

MAPPING LIMINOID GEOGRAPHIES IN CONTEMPORARY CATALAN THEATRE

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*It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home,
Mr. Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution.*
Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* (1957)

“You still do not master our language, and you are already soiling it” (*La pell en flames*, 43).

“He understands your language, but he cannot speak it” *Après moi, le déluge*, 468).

“I suppose I feel like talking to someone who speaks my language” (*Fum*, 195).

“Do you always have to show off that you are an expert at language?” (*Olvidémonos de ser turistas*, 453).

Four instances where language, identity, and displacement weave imperceptibly into a liminoid space, marked by the many multi-liminal situations that saturate four Catalan plays: Guillem Clua’s *La pell en flames* (2005), Lluïsa Cunillé’s *Après moi, le déluge*, (2007), Josep Maria Miró’s *Fum* (2012), and *Olvidémonos de ser turistas* (2017), respectively. Their characters roam foreign lands, odd and violent multilingual worlds in which, regardless of the particular storyline, their presence becomes physically and psychologically incongruous. The plays expose deep conflicts that reverberate well beyond the walls of their remote settings and the stage.

By using the adjective *Catalan*, instead of *Spanish* or *Peninsular*, I want to signal yet another layer of liminal conflict that the plays dissect. Catalan plays and playwrights have a complex relationship with Spain and the Spanish language. When a Catalan play opens in Spain, its origin, linguistically and culturally, is ignored; only very rarely is translation mentioned, even when the mediating hand is the playwright’s. (Ignore this crossed out comment) Thus, the complex political and sociolinguistic positions to any piece written in any Peninsular language other than Spanish are silenced. The fight against marginalization is undermined, and the hegemonic disdain for the minority that some of these works contest is accentuated.

For example, in 2012 when *La pell en flames* opened at the Centro Dramático Nacional—María Guerrero Theatre in Madrid, the program did not mention the title nor language of its original production which dated almost ten years earlier, nor the fact that Clua had translated his own play.¹ When *El principi d’Arquimedes* by Miró opened at the Teatro de la Abadía in Madrid in 2014, none of the main reviewers credited Eva Vallinés Menéndez’s scrupulous Spanish translation. In contrast, when Cunillé’s *Occisió* (2005) opened at the Comédie Française, French reviewers emphasized that it was translated from Catalan and that Cunillé usually writes in Catalan.² Spanish critics usually note and possibly discuss the origin of foreign plays produced in Spain and credit the translator but the origin and original language of Catalan works are rarely

mentioned. This eradication is an ethnocentric, albeit naturalized, act. Clua, Cunillé, and Miró set the plays analyzed here in different foreign countries, but paradoxically their conflicted origin raises above the background noise. As Hélène Cixous, another bilingual author, observes: “Language is a country in which scenes comparable to what is happening . . . are played out in the linguistic and poetic mode.”³ In bilingual contexts, language becomes liminoid by default, and as we will see its expression is anything but innocuous.

While apparently irrelevant to some critics and readily erased, the liminoid state that the translation process engenders is pervasive. From the Latin *limen* meaning threshold, liminality describes the state we experience as we pass from one stage of life to another. Ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1909) first used the term to describe rites of passage involving separation, transition, and incorporation. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner in his seminal *The Ritual Process* (1969), adopts and further develops the concept, in particular the transition stage that Van Gennep called *margin* or *limen* (1982, 24). Turner writes: “the attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous” since the liminal stage is “neither here nor there,” only “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (1969, 95). Thus, the forms, rules, and conventions of both past and future states do not apply. In this indeterminate moment, we are outsiders, foreigners, on the margins, sometimes “stripped of names” and considered “dark, invisible, like the sun or moon in eclipse,” characterized by “a blurring and merging of distinctions” (1982, 26). “[L]iminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or the moon” (1969, 95), conditions that disturb epistemological confines. The goal of this societal phase is to “push” the initiands (adolescents, for example) “as far toward uniformity, structural invisibility, and anonymity as possible” (1982, 26).

Turner points to examples of literary characters who live outside the structure whom he terms the *communitas*, “Members of despised or outlawed ethnic and cultural groups” (1969, 110), whose function is to restore order when all is said and done. According to him, “communitas contrasts with structure. Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law and custom” (1969, 113). Categorical boundaries are countered, along with the discursive powers of the ruling establishment. “[B]etween one context of meaning and action and another,” initiands are characterized by “marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning” (1982, 113).

Turner at times uses another term, *liminoid*. Liminal is always associated with tribal rituals, but liminoid is more apt for artistic expressions that are “subversive in intention towards prevailing structures” (1982, 118). The liminoid is the realm of the subjunctive, “where suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities, and so forth, all become legitimate” (1969, vii). He associates it with what Martin Esslin (1960) has called “The Theatre of the Absurd,” for example the plays of Ionesco, Arrabal, and Beckett, which side-stepped convention and common sense to criticize the social order built on these shaky premises (1982, 113). Liminal describes a phenomenological situation; liminoid is an attitude conveyed by artistic works. Clua, Cunillé, and Miró depict liminoid spaces built from many liminal moments and situations.

