



Theatrical Translations: Postmemory and Politics in Daniel Alarcón's *At Night We Walk in Circles*

Traducción teatral: posmemoria y política en *At Night We Walk in Circles* de Daniel Alarcón

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Abstract: This article examines Daniel Alarcón's 2013 novel *At Night We Walk in Circles* and analyzes how artists engage with political crisis and its continued traumatic effects long after the crisis (in this particular case: the internal conflict in Peru) has ended. Taking Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" as a point of departure, the study focuses on the relationship between past trauma and its legacy in the present, arguing, that such negotiations between past and present may be understood through the lens of translation. Here, translation is seen as pointing to the ways in which art created in response to one context is continually reimagined and recreated—that is, translated—in order to circulate in new contexts. Alarcón's novel particularly positions theater as a translative force, one that elucidates the relationship between trauma, postmemory, and mourning.

Key words: Daniel Alarcón; Postmemory; Translation; Trauma; Theater.

Resumen: En el presente artículo, se analizará *At Night We Walk in Circles* (2013), novela de Daniel Alarcón y texto ejemplar a la hora de examinar la articulación artística entre el tema de la crisis política (en este caso, el conflicto interno en el Perú) y sus efectos traumáticos, que aún persisten muchos años después del final de ésta. La relación entre el trauma surgido en el pasado y su legado en el presente se explorará a partir del concepto de "posmemoria" acuñado por Marianne Hirsch. Se sostendrá que la figura de la traducción arroja luz sobre tales negociaciones entre pasado y presente, entendiéndose la operación translaticia como el modo en que una manifestación artística es reimaginada, recreada y puesta a circular —o sea: traducida— en nuevos contextos. Más en particular, la novela de Alarcón postula el teatro

como fuerza translaticia, una fuerza que elucida la relación entre trauma, posmemoria y duelo.

Palabras claves: Daniel Alarcón; Posmemoria; Traducción; Trauma; Teatro.

In a 2014 interview with Catherine Brady in *The Rumpus* shortly after the publication of *At Night We Walk in Circles*, Daniel Alarcón is asked about Diciembre, the experimental theater troupe at the heart of his novel. The novel takes place in an unnamed South American country that closely resembles Peru; Diciembre was founded in the early 1980s, during a period of political violence. Brady says, “[y]our novel references an era of political protest” –the troupe’s heyday in the 1980s– “but positions it as something already forgotten –or at least diminished to irrelevance” (2014). Alarcón responds, “In the midst of ‘good times’, no one wants to hear a contrary word. It begs the question: what’s the point of a protest play if no one wants to protest? Where is the motivation for social critique if there’s no political urgency?” He adds, “protest is exhausting. [...] The initial spark of protest fades– it’s hard to sustain even in the best of circumstances” (Brady 2014).

Alarcón’s response speaks to a fundamental tension between art produced under duress, borne of political protest and urgency, and art produced in the long aftermath of the crisis, when the urgency has faded but the legacy of the trauma persists. This article seeks to explore that tension: to consider what it means to attend to politics through an artistic lens and, more specifically, how artists engage with political crisis and its continued traumatic effects long after the initial spark of protest has faded. As I will argue, in contexts such as post-Cold War Latin America, where the sense of political purpose in the present is far more fragmented than that of the generation who came of age under repressive regimes, these negotiations between past and present may be understood through the lens of translation, broadly construed. In many Latin American countries, including Alarcón’s Peru (real and fictionalized versions alike), the legacy of Cold War-era upheaval persists, despite the decades of relative stability. The cultural and political concerns of the present unfold in constant negotiation with the past, yet they are also driven by a desire for difference and distinction. Moreover, the present exerts a force on the past, too; as we move forward in time, we reinterpret what’s come before.

