitransparent tulle, and among them, Berrondo placed a cavernous hole, filled with rubble and debris. In addition, Gas added a visual prologue and epilogue that were not present in Benet’s original text: at the beginning of the spectacle, images of the city in its various stages of demolition, which were evocative of Maria’s photographs, were projected upon the metallic frontal curtain (the type normally required for fire prevention). At the end of the play, Maria and Joan remained frozen on the stage, positioned in a type of *tableau vivant*, while the photographic images were projected once again and the theatrical space was inundated by the roaring crescendo of demolition machines.

*Olors* is one of very few contemporary plays that have dared even to touch upon the multicultural realities of Catalonia, its status as a transnational space. As Catalonia struggles to position itself within the space of cultural integration and disintegration that is the new Europe, it must also take into account the space of cultural pluralism that it calls home. If



the aesthetic and political evolution of the modern Catalan stage is conceived as a process of intercultural transactions, the product of attitudes of openness with regard to international theatre traditions, then the contemporary conditions surrounding the emergence of a postnational subjectivity have only served to facilitate this process. Underpinning this evolution is an implicit aspiration for transcendence, a desire to evade locality and localism. Hence, one of the primary geopathological obsessions of contemporary Catalan drama is the limit of cultural specificity.

Perhaps, in terms of international projection, there is much to be gained from this aversion to specificity. Today, the ontological limits that define the contemporary Catalan stage reach far beyond the geopolitical borders of Barcelona and Catalonia *per se*. Sergi Belbel, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, Calixto Bieito, Lluïsa Cunillé, Lluís Pasqual, and Carles Santos are among a long list of prominent contemporary Catalan directors and playwrights that have traversed international borders and witnessed their works premiere at venues that include the Edinburgh and Salzburg Festivals, the Teatro Piccolo di Milano, the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Contemporary Catalan theatre seems to thrive on such transnational transactions, creating a limitless theatrical geography.

The question that lingers is whether it is possible to foment international interest, to play on the global stage, and at the same time maintain a distinct sense of self and identity. The answer, perhaps, lies in the conception of *Catalunya invisible* as a space whose contours are plotted not only through strategies of disappear-

ance, silence, and erasure, but also, through self-recognition and self-conscious desire. In his theoretical writings, Brook has emphasized the role of the "empty space" of the theatre as a place where the invisible can unexpectedly materialize, making itself visible and known to the spectator (*The Empty Space* 42). Similarly, in this aesthetic of invisibility, Catalonia's presence vacillates and makes itself known. It manages to resist the absolute vanishing point.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Joan Ollé, as well as the series of articles in *La Vanguardia Digital* by Santiago Fondevila.

<sup>2</sup> See Ramon Teixidor for more on the history of the Teatre Lliure.

<sup>3</sup> The Palau contains two performance spaces, the Teatre Fabià Puigserver and the Espai Lliure, presently under the artistic supervision of Josep Montanyès and Joan Ollé, respectively. Montanyès has also replaced Pasqual as general director of the Ciutat del Teatre consortium.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Pablo Ley's reading of *Edipo XXI* in relation to Pasqual's personal circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> The Mercat de les Flors is situated behind the Palau de l'Agricultura. These two structures, together with the outdoor Teatre Grec and the Institut del Teatre, comprise Barcelona's Ciutat del Teatre.

<sup>6</sup> According to Gallén, the Agrupació offered performances of plays by Molière, Shakespeare, Jonson, Goldoni, Musset, Chekov, Strindberg, Shaw, Claudel, Giraudoux, Anouilh, Rattigan, Ionesco, Dürrenmatt, and Brecht, as well as several modern Catalan plays. In addition, the Agrupació founded a publication series, *Quaderns de Teatre*, which offered plays in Catalan translation drawn from an international repertoire, as well as modern Catalan drama ("Catalan Theatrical Life" 23-24). The Adrià Gual school, under the direction of Ricard Salvat and Maria Aurèlia Capmany, staged plays by Brecht, Handke, Rusiñol, Espriu, and Villalonga, among others. See also Gallén, *El teatre a la ciutat de Barcelona*

*durant el règim franquista (1939-1954)* and Coca, *L'Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona*.

<sup>7</sup> One finds, for instance, in the realm of Catalan-language television, several self-consciously parodic evocations of the first-person plural. The six-part series titled *Som 1 meravella*, produced by the theatre company Els Joglars in 1988 for Spanish national television, was inspired by the Generalitat's political slogan "Som 6 milions." Similarly, *La cosa nostra* was the ironic title of the late-night television program produced by Andreu Buenafuente and the multimedia production company El Terrat during the late 1990s for Catalan autonomous television. Also related is the catchphrase "La teva," which is regularly employed by Catalan autonomous television.

<sup>8</sup> Xavier Rubert de Ventós presents a similar concept in *Catalunya: De la identitat a la independència*.

<sup>9</sup> My description of Vigatà's *mise en scène* of *La venda* is derived from my experience as a spectator at the première of the play at the Teatre Adrià Gual on July 17, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this reconstruction, see Oriol Bohigas.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault on the concept of heterotopia.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Batlle's articles, "El drama relatiu" and "Notes de l'autor."

<sup>13</sup> My description of Casares's *mise en scène* of *Suite* is derived from my experience as a spectator at the Sala Beckett on January 19, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> The image of rising water and the fear of drowning were also present in *Combat*, one of Batlle's earlier texts.

<sup>15</sup> *Una vella, coneguda olor* premiered in 1964 at Barcelona's historic Teatre Romea under the direction of Bartolí-Asensi, with a set design by the venerated Catalan painter Josep Guinovart. In 1975, Lluís M. Güell directed a version of the same play for the Catalan-Balearic circuit of Spanish national television. *Baralla entre olors* was produced under the direction of Lluís M. Güell for the same television circuit in 1981. Rosa Maria Sardà was cast in the role of Maria in both television versions.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Feldman, "'Un agujero sin límites': La mirada fenomenológica de Josep M. Benet i Jornet."

<sup>17</sup> My description of Gas's *mise en scène* of *Olors* at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya is based on my viewing of a video recording of the production. I am grateful to Josep M. Benet i Jornet for providing me with a copy of this video.

<sup>18</sup> See also Brook, *The Shifting Point*.

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