The plays studied are also characterized by ambiguities and aporias. Spectators exit the theater with more questions than answers, unsuccessfully trying to put together a series of malleable

claims from friable, warped dialogues voiced by characters who limp about a perpetual no-mans-land.⁴ Susan Broadhurst describes liminal theatrical performativity as “indeterminacy, self-reflexiveness, eclecticism, fragmentation, a certain ‘shift-shape’ style and a repetitiveness that produces not sameness but difference” (168). Cunillé, Clua, and Miró go farther, thwarting the characters’ efforts to create some solid sense of self by stranding them in what Beckett called “the eternally larval.” The Irish author’s imprint is clear: he lived in a linguistic, cultural, and professional liminality, a creative stasis between crawling and flying. He acknowledged and welcomed both for his characters. As Marco Bernini observes:

Most of Beckett’s liminal minds are intent on incessantly making guesses about their perceptions and the worlds they end up in, but every hypothesis they produce is subsequently negated, undermined or impossible to verify. Beckett’s liminal minds are thus incapable of making reliable predictions and therefore of updating the model of the world they inhabit; because of that, they maximise the erroneousness of their predictions based on their perceptual inferences. (48)

Cunillé, Miró, and to a lesser extent Clua create liminal situations and trial-and-error dialogues that cannot reach conclusions or even clarity. Characters delineate broader human and spatial geographies submerged in a permanent void, suffering an inscrutable loss.

Disregarding the liminality that linguistic asymmetry unravels raises an ethical concern. Sharon G. Feldman argues that “[f]or dramatists writing in Catalan, ever conscious of the precarious condition of their language and cultural identity, the paradoxical position of both political distance and proximity in relation to Spain has perhaps accentuated their cosmopolitan yearning to reach beyond local borders and belong to a larger international sphere” (2017, p. 1). However, from the Peninsular center, the unidentified or foreign setting can be understood rather differently, as Sergi Doria asserts for Catalan novelists: “Authors who write in Catalan have finally given up the moniker [*sambenito*] that links them maliciously with the taste of their terroir [*terruño*], and now they’d rather transit through mysterious and faraway places.”⁵ Doria concludes that “[o]nce freed from nationalistic responsibilities, contemporary Catalan literature is cosmopolitan.”⁶ Leaving aside the broad generalization, Doria assumes that for Catalan authors to be successful, they must erase their roots. Since silence about translation expunges the linguistic tension, Doria would consider Cunillé’s *Déluge*, Clua’s *Pell*, and Miró’s *Fum* and *Turistas* cosmopolitan: no mention of *terruño* and just a few mentions of anything related to Catalan. Even if the characters are Catalan or live in Barcelona, politics is not (directly) mentioned.

Perhaps Catalan writers are striving for worldwide audiences, but then why do all three playwrights place their scenarios in zones rife with war, destruction, death, and postcolonial structures? Or populate them with characters who struggle to articulate their own identity in front of an “other,” unable, at times unwilling, to help, while we witness them sinking into inner chaos and the conflict that surrounds them? Why does every play take place in a hotel, that liminoid gap between here and there?

In Lluïsa Cunillé’s *Déluge*, three characters occupy a hotel room in Kinshasa, but only two—a weathered, scar-covered businessman and an interpreter—are physically on stage. The invisible

third is an old local man who “joins” them later. The businessman has met the old man briefly while entering the hotel. They could not understand each other because they spoke different languages, and the businessman knows the man’s name only because someone wrote it on a piece of paper that he then handed to the interpreter. That name is never revealed, nor are the names of the other two characters—just “man” and “interpreter.”

The interpreter, a woman who has lived a long time in the city for reasons unknown to us, speaks the old man’s words. He and his son have been following the businessman for the last couple of days. He comes to the hotel for only one reason: to convince the businessman to take his son away and manage his career as a football player. When the businessman refuses the strange proposition, the old man tries to persuade him to take his son as a personal bodyguard.

During this “translation,” the businessman sits in a chair and talks to the chair where the old man is supposed to be. The interpreter sits in another chair but never looks toward the empty chair. She speaks the old man’s words in Catalan; his voice and his presence are expunged.

Both foreigners share a strong sense of displacement that percolates throughout the play. They see all people as foreign, all countries as strange and violent. They are detached from this place and others; each one is an island. The “asshole white businessman” (498), as he describes himself, works for a South African company and has lived in many places. The interpreter, who cannot remember the last time she left the hotel, speaks fifteen languages, including Kiluba, the only language the old man speaks. The old man lets them know that he understands the language they are speaking, which is never disclosed, but “cannot speak it” (468). He finally adds that “to speak through a woman” is not “honorable” (468).

Guillem Clua’s *Pell* also takes place in a hotel room in a country still recovering from a civil war. The setting and the conflict suggest a country in the Balkans, but we have no details. Two stories take place in the same room, an exercise that exploits the idea of physical and temporal thresholds. In the first, Frederick Sàlomon, a famous photographer who, twenty years earlier, immortalized the precise moment a bomb blew a little girl to pieces, is with Hannah, a journalist interviewing him about an important government prize he has returned to receive. It comes with a cash award of one million dollars although the country is ravaged by poverty and health crises. Sàlomon is part of the festivities celebrating the country’s transition to democracy, or a facsimile that will kowtow to Western expectations.

The other story involves Dr. Brown, a sinister UN doctor with political clout who is keenly interested in the success of the country’s ongoing political transition, and Ida, a local woman he sexually abuses and tortures. Her back is disfigured by a large burn scar. She acquiesces to his every debasing sexual demand in exchange for medicines and a treatment that might save her daughter Sara from a terminal illness. Sara is under Dr. Brown’s care, and he prohibits Ida from visiting her in the hospital. The action in both stories happens simultaneously in two separate rooms that share the same theatrical space. The two couples do not interact until the end, when Dr. Brown and Sàlomon share a brief scene in which they meet before going to the official dinner together.