Political violence, trauma, and memory are often dealt with first through political and legal frameworks, yet literature –and art more broadly– can attend to what those frameworks miss: to the nuances that exceed (or in some cases challenge) a political, legal, or sociological approach. In the 1970s and 1980s, when much of Latin America was ruled by repressive regimes, literature tended either to engage directly with political struggle, often employing a dense, hermetic aesthetic to reflect the trauma of life under state repression, or to avoid the political all together, as a means of escape. The generation that has come of age in the years following that trauma –members of what Marianne Hirsch calls “the generation of postmemory” or the “postgeneration”

(Hirsch 2012, 4)– has had to wrestle with the persistent legacy of political violence in the present. While some writers of this generation have continued to make use of that dense aesthetic, many others have sought to evoke disruption and its persistent legacy in more subtle ways.¹ Daniel Alarcón exemplifies this generation of writers. Born in Lima, Peru, in 1977, Alarcón moved to the United States with his family as a young child. He writes and works in English and Spanish and in multiple media: he is a novelist and short story writer, but also a journalist and the founder of Radio Ambulante, a Spanish-language podcast distributed by the U.S.-based NPR. Like many of his cohort, his writing grapples with repression and terror in Latin America, in particular with the Shining Path years in Peru in the 1980s and their legacy in the present day. What is particularly striking about *At Night We Walk in Circles* is the way its premise configures the place of art in relation to political violence and its legacy: the novel imagines a play written in an era of great violence and corruption and then posits what it would mean for that play to be revived two decades later. How would the company reinterpret those old scripts? How would the audience respond?

TRAUMA AND ITS AFTERLIFE: POSTMEMORY AND TRANSLATION

It is with this set of concerns in mind that I turn to the figure of translation. In “Thinking Postmemory through Translation in Roberto Brodsky’s *Bosque quemado*”, I argued that inasmuch as translation, in its most common, interlingual definition, serves to transform something that is incomprehensible into something that is comprehensible, translation in response to trauma conveys some semblance of pain and loss across space, time, and form, while acknowledging that certain elements of trauma can never be assimilated (Levinson 2015, 592). In that vein, I noted that postmemory itself –Hirsch’s term for the experience of the children of survivors of trauma (1997, 22)– functions as a form of translation. This formulation depends on the ways in which translation functions in multiple registers: not only as a mediator between languages, but in registers associated with space, time, and form (Levinson 2015, 592-593). With regard to space, for example, the “carrying across” denoted by the literal sense of *translatio* suggests not only the carrying of meaning across language, but a carrying of ideas across borders, including national or cultural ones. Walter Benjamin’s thinking on “afterlife”, in “The Task of the Translator”, illuminates the temporal, and more specifically generational, components of translation. The relationship between a translation and its original is time-based: “a translation comes later than the original”, thus ushering in a “stage of continued life” (Benjamin 1996, 254). Indeed, “great works of art” develop across generations: they “descen[d] from prior models”, come to fruition

¹ For other examples of writers in Alarcón’s generation, see, for instance, Patricio Pron’s *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia* or *Formas de volver a casa*, by Alejandro Zambra. For more on “the post-dictatorship generation” in the Southern Cone, see Ros (2012).

“in the age of the artist”, and secure “their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations” (Benjamin 1996, 255). Translation, specifically, contributes to that afterlife, both in a forward-looking sense, because “the life of the original attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding” in a translation, and in a backward-looking sense, because “in its afterlife [...] the original undergoes a change” (Benjamin 1996, 255-256). The translation may reveal nuances in the original that had previously gone unnoticed or otherwise alter its significance. Translation, we see, carries ideas across space and time.

However, as I argued in “Thinking Postmemory”, translation is also a useful figure for pointing to that which cannot be fully understood or assimilated; as such, it is productive for negotiating across different kinds of media or forms (Levinson 2015, 593-594). Benjamin asserts that a translation must “give[] voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*” (1996, 260). He adds, “[a] real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully” (1996, 260). The difference –and distance– between an original and a translation is impossible to bridge fully; in the context of trauma, the invocation of translation highlights the gulf between the pain of the originary trauma and its echoes in the present that is never completely navigable. Indeed, Brett Levinson takes up Benjamin’s “pure language” to point to that which “exceeds” or eludes translation (2001, 24), a detail that is complementary to Benjamin’s “supplement”, since excess and supplement both indicate a crucial distance between what is translatable and what resists translation. In the context of trauma, I argue that “excess” is pain or loss, which can be described but never fully assimilated (Levinson 2015, 594). Here, translation acknowledges that limit.

My contention is that dictatorship, as a disruption to the existing order, produces distance, particularly spatial distance (often as a result of displacement or exile) and temporal distance (between the “before” –the events of the past and whatever precipitated the dictatorship– and the “after,” its legacy in the present). Translation, then, is a figure for negotiating the many spatial and temporal distances wrought by dictatorship, with particular attention to generational distance from trauma –and therefore to the concerns of postmemory. For Hirsch, postmemory connotes the generational distance between those who experienced a particular historical event and those who were less directly affected, but whose lives have continued to be marked by the event (1997, 22).² Because of that distance, postmemory is “mediated not through

² In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch poses “affiliative” postmemory as an extension of her initial “familial” postmemory: “the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation, combined with a set of structures of mediation that would be broadly available, appropriable, and, indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission” (2012, 36).

recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (Hirsch 1997, 22). Postmemory therefore functions as a form of translation because of the way it, too, mediates between the past (an originary trauma) and the present or future (continued manifestations of that trauma over time) (Levinson 2015, 593). In this way, postmemory speaks to the afterlife of trauma.

Other scholars have similarly articulated the relationship between survivors of trauma and the generations that follow. Some have critiqued postmemory, either to consider its suitability for contexts beyond the Holocaust (for which Hirsch developed the concept) or to call attention to some of the nuances of trauma and its legacy that postmemory misses. I invoke the figure of translation as a response to trauma precisely because it attends to some of those nuances. For example, Michael G. Levine, whose scholarship also focuses on the Holocaust, proposes “belated witnessing” as an alternative to postmemory in order to highlight the “implication of the second-generation survivor in the traumas of the first” (2006, 21). He argues that the “postmemories” of second-generation survivors have a “retroactive effect” on the first generation’s “memories” (17), a point that suggests that “time itself” is “out of joint” (20). He links “being out of joint” directly to translation, arguing that the irruptions of memory prompt a “rearticulation” of “the temporal and logical priority of an original over a translation” (2006, 196n12). In a similar vein, Luis Martín-Cabrera rejects the applicability of postmemory in the context of the Southern Cone (though he embraces its intergenerational focus) because second-generation survivors there are not “overwhelmed and dominated by the traumatic narratives of their elders” –as in the case of Holocaust survivors and their children– but by a lack thereof, that is, by “the noisy silence” (2011, 132). He fears that postmemory’s “discrete distinction between subject positions” will “disconnect[] the survivors from their inheritors” and thus overlook those in the next generation who are ready to be an audience “willing to lend their gazes *and voices* to the experience of looking and hearing what no one wants to see or hear” (2011, 132-133, emphasis mine). For both Levine and Martín-Cabrera, postmemory does not sufficiently account for the degree to which subsequent generations are implicated in the trauma of the first generation; not only can they have an effect on the first generation’s memories, they can lend their own voices to the “ethical imperative to confront the unsaid” (Martín-Cabrera 2011, 132).

Figuring translation as a response to trauma addresses these concerns, at least in part, since translation necessarily implicates the translator in the source materials. Because of the way it is oriented backward and forward in time, translation can also detect (even if it cannot rectify) the temporal disjointedness of trauma. In the context of postmemory, translation highlights precisely the “implication” of the translator-witness in the trauma. Thus, I refer here to a broad understanding of postmemory, one that takes Marianne Hirsch’s formulation as a point of departure but that seeks, through the lens of translation, to attend to these nuances. Translation entails an audience –whoever is reading, listening, or watching– thereby foregrounding transmission and, with it, potentiality on the part of those who have lent their gazes and voices to

confronting the unsaid. Yet in acknowledging its own limits, translation indicates that something will always go unassimilated, that there is always something that exceeds translation.