Miró’s *Fum* takes place in two rooms and the lobby of a four-star hotel somewhere in a third-world country, although the exact location is never specified.⁷ Two Barcelona couples, Laura and Jaume and Àlex and Eva, are trapped inside by an uprising. Jaume is a well-known writer who

used to work for the embassy and owns property in the countryside where he and Laura spend most of their time. The younger couple is here to adopt a baby after five long years of bureaucracy waiting for the government's approval. Over three days, while the political conflict intensifies, both couples wait for the airport to reopen so they can escape.

Turistas also opens with a Barcelona couple, Martí and Carme, in a hotel room in Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil, an area close to the Iguaçu Falls also known as Marco das Tres Fronteiras [“three frontiers”] that borders Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. It is a liminal territory between three nations at the edge of a sheer escarpment, the largest falls in the world. Carme leaves the room after an unsettling encounter with a young man; later, Martí also goes out. In their successive scenes, each meets a different character until they rejoin in a little town in Catamarca, northern Argentina.

These foreign settings immediately prompt the question of language, which the characters overtly problematize. The playwrights specifically frame the action in multilingual contexts, making whatever language might be used reverberate with political implications and consequences. Usage is not an innocent bystander. It recalls colonialism: Cunillé's *Déluge* – the title in the French of the Belgian colonizer as well as Louis XIV - and Miró's *Fum* explicitly reference colonialism, rendering the Other, linguistically and physically, a spectral presence. We never see or hear the Other; words articulated by the Westerner may or may not be accurate, and convey significant nuances.

Cunillé, Miró, and Clua depict an asymmetric powerplay between foreigners and locals. Bilingual environments always embed liminoid layers that preclude easy conclusions, especially when one of the languages has tried to erase the other. Hearing them in Catalan, or knowing they were originally articulated in Catalan, a language historically prohibited in public spheres, the audience cannot ignore the immediate connotations of the battle between oppressor and oppressed.

In these plays, we find phrases or words that call attention to a characteristic of minority languages Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “stutterings” in *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*. By minor languages, they do not mean the distinct languages of numerical minorities; “it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). The “rather that which” always involves three characteristics: a high deterritorialization coefficient, an immediate connection to politics, and collective value (16-18). It also involves a disruption in the “machine of expression” (28) of the major language. In “He Stuttered” (“Bégaya-t-il...”), Deleuze writes that authors who use a minor language create affect (107) as their ultimate goal: to stutter to disrupt the structure, linguistic or otherwise, of the majoritarian language.

For when an author is content with an external marker that leaves the *form of expression* intact (“he stuttered . . .”), its efficacy will be poorly understood unless there is a corresponding *form of content*—an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words—that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter, the tremolo, or the vibrato, and makes the indicated affect reverberate through the words. (108, original emphasis)

The multilinguistic interferences in Clua, Cunillé, and Miró's plays convey "scream, stutter, stammer or murmur" (110), jamming our expectation of fluency. "Creative stuttering," Deleuze writes, "is what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium" (111) because it breaks language down, minorizes it, turns language into another liminal space.

Setting the plays in foreign lands automatically renders their language suspect, transactional, fragile. The porosity of the characters' enunciations challenges the signifying regime—whether a major language or a political structure—that controls them, making them foreigners in their own language, not only linguistically but also existentially.

In "Literature and Life," Deleuze states: "Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed . . . It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived. Writing is inseparable from becoming" (1). He adds, "To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferenciation" (1). Writing then is a liminoid exercise or an exercise on liminal phenomena. Almost all the characters in these plays are in transit or fixed in foreign spaces where language naturally stutters because of its multiplicity, politics, its silenced origins, or the impossibility of articulating the liminoid state. The settings hum with socio political and geographical disputes, and following Deleuze and Guattari, the forces of reterritorialization try to impose on them a "formalizing, linear, hierarchized, centralized arborescent model" (*Plateaus* 327), but they remain liminal. The in-between, in constant flux, contains the processes of de- and reterritorialization. The characters, on the move, far from their natural habitat, try to re-invent or deterritorialize themselves, and while Deleuze and Guattari consider "opening the assemblage" or "deterritorializ[ing] the refrain" (*Plateaus* 350) positive actions, the characters seem rootless, lost, out of touch.

Cunillé's *Déluge* is an exercise on language and translation/interpretation that reinforces the asymmetric relationship between sides. It emphasizes language, specifically Catalan, to a degree that betrays the global scenario in which the characters locate their stories. The woman is interpreting the old man's Kiluba, a Bantu language spoken in southern Congo, into Catalan, or whatever language she and the businessman speak. The audience never hears Kiluba; we hear only the woman's version. Hence, she physically performs liminality as a woman between men, a longtime expatriate from some unknown country, a neutral conduit between two interests, and the voice of two or three languages: Kiluba, Catalan, and whatever *lingua franca* she uses with the businessman, which is never revealed. It could be English or French, but we have only Catalan.

In linguistic terms, Clua goes even farther than Cunillé. The name of the protagonist, Frederick Sàlomon, takes the Catalan spelling—a grave accent mark on the a—in a strange and seemingly useless gesture that tips the spectator reading the program to the cultural point of view from which the action starts. In his stage directions, Clua writes, "Ida speaks with an accent and does not have the fluidity of the others . . . the accent has to be invented, it cannot be identified with any known languages" (8). Readers of the play are immediately made conscious of languages and accents, but the *lingua franca* is not specified nor how it should be differentiated. When Ida says "shit" [*merda*], Dr. Brown scolds her: "Do not curse. You still do not master our language, and you are already soiling it" ["No diguis paraulotes. Encara no domines la nostra llengua i ja et dediques a embrutar-la...això ho haurem de canviar"] (43). What is "our language"? Catalan, English, neither? While

the location of *Pell* is also undisclosed, Dr. Brown's actions indicate a strong neoliberal government under which entitled Westerners roam free. And even though the war is over, the locals' wounds are as raw as the language that they are forced to use.

Throughout the play, spectators witness Ida's physical and psychological debasement by Dr. Brown, one of her land's "saviors," in exchange for the remote possibility that he may take her daughter "[t]o the West!" ["A Occident!"] (42) to be cured. Dr. Brown and Mr. Sàlomon show constant contempt for Ida and Hanna's country. Dr. Brown thinks "[t]he World Health Organization should forbid this country" ["L'organització Mundial de la Salut l'hauria de prohibir"] (60) because it is unhealthy for everybody. He tells Ida, "You want to save your daughter, and I want to save your government, cleaning up its reputation a little" ["Tu vols salvar la teva filla i jo vull salvar el vostre govern, rentant-li una mica la cara"] (43). Ida's back is visibly scarred, but she says she cannot remember how it happened. The locals' pain has no foreseeable end, regardless of the self-congratulatory attitude of the new government. They will live in a liminal space, under the rule of a Western hegemony for which who they are and what they represent will forever be unacceptable. They have two escape options: death or lies. In minoritarian narratives, the personal always becomes political (*Kafka* 17), and the system that Dr. Brown represents demands full capitulation; no space for liminality allowed. The pending peace treaty to reconcile the different factions that have been fighting for half a century is just window dressing. According to Hanna, "to assuage the West's guilt by transforming our country's upheaval into a frivolous symbol" ["La desgràcia del nostre poble convertida en un símbol frívol del sentiment de culpabilitat d'Occident"] (25). Hanna rebukes Sàlomon's optimistic outlook by reminding him that "we are still at war, Mr. Sàlomon. Just because you do not hear the bombs does not mean that it is over" ["Seguim en guerra, senyor Sàlomon. Que no senti les bombes no vol dir que s'hagi acabat"] (13).

Miró's *Fum* and *Turistas* explore both sides of the problems that language creates. In *Fum*, the locals are not seen and their language is not heard. Toward the end of the play, Laura has a brief phone conversation in French, the colonizer's language with somebody from the hotel. During the first scene, we find out that Eva left the safety of the hotel early in the morning to venture into the revolt. When she comes back, she explains that she wanted to tell her soon-to-be-adopted daughter about this historic day in her country (203). The other characters have no desire to step outside. Like the audience, they never know exactly what is happening. They just hear noises that, at times, seem unnervingly close.

Regardless of their marital problems, the two couples share a colonizer's ideology. They refer to the locals as "infeliços" ["the doomed"] (195), who live in this "fucking city" ["cony de ciutat"] and "this fucking country" ["aquest cony de país"] (200). In one scene, Laura tries to justify Àlex's behavior by arguing that something in this country triggers him and the revolution outside is only making things worse for him. (209). She and her husband represent a rich, white, educated elite that publicly empathizes with the locals but betrays them in word and deed.

At least Jaume is aware of the political double standard their Western position allows. In the middle of the night, he witnesses—or does he dream? Is it real, or is it liminoid?—a local man banging his head several times on the glass outside the hotel lobby after being apprehended by the police. Jaume tells Àlex:

Do you get it? A man just busted his head open right in front of our eyes. We know nothing at all about these people. You just came here to get a kid. We have been living here for a long time. I have written many articles about how much I like this place because people are happy, and they can live with almost nothing, and because you can still smoke inside a restaurant.... But now that these people have a bit of hope for a change, now we escape.... We have wished for a revolution for so long, but when we are in the middle of it, we'd rather it didn't happen. We are all locked up in our rooms, waiting, observing, and that's it. Meanwhile, right in front of our eyes, a man bursts his head open against the glass.

Se n'adona? Un home s'acaba d'obrir el cap davant nostre. No sabem absolutament res d'aquesta gent. Vosaltres veniu a buscar-hi un fill. Nosaltres hi hem estat vivint una bona temporada. Jo he escrit articles i articles explicant que m'agrada aquest lloc perquè la gent és alegre i sap viure sense gairebé res, perquè encara es pot fumar un cigarro als restaurants... Però ara que aquesta gent té un bri d'esperança d'un canvi, ara n'escapem. . . . Hem arribat a desitjar en tantes ocasions una revolta però en el moment que ens hi trobem al mig, preferiríem que no hagués passat. Estem aquí tancats, a les nostres habitacions, esperant, observant i proud, mentre davant nostre, un home es clava cops de cap, fins al punt d'esclafar-se'l contra el vidre. (231)

Jaume's monologue encapsulates the Western, foreign mentality about the colonized Other. Its language is saturated with racism, entitlement and, invariably, aggression. It unites the guests within and separates them from the outside world. The Other is just noisy background to their marital problems, and their attitude in silencing it speaks volumes.