STAGING MEMORY AND POSTMEMORY IN *AT NIGHT WE WALK IN CIRCLES*

That reference to audience recalls the significance of the theater and theatrical performance in *At Night We Walk in Circles*. In literary accounts of political repression and its legacy—such as Alarcón’s novel—the displacements and breaks of political crisis are often represented and then formally underscored via instances of textual disruption, particularly textual references to other media, such as photography, film, or—in this case— theater.³ In what follows, I focus on the way Alarcón’s novel frames theater and theatrical performance in relation to politics, trauma, and (post)memory. The novel stages two sets of performances, one during a period of political violence in the 1980s and one that takes place nearly a generation later, in the early 2000s. Translation is a figure for understanding what transpires between the violence of the first set of performances and the long-term resonances of that violence during the second. Through these stagings, theater emerges as a translative force that attends to the concerns of postmemory by negotiating between the trauma of the past and the uncertainty of the present. Thus, I argue for the significance of translation in the context of trauma not only for its attention to pain and loss, but for the way translation illuminates the relationship between artistic creation and its socio-political context, pointing to the ways in which art created in response to one context is continually reimagined and recreated in order to circulate in new contexts. Translation, through the logic of the theater, signals the degree to which art mediates and interrupts, allowing for the performance of powerful narratives in the present that go beyond a mere rehearsal of the past.

At the center of the story is Nelson, a young actor who auditions to go on tour with Diciembre, a radical, experimental theater troupe originally founded during a period of political violence and censorship two decades prior, in the early 1980s. In its heyday, Diciembre was best known for its performances of *The Idiot President*, a political satire written by Henry Nuñez, the company’s lead actor and playwright. Henry is arrested for “incitement” (Alarcón 2013, 4) in 1986, which effectively ends Diciembre’s tour and dismantles the troupe. He goes to prison, where he meets and falls in love with Rogelio, who later dies during a prison uprising. When the novel begins, Nelson has just won a role in a revival of *The Idiot President*, and Diciembre is set to go on tour again in the spring of 2001.

³ For more on references to photography and film in post-dictatorship literature, see Levinson (2015). A number of critics have considered the relationship between media and memory, including photography, especially Franco (2013) and Richard (2010).

Like many novels about political trauma and its aftermath, Alarcón's novel is marked by distances on spatial, temporal, and formal levels. Both of Diciembre's tours set the novel in motion, as the troupe moves out of the coastal city and into the mountainous countryside. The troupe's decision to go on tour in the mountains has a different valence in the 1980s than it does in 2001, but in each case, that trip into the mountains underscores the tensions between the two regions. The setting for *At Night We Walk in Circles*, though technically unnamed, closely resembles Peru's geography and politics. In that sense, the book itself traverses two locales, painting a portrait of a Spanish-speaking, South American country for an English-speaking audience. In addition, *At Night* treats multiple types of media, juxtaposing literature and theater, but also journalism or reportage. It is narrated by an unnamed journalist reporting for a magazine, with much of the text presented as interviews from the reporter's files. Part of the novel's force comes from this heteroglossia, from the way it poses literature itself as a powerful tool for bringing together the disparate discourses of history, politics, and art.

The most significant distance in the novel is the generational gap between the politically charged 1980s—a period Nelson's father referred to as “the anxious years” (Alarcón 2013, 3)—and the relatively calm and prosperous, though no less complicated, 2000s. Diciembre's own history underscores two historical periods, and it is through the lens of the 1980s tour and the 2001 revival that we come to understand the significance of all that has unfolded since the troupe's founding. Peru's history overlaps with that of the novel's unnamed country: the 1980s signal the height of the terror and violence of the Shining Path years, whereas the early 2000s indicate the end of Alberto Fujimori's presidency, an era marked by greater stability, but also by the imposition of neoliberal economic reforms and a continuation of human rights violations against the radical left. As in much of Latin America, the emphasis on neoliberalism and privatization persists even after Fujimori's departure, as does the emphasis on the value of the individual over collective action. 2001 also marks the establishment of the two-year long Truth Commission, convened in order to investigate and report on the violence of the 1980s. Thus, 2001 is an important year for the politics of memory and postmemory, when the country officially seeks to grapple—from a generational remove—with its internal conflict. By beginning the second Diciembre tour in 2001, the novel stages by proxy that postmemorial engagement. The revival of *The Idiot President* both commemorates the fear and urgency of the first tour and represents the troupe's attempt—and the nation's attempt—to reinvigorate itself in the present.