Language in *Turistas* works differently. The co-production by Sala Beckett (Barcelona), Teatro Español (Madrid), and the Gabriela Izcovich company (Buenos Aires) opened in 2018. Lina Lambert and Pablo Viña played Carme and Martí, the Barcelona couple, while Eugenia Alonso and Esteban Meloni played the seven characters the Catalan tourists meet on their separate journeys until rejoining in Catamarca. The actors all spoke Spanish, although the four women and three men representing the locals spoke different variants of Southern Cone Spanish peppered with regional words and expressions, such as “mucama” (460), “birome” (460), “micro” (468), “subte” (468), “guita” (468), “quilombo” (469), “corrermela cara” (472), and “atado de cigarillos” (479), to mention a few, and the dialects' distinctive grammar and intonation are respected. However, in the published text, all the stage directions and more importantly the dialogues between Carme and Martí are in Catalan. At one point, Martí breaks down in front of Gonzalo, a priest, and blurts out something in Catalan that the priest does not understand (480). Thus, depending on where one sees the production, language sensitively reflects origins and hierarchy.

My sampling from these plays indicates how language destabilizes minoritarian narratives. Their bilingual playwrights choose multilingual settings to engage language—its sound, its silence, its vacillations, its negotiations—as an active participant as well as a question. Its liminality offers no safe haven for the characters; rather, it accentuates their insecurities, ambiguities,

disconnection, vexation. Is language a file or a hammer, a sponge or a needle? Characters carefully articulate words that they well know can shatter their reality.

Bilingual authors often address this estrangement. It is a constant theme in Jacques Derrida's works, in particular *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, a conflicted account of his multilingual childhood, speaking Arabic, Yiddish, and French. It begins: "I only have one language; it is not mine" (1). He explains: "When I said that the only language I speak is *not mine*, I did not say it was foreign to me" (5; emphasis original). He argues that when one language dominates, it always leads to debasement of the self. "[T]he master" believes he possesses the one true language, and "he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning; he wants to make others believe it, as if they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school, or the army" (23). However, this complete control will never happen because "there is never any such thing as absolute appropriation or reappropriation. Because there is no natural property of language, language gives rise only to appropriative madness, to jealousy without appropriation. Language speaks this jealousy; it is nothing but jealousy unleashed. It takes its revenge at the heart of the law" (24).

Derrida then argues that language in these liminal situations is always colonial at the core. The Other's monolingualism immediately turns into "law originating from elsewhere . . . And the Law becomes Language" (39), and the language becomes law. This procedure "tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One; that is, to the hegemony of the homogeneous. [It is always at work] in the culture, effacing the folds and flattening the text" (40). For Willy Maley, Derrida's *Monolinguisme* is about "the obstacles in its path when one's origins are multiple and mutilated" (123). Most of the characters in these plays carry truncated origins with them, as they wander remote lands speaking foreign languages. The plays themselves are also a strange artifact. They are written in a minor language and even if they are successful they might only play a month, as most contemporary playwrights know. It would make more sense for the playwrights to write directly in Spanish, as they have often been told, but they refuse. The original is in Catalan, an important detail that we should keep in mind even if the plays are performed in Spanish or French. Derrida connects loss of our native language to death: "'Displaced persons,' exiles, those who are deported, expelled, rootless, nomads, all share two sources of sighs, two nostalgias: their dead ones and their language" (*Hospitality* 87). He argues that our mother tongue is the only thing that accompanies us all through our lives: "Language resists all mobilities because it moves about with me. It is the least immovable thing, the most mobile, of personal bodies, which remains the stable but portable condition of all mobilities" (*Hospitality* 89).

The linguistic particularities in the plays discussed above, while seemingly innocent, are disruptive and function to make sure the folds are not effaced and the text is not flattened. They draw attention to a liminal process that extends beyond the pages or performance. Their structure persistently contests monolinguisism (or accidental bilinguism) or deterritorialization/ minorization, in Deleuze's terms. In Derrida's words, no language that complicates the idea of a fixed, singular, or stable identity truly belongs to us: "No, an identity is never given, received or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures" (28). The experiential and ideological consequences of wrestling with languages contaminates everything from the moment a word is uttered.⁸ For example, the notion of a strong national identity shatters in liminoid environments.

Inevitably then, linguistic liminality permeates the characters' personal situations. In *Déluge*, as Feldman argues, the interpreter is "positioned as a kind of bridge or hinge through which two worlds and two cultures, the dominant and the subaltern, converge" (2013, 92). It is the "in-between" space where Catalan and the unheard Kiluba, the visible and the invisible, the colonizer and the colonized, man and woman merge. The moment the interpreter changes from "he says" to "I say" and assumes the man's voice, we are in an indeterminate zone. The audience witnesses the complete erasure of origins. It comes after a long pause when the interpreter, as the old man, tells the businessman that he has a son, and they share the same name which remains unknown. From this moment until the old man's exit, several common threads interweave: dead sons and miscarriages, accidents, illnesses, and scars, many scars. Violence has plagued both the businessman and the local man. In graphic and excruciating detail, the old man narrates how at eight years old, his son was kidnapped and forced to become a guerrilla. The children were injected with a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder known as Brown Brown and sent into battle, the youngest first, to draw the enemy's fire. His son was forced to commit atrocious acts from rape to cannibalism that left him deeply traumatized, his sense of reality forever wrecked. The old man's attempts to convince the "fill de puta de negocis blanc" (498)—literally, "white son-of-a-bitch businessman"—to take his son away, whether as a soccer player, bodyguard, helper, or nurse, are fruitless. At the end of the conversation, the businessman wants to meet the old man's son, but the old man says his son is dead. He died when he was three, sixteen years ago, from malaria. The old man says he wanted someone else to miss his son, and from now on the businessman will.

The scene is played straightforwardly. The stage directions indicate three chairs. The businessman and the interpreter sit looking at the "empty" one. While we trust the interpreter's version of the old man's words (or do we?), the transaction is asymmetric. Privileged positions result from the colonization process. The original voice is not heard: the colonizer represents it, interprets it. The old man's narrative itself is a liminal discourse on what lies between life and death, rich and poor, black and white. The son suffered the postcolonial trauma of the guerrilla atrocities or forgot them or did not suffer them at all. Is there a son? Was there ever a son? We know only that the story is about loss.

The metatheatrical implications of the interpreting act include the actor as interpreter of a role, the playwright as interpreter of a reality or viewpoint, and the audience as interpreters of witness. Even the play's title refers to privileged indifference and a colonized, raped, hurt territory, product of Belgian colonialism. It presages a devastating conclusion. A local language is substituted for the official colonial French that sought to mute and displace the Congo's peoples. Cunillé also includes an epigraph from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novella by a Polish author who wrote in English about an Englishman in London narrating a story about the Belgian Congo: "Men who come out here should have no entrails." (page #) The implied disembodiment characterizes the play. For example, the businessman lives in South Africa and works for a Canadian company, two countries embedded with political and linguistic liminalities, while the interpreter, in her own words, just wanders around the hotel as if its walls were some kind of impassable border. All three characters talk about pain and violence incessantly. Their bodies are scarred like the territories they cross. After asking the businessman about his many scars, the interpreter very matter-of-factly recalls that after an appendix operation, she had an infection and a marabout saved her. He told

her that she had actually suffered a miscarriage, and he had removed the spirit of her dead son—yet another dead son. Two bodies caught in a liminal state. Dead children appear in all the plays. In *Pell*, we are led to believe that Ida's daughter, Sara, is in a coma, a liminal state between life and death, but then we are told that she died the night before.

And what about the girl in the photograph that made Sàlomon famous? What is a photograph but a threshold, a tear in time and space? When Hanna claims that she is the girl, Sàlomon sniffs (scoffs?) that many young women have claimed to be that girl, and they all have the burned skin to prove it, sometimes self-inflicted (75). He blames the victims. Hanna creates a convincing narrative, except for a couple of key details that Sàlomon will provide so that she can pretend (another liminal element) to be the girl in the photo. Ida *is* the girl whose body was blasted away by the bomb's impact, and when she learns of her daughter's death, she jumps out of the window of the hotel. The tragedy of a country, a people, and particularly these women is contained in the circular story told at that moment in that hotel room. The play ends with its beginning, the deaths of two innocent casualties of war repeating on a loop: history as purgatory, the perfect liminal space. The civil war the anonymous country has endured is far from over, Hanna says. As in any civil war, many disappear, leaving nobody for people like Ida to mourn. Mourning should be the liminal space where we accept the transition from life to death, but to move into the relentlessly progressive neoliberal space, Ida and Hanna's country is forced to stop mourning. Clua's circular framing freezes the absurdity of wars and their unforgivable effects, especially on children who will never cross the border to life.

Similarly, children and death are a recurrent motif in Miró's plays. In *Fum*, the young couple hopes to adopt a baby girl from a local orphanage after a five-year wait. Eva's earlier miscarriage has left the marriage tottering. At one point, she tells Àlex that at least the locals don't look at her "as a woman who had to be emptied out" ["Almenys ells no em veuen com una dona a qui van haver de buidar!"] (216). The two are afraid that the rebellion outside the hotel will oust the current government and imperil the adoption (205). Àlex is on edge from the beginning, criticizing Eva's risky decision to venture out to photograph the historic events so that one day she can tell her daughter about her birthplace. Àlex finds her naive and phony: "The only thing I hear is all the stuff they're throwing at us. You can also explain to our daughter one day, when she grows up, that the day we came for her, her people hated us so much that they would have killed us if given the chance" ["El que sento és que ens llancen tot el que poden. Això també podràs explicar-l'hi un dia a la nena, quan sigui gran que quan vam venir a buscar-la, la seva gent ens odiava de tal manera que si haguessin pogut se'ns haurien carregat."] (215). Àlex realizes that their daughter's liminoid future might clash with their hopes. From the adoption process, a bureaucratically mediated threshold between birthmother and prospective parents, to living in another country on another continent as a racial minority, she may always feel *between*, and Alex fears for her. He sees Eva's optimistic expectations and interest in the locals as "[f]ilosofia barata" (215), cheap grandstanding. At the end, when the revolt is over, and the hotel is no longer a bunker, we know the adoption will proceed as planned. Although their daughter's name has been chosen and both Laura and Jaume ask about it, they do not reveal it. This deliberate silence, concealing whether they have chosen a local or Western name, speaks volumes.