At Night We Walk in Circles depicts—or stages—several different performances of *The Idiot President*; here, I focus on stagings from each of the two tours and conclude by looking at the novel's depiction of a third performance, which takes place toward the end of the second tour. Nelson—the youngest member of Diciembre—agrees to stay in T-, the last stop on the tour and hometown to Rogelio, Henry's long-dead lover from prison. For the sake of Rogelio's ailing mother, Anabel, Nelson agrees to perform the role of Rogelio to maintain the longstanding fiction that Rogelio is alive but absent,

living in the United States. For the duration of the performance, he lives with Anabel and with Rogelio's sister. Each of these stagings is a translation: each new performance of *The Idiot President* is another unfolding, another phase in the play's continued life, even as it carries the scars of the past. In the case of the last performance, this idea extends beyond the context of the traditional theater venue and into a private home; as such, it's a theatrical staging that attends to the nuances of mourning, pushing at the bounds of what it means to revisit the past.

In general, I use the word "performance" to refer to the presentation or staging of an artistic work; within the context of *At Night We Walk in Circles*, that artistic work is most often a play, usually *The Idiot President*. Nelson's performance of Rogelio complicates that definition, since it involves the presentation of a specific character, though not a play. Nevertheless, I consider Nelson's portrayal of Rogelio to be a performance in the sense that he presents himself to Anabel in this role and stages his production, as it were, within the confines of her (rather limited) world.

THEATER AS TRANSLATIVE ENDEAVOR: GESTURE, CITABILITY, AND AFTERMATH

With regard to theater and theatricality, I refer to Samuel Weber's work on "theater as medium", in which he highlights the "ongoing" nature of a "theatrical happening", particularly in terms of its "coming to pass" and also "passing away":

When an event or series of events *takes place* without reducing the place it [sic] "taken" to a purely neutral site, then that place reveals itself to be a 'stage', and those events become theatrical happenings. [...] [S]uch happenings never take place once and for all but are ongoing. [...] They can be said, then, in a quite literal sense, to *come to pass*. They take place, which means in a particular place, and yet simultaneously also *pass away*—not simply to disappear but to happen somewhere *else* (Weber 2004, 7).

Here, the conjunction of place and time resonates in the context of trauma and postmemory in which trauma, rooted in a particular time and place, "comes to pass" and also "passes away", in the sense that its legacy endures and its effects persist, though not necessarily in precisely the same place or the same way—or to the same people.

The metaphor of translation is particularly well suited to the context of the theater, in which any given performance of a play represents a kind of translation of its source material.⁴ A performance depends on both the play as text and on the interpretation of that text as it gets translated to the stage. Each performance of a play is fundamentally distinct: even if the content stays the same from one performance to the next or from

⁴ *At Night We Walk in Circles* itself has a kind of translative history, developing in relationship to two earlier short stories by Alarcón, "The Idiot President" (2008) and "Second Lives" (2010), although neither can exactly be termed "an original".

one series of performances to the next, each performance will inevitably be affected by changes in audience, venue, or the performers' moods. In some cases, as here, those differences can be substantial. The significance of *The Idiot President* during the anxious years, for example, is quite different from its significance fifteen years later, a result not only of differences in the staging and interpretation, but of differences in the audience's response and engagement. Benjamin's "afterlife" resonates here, too, since plays are generally written with the understanding that they will have a life of their own and be performed well beyond the influence of the playwright, perhaps even posthumously. They will inevitably be adapted, giving voice to the original *intentio*, but also allowing for a new *intentio*.