A dead son is also at the center of Miró's *Turistas*. At the beginning of the play, the Barcelona couple, Carme and Martí, talk about a young man they encountered earlier in the day. They made plans to meet him for dinner, but Martí abruptly cancels. Upset with her husband, Carme goes on her own. Toward the end of the play, we find out that their son, Carles, died in a motorbike accident a couple of years earlier in the little town where the couple reunite at the end of the play after their respective travels. Nobody knows why Carles left Barcelona for Argentina, and Tía [Auntie], whose real name we never learn, cannot understand why he left Buenos Aires to stay with her in her remote town, or why he did not ask for help: "Quizás no quería. Quizás no la necesitaba. Quizás creía que no la necesitaba" ["Maybe he did not want any [help]. Maybe he did not need any. Maybe he did not think he needed it."] (485). The couple realize they do not know much about their son, just details that do not answer their many questions. Even his body is shrouded in mystery; no final resting place is mentioned, an ironic collocation that tries to expunge liminality. Carme and Martí are doomed to mourn without knowing why their son is dead or where his remains reside, which creates a "liminal status of uncertainty as disquiet or perturbation that can be resolved only by knowing where the disappeared is" (Karl 730).

Fabián, the young man who introduces Carme to Tía, his neighbor, also has a story of abandonment marked by liminality. Almost twenty years earlier his father emigrated to Rome, promising that he would make enough money to buy his wife and son tickets, but his letters gradually stopped. After his mother died, Fabián traveled to Rome and soon learned that the return address never existed (477), although somewhere in the city, a rather grotesque homeless man shouted at him and might have called his name. He might have been his father. Fabián is still obsessed with that moment, not knowing what actually happened to his father. Fabián also feels guilty because he hated the pittance his father would send, but now it dawns on him that it might have been a fortune for his father at the time. He is back in town to pack up the house where his mother lived, but the allotted ten days have stretched to over a month with no end in sight. He is trapped. He keeps asking questions without getting answers, maybe like Carles. Fabián is another character enclosed in a cocoon, sealed off in childhood.

Tía's story combines both politically engendered violence and children. Toward the end of *Turistas*, she delivers a long monologue, both hypnotic and horrific, to Carme. She was born in Paraguay, and her childhood was profoundly traumatized by rape. First, under Stroessner's dictatorship, his officers, known as "cazadoras de niñas" [little girl hunters], would drive a red jeep around town, kidnapping and bringing their prey to top government officials. Although Tía eluded capture, her fear remains (483).⁹ Second, her uncle started raping her when she was eleven, and her aunt ignored her cries for help, not believing her but blaming her. Tía managed to escape to Catamarca, where her guesthouse or hostel, to call it something, serves as a refuge for nomadic souls, victims of all kinds. She has heard so many stories of abuse that she sees her childhood suffering as mild compared to the horrors others experience: "Yo creía que mi país era el infierno hasta que descubrí que el infierno está dentro de los hombres" ["I thought my country was hell until I discovered that hell is within men"] (484). Not surprisingly, sexual abuse has been linked strongly to liminality: "abused children become liminal personae (threshold-people), partly through their premature sexual knowledge and experiences, and partly through trauma which is itself an experience of liminality" (Haywood 85). Children who have been abused are fractured

and unless the abuse is carefully addressed and successfully treated, they will wander in a perpetual liminal state.

Tía's shelter is the perfect exemplar of the hotels or hotel rooms where the other plays take place: the liminoid home. Whether we use Marc Augé's *non-lieux* or Deleuze's *space quelconque*, to name just two, the transient space is both transitional and transactional. It is controlled by check in and check out; a stay may be short or long, but eventually the guest must move on. Hotel spaces have anchored plays ranging from Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930), Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) to, more recently, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) or Tracy Letts's *Bug* (1996). The disparity of these titles demonstrates the versatility of the setting: it can enclose highly sophisticated comedy and the worst that humanity can offer. Hotels also enclose a metatheatrical effect, especially the common areas, with each space akin to a new staging and each guest, a new character. Tim Edensor describes hotels as "stages where transitional identities may be performed alongside the everyday enactions of residents, passers-by and workers" (64). Hotels are hybrid, temporal, and transient spaces, "agents of a contemporary existential crisis, a crisis of relations to the other, and by extension a crisis of individual identity constituted" (O'Beirne 38). They house those who wander anonymously without personal connections.

Hotels contribute to the epistemic directive that builds them for the guests they are designed to serve. Alongside *Déluge*, *Fum*, I also include *Pell*, where the action takes place in (post)colonial hotels where violence roams freely outside, whether actually or in a sharply remembered past. They are like palatial fortresses that "not only insulated colonial society but also offered multiple opportunities to build and perform notions of racial superiority, quash moral and ethical dilemmas about settlers' role in exploitation, and restore the vitality of settlers stressed by prosecuting the brutalities necessary to maintain the colonial regime" (Sarmiento and Linehan 289). Whether the violence is historical, linguistic, or physical—bombing, sexual slavery, child molestation—the hotel rooms quickly transform from safe havens to prison cells, incarcerating these neoliberal offenders whose lives depend on them but intensifying their pain.

Turistas travels through a series of liminoid spaces, but mobility and escape are delusions. A well-off Barcelona couple traveling to a faraway tourist spot like Marco Das Tres Fronteiras is not surprising. As Bjørn Thomassen explains, "Liminal spaces are attractive. They are the places we go to in search of a break from the normal. They can be real places, parts of a larger territory, or they can be imagined or dreamed. Liminal landscapes are found at the fringes, at the limits" (21). Here, not only the three politically drawn borders, but also the majestic falls create a liminal space where passing between the two precipitous levels would be violent and usually deadly. We meet the couple in a hotel room.