To extend the synergy between translation and theater further, consider Samuel Weber's analysis of Benjamin's interest in "citability" and "gesture" in the theater, particularly in epic theater, though Weber extends the analysis to contemporary theater and theatricality more generally (Weber 2008).⁵ For Benjamin, epic theater is characterized by gestures and by citation, that is, by "making gestures citable" (Weber 2008, 98-100). Both gesture and its citability are noteworthy for their capacity for interruption: gestures interrupt action (Weber 2008, 100), while the citability of gesture indicates a kind of continued capacity for interruption, which "can give rise to *Nachdenken*, to after-thoughts. Such thoughts consider the 'after', the aftermath, the *citability* of the gesture as disjunctive and discontinuous" (Weber 2008, 105). Here, "after" also easily recalls after-life. If the gesture interrupts the "immediate" theatrical context at the moment it is introduced (Weber 2008, 105), its citability also indicates the possibility that it might continue to be thought-provoking, even beyond the end of the theatrical performance.⁶ Moreover, Weber argues that understanding the citability of gesture "requires a different type of logic" –one that resembles that of translation– "in which identity and difference, repetition and transformation are not construed as mutually exclusive" (Weber 2008, 97). Translation functions similarly; an original and its translation are similar, albeit not identical, but also fundamentally different. Translation is concerned with repetition at the same time it is essentially predicated on transformation. Benjamin likewise posits the "theatrical experiment" itself in terms that intersect with those of translation: both "entail a certain iterability, but not one that involves the reproduction of the identical" (Weber 2008,

⁵ In *Benjamin's -abilities* (2008), Weber's discussion of citability, gesture, and interruption is strongly rooted in Benjamin's "What is Epic Theater?". In *Theatricality as Medium*, Weber similarly refers to this lineage and context, but describes Benjamin's gesture, citation, and citability in epic theater and in "theater in general today" (2004, 45). See, for example, Weber 2004, 44-49.

⁶ Afterthoughts, aftermath, and afterlife also recall Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwardsness: the idea that "experiences, impressions and memory traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development" (Levine 2006, 169). Traumatic experiences may be subsequently "revised to fit in with fresh experiences", a process that resonates with the various interpretations of *The Idiot President*, in which the play is revised (by actors and spectators) in order to "fit in with" new settings and contexts.

108). Theater is thus a translative endeavor, with the “goal” of producing not “the identical”, but “the singular, the incommensurable, the irreducibly different” (Weber 2008, 108).

The rhetoric of the theatrical gesture and its citability resonates not only with translation, but with trauma and postmemory. Ross Chambers also invokes the notion of “aftermath” in order to describe societies or cultures that are “perpetually surviving a trauma that is never over”, a state distinguished by the kind of “untimeliness” or “out-of-jointness” –the “copresence of past and present, there and here”– that afflicts those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Chambers 2004, 43). Diana Taylor similarly argues that trauma itself “is a durational performance, characterized by the nature of its repetitions”, including “reiterated” –though not necessarily identical– “acts of showing, telling” (Taylor 2009, 19).⁷ Aftermath’s chronic out-of-jointness, which can manifest as the past interrupting the present through “flashbacks and hallucinations” (Chambers 2004, 43), recalls the “disjunctive and discontinuous” nature of gesture’s citability. Thus, the gesture itself can be emblematic of trauma and its effects: in the aftermath begotten by its citability, the gesture interrupts in ways parallel to the untimely interruptions of traumatic effects in the aftermath of trauma.

Though Benjamin is not precisely interested in trauma, his consideration of theater, and of dialectical images more generally, seems to point to theater’s translative force in the wake of trauma. Theater, in Benjamin’s framing, “interrupts the announcements of everyday life to bring us a special message” (Weber 2008, 113). Understood as a kind of dialectical image, that is, as “something to be read rather than merely seen”, theater is “both disjunctive and medial in its structure [...] both actual and virtual at the same time” (Weber 2008, 49). Weber explains that dialectical images “become a point of convergence, which Benjamin here designates as ‘now’. This *now* coexists with the ‘time’ from which it simultaneously sets itself apart” (2008, 49). Theater interrupts and mediates; it is representative of a “now” –the *Jetztzeit*– even as it, like translation, mediates between the events of the past and their repercussions in the present. Trauma, too, is an interruption, one made citable through its continued capacity for interruption, albeit in unpredictable ways. Theater, as a translative endeavor, is a venue for framing and then mediating those interruptions, attending to the concerns of postmemory as they continue to evolve. In the context of the novel, as the plot moves back and forth between the anxious years and their aftermath, the various performances evoke trauma and its aftereffects, reiterating and retelling, but also forestalling, the aftereffects of trauma, particularly in T--, as Rogelio’s brother and sister attempt to shield their mother from her son’s death.

⁷ Taylor has also noted the connection between dictatorship and performance where public spectacle may be used by the state to force the spectator into collusion with military violence (1997, 123). She has also noted a non-collusive kind of participation, where theater and performance can “make witnesses of the audience”, orienting viewers toward productive “transmission” and, thus, translation (2009, 25).

REVIVING *THE IDIOT PRESIDENT*: FROM “THEATER FOR THE PEOPLE!” TO COMMEMORATION-AND MOURNING

The temporal divide between the first incarnation of Diciembre and its revival is explicit from the novel's first page. Diciembre was founded “during the war” by a veritable who's who of the radical, the extreme and the marginalized: “the longhairs, the working class, the sex-crazed, the poseurs, the provincials, the alcoholics, the emotionally needy, the rabble-rousers, the opportunists, the punks, the hangers-on, and the obsessed” (Alarcón 2013, 3). Alarcón adds that the company –whose slogan was “Theater for the people!”– traveled “into the conflict zone [...] at no small risk to the safety of the actors” (2013, 4). The troupe was more easily associated with the extreme and the risky precisely because the socio-political circumstances tipped the scales in that direction: “[s]uch was the tenor of the era that while sacrifices of this sort were applauded by certain sectors of the public, many others condemned them, even equated them with terrorism” (Alarcón 2013, 4). Those same circumstances turn the actors' work into a sacrifice, heightening its significance.

Among the troupe's founding members are Henry, the company's lead playwright, and Patalarga, Henry's confidante. They are the novel's main characters, along with Nelson, who joins the troupe's revival in 2001. Alarcón highlights the generational gap between Henry and Patalarga and Nelson: at the time of Diciembre's founding, Nelson “was just a boy” (2013, 3). At the moment in which Diciembre's stakes were highest, Nelson was a young child, with little access to, or awareness of, the tension and violence that marked Henry and Patalarga's young adulthood.

In Diciembre's “glory days at the end of the 1980s”, the extremity of the political circumstances directly affect Diciembre's artistic expression, and art and politics are closely intertwined. The troupe “felt less like a theater collective and more like a movement”; as such, they adapted to the exigencies of the era, “stag[ing] marathon, all-night shows in the newly abandoned buildings and warehouses at the edges of the Old City” and performing by candlelight or even in the dark when there was no electricity (2013, 6-7). Alarcón describes the troupe's best-known performances, each of which represents an adaptation in response to the extraordinary circumstances that afford Diciembre the influence it would probably not have had otherwise. García Lorca gets a “pop reworking[]”; Brazilian soap operas are presented as “stentorian”; poetry nights “mock[] the very idea of poetry” (6-7). The troupe is forced into a special kind of creativity, and it gives them the opportunity to create community in the midst of violence.

Even from a generational remove, Nelson and his peers imbue the 1980s with import and legend, albeit naively and reductively. They “mythologize []” Diciembre, searching “the stands of used books and magazines” in the Old City to “find mimeographed copies of Diciembre's programs, wrinkled and faded but bearing that unmistakable whiff of history, the kind one wishes to have been a part of” (6-7). This point marks Nelson's generation as postmemorial: they eluded the vi-

olence themselves, mainly by virtue of having been born too late, but their own experiences are marked by the persistent legacy of that violence. Even knowing Diciembre's prominence came at risk to its members' lives, Nelson's generation sees that those same circumstances give art a significance it is unlikely to have in peacetime. For Nelson and his cohort, that point is also a call for translation, for a reworking of the troupe's legacy in a way that corresponds to the demands of the present—an opportunity to recognize and cite the gestures of their predecessors, but in the context of a new theatrical experiment. Their work would have to transform that legacy for the present moment, one newly obsessed with privatization and self-fulfillment.