Outside of hotel rooms, Martí's experiences remain liminoid. Mauricio the bus driver tells him that he was a subway driver in Buenos Aires but left (or maybe the city left him, he ponders) after witnessing too many suicides. If he'd had enough money, he would have gone to Europe, but Martí warns him against idealizing Europe, "an old lady to whom all types of chronic, terminal, predictable diseases appear, difficult to diagnose and (impossible to) cure" ["Europa es una vieja a la que le están saliendo todas."]

Martí's last encounter before reuniting with his wife at Tía's is with a Catholic priest, who describes his profession as a liminoid mediation between heaven and earth. They meet in Cerro Uritorco in northwest Argentina, known for many UFO sightings and other paranormal activity. However, Gonzalo is the only lifelong resident who has never witnessed a sighting. All the others witness several a day. His conversations with God are not going very well either: "¡No jodas! ¡Dios! ¿A qué jugás? ¡Yo soy colaborador tuyo! ¡Nos conocemos desde hace tiempo! ¡Hemos pasado un montón de horas juntos! ¡No puede ser que me hagas esto!" ["Don't fuck with me, God! What's your deal? I'm on your team! We've known each other for so long, and we've spent so many hours together! You can't do this to me!"] (480). He can no more communicate with God than he can with other extraterrestrials.

Before they separate, Mauricio tells Martí that he is going on a humanitarian mission to help with the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean: "Es terrible lo que está pasando allá, cerca de sus casas" ["What's happening near where you live is truly horrifying"] (481). His final comment points to another displaced group, or what Cecilia Menjívar terms "liminal legality," a condition that refugees suffer, with serious psychological and physical consequences. Threatened with no viable future or imminent death, they could not stay where they were, so they made perilous sea journeys on makeshift rafts to faraway lands where they are barely tolerated. They are not tourists like Carne and Martí but people trapped in a liminal existence in extreme conditions. However better off, the main characters share an emotional disequilibrium that will forever deny them a stable and safe habitat—a home.

Clua's *Pell*, Cunillé's *Déluge*, and Miró's *Fum* and *Turistas* have several common themes that align with Turner's concept of liminality. Their bilingual identity renders language a threshold across several domains, and it is often ignored because the idea of intranational translation and historical suppression appears to have made reviewers uncomfortable. The nomadic characters traverse similar hybrid experiences of violence, death, and child abuse, which makes them unable to reclaim any sense of stability or subjective agency. Even those who might seem to have escaped are still imprisoned. Tía, for example, has made her house a shelter for those who need it, like she once did. Nevertheless, even her Argentinian accent, her identity, is not her own ["Mi acento desde hace años es el de una argentina"] (483). The traces of her violent upbringing—abandoned by her parents, molested by her uncle, and mistreated by her aunt—recur in her nightmares. The past is never erased.

Clua, Cunillé, and Miró place moments crammed with ambiguities, displacements, identity negotiations, and unsolved questions in spaces with ever-encroaching walls—from violent cities to remote towns hemmed by raging water to claustrophobic hotel rooms to three chairs on a stage to the beating heart. From the womb to the tomb, the questions posed have no single answers.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Ruano (2012).

² See Fauvel (2020), Héliot (2020), or Salino (2020).

³ The original and complete phrase is as follows: “La langue est un pays dans lequel se jouent, sur le mode linguistique et poétique, des scènes comparables à ce qui se passe, par exemple, en ce moment en France dans le domaine de l’ouverture ou de la fermeture des frontières” (“Guardian of Language,” 7).

⁴ For more detail on Cunillé’s works, see also Feldman (2013), Puchades (2005), and Pujol (2009; 2010).

⁵ “Los autores que escriben en catalán se han despojado del sambenito que les asociaba malévolamente con el sabor del terruño y prefieren transitar por geografías ignotas y distantes.” All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁶ “Liberada de responsabilidades patrióticas, la literatura catalana actual es cosmopolita.”

⁷ Nacho Cabana asserts that it is probably the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the same setting as Cunillé’s *Déluge*.

⁸ In her groundbreaking “Mon Algérie,” Cixous coins *Passporosity* to describe her lack of identification with the woman in her passport:

I cannot look at it without trembling for fear of being unmasked, because it is a fake, always has been. Lie, forgery, use of forgery, in spite of myself with my consent. It is this verb to be that has always bothered me. What are you? Are you French? Who am I? Am I her? And to answer with a word or a cross in the box, when I would need one hundred or a blank. . . The paradox of this passport: having it always closed me in a double-bind. On one hand ‘I am French’ is a lie or a legal fiction. On the other hand, to say ‘I am not French’ is a breach of courtesy. And of the gratitude due for hospitality. The stormy, intermittent hospitality of the State and of the Nation. But the infinite hospitality of the language. No coincidence between the identity papers and the intimate feeling. . . *I felt perfectly at home, nowhere.* (127-28; emphasis original).

⁹ Mat Youkee’s article details the historical background to Tía’s story:

Rogelio Goiburú, director of reparations and historical memory at Paraguay’s Ministry of Justice, told AQ the contours of the case are clear. As many as 1,000 girls ‘may have been groomed and then systematically raped’ during the dictatorship, he said. They tended to be between the ages of 12 to 14 and from poor families in the countryside, he said. They were taken from their homes to houses in Asunción and elsewhere, where they were held captive and subjected to abuse by senior officers in Stroessner’s government, Goiburú said.

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