After all, the end of the war ushers in a new, neoliberal era, which clearly changes things for Diciembre. The troupe continued to work occasionally after the war's "nominal end", but mostly in "private homes" with an invite-only audience (Alarcón 2013, 8). This shift signals a translation and a transformation: the war sent them into the countryside, at risk to their lives, impelled by a collectivist spirit to bring "theater to the people". In peace, it is finally safe to travel through the countryside, but the troupe hardly leaves the city. As a reflection of the new economic reforms, they recede into private homes, where their art becomes exclusive, inaccessible.

The change in political circumstances thus points to a change in the company's credo and goals: "in late 2000", some of the old members of the troupe suggest a "commemoration" of the troupe's founding. Henry's time in prison has made him reluctant to re-involve himself with theater, but he agrees to participate if the troupe finds a new actor for the tour (10). Citing the significance of the first tour, commemoration is the rationale for the revival—a sharp but inevitable contrast to "Theater for the people!". Henry's request to find a new actor demonstrates the postmemorial stakes of this new tour, as well as his recognition that the revival must be a "supplement" or a transformation, rather than a reproduction. In choosing Nelson, who was just a boy during the anxious years, Henry gives the play new life, an "afterlife," leaving room for Nelson to carry his own circumstances, experiences, intentions into the world of the play, as well as into Diciembre's ethos.

Nevertheless, the revival is tinged with nostalgia for all involved. Henry, Patalarga, and Nelson all agree to the tour for their own reasons. All three are drawn to the countryside, its associations with the past, and a certain idealized notion of authenticity—a common trope in Latin American literature that is both underscored and subverted here. Henry and Patalarga, the veterans, believe that the second tour might somehow re-imbue their lives with a hope they abandoned years ago (Alarcón 2013, 77, 98). Nelson is not looking for something he once had, but he is trying to leave disappointment and routine behind (13). He's also affected by Diciembre's mythology and legacy. His interest in the tour, and in the countryside, is a translation of Henry and Patalarga's nostalgia, an idealization of the revolutionary past that's been inaccessible to him. Though none of the three can recover the past, this new tour nevertheless

represents an opportunity for translation, a repetition of the earlier tour that is also, inevitably, a transformation, a chance for each of them to make sense of their present in light of the scars of the past.

The Idiot President itself presents a similar opportunity. It is a story of political violence and corruption, though the weight of that violence varies in tandem with its staging and socio-political circumstance. The titular character is an “arrogant, self-absorbed head of state,” who replaces “his manservant” each day (2013, 47). The only other character is Alejo, the president’s son, who admits to the manservant that he has considered killing his father because his father is such a tyrant. After much badgering, the manservant finally admits that perhaps Alejo is right and the president should be killed. Alejo then accuses the manservant of treason and has him killed; the president has to hire another servant for the next day. We are given to understand that Alejo’s manipulation of the manservant happens each day, that this is merely one episode of many, so the play itself cites repetition and transformation as complementary rather than mutually exclusive; each manservant is, in some sense, the same (he never has a name), but also inevitably different. Each episode is a translation of the previous one, an expectation of repetition with the hope of transformation. On Diciembre’s first tour, it is not clear who played which part, though probably Henry would have played Alejo. On the second tour, Henry plays the president/father; Patalarga plays the manservant; Nelson plays Alejo. In the revival, the play takes a postmemorial turn; it seems to be as much about the generational distance between father and son as it is about politics.

As the narrator observes, “[I]t’s easy enough to understand why *The Idiot President* was so controversial during the war. The play debuted a few months after the inauguration of a new head of state, a young, charismatic but humorless man acutely lacking in confidence” (48). After his arrest, Henry argued that the play was not modeled after any particular president, but it is clearly written as a commentary on a particular set of circumstances. In Peruvian history, this reference is likely to President Fernando Terry, who took office just as the Shining Path was on the rise, though he largely ignored the violence during his time in office. In any case, the play is a challenge to authority, calling attention to nepotism, deceit, and the abuse and manipulation of power. Even in the novel’s present, more than ten years after the end of the war, the play continues to pose a threat to authority. At the first stop on the tour, for example, the mayor is reluctant to let the troupe stage the play because he doesn’t like the title (97). He notes that there have been several killings since Diciembre’s last visit in 1982, with the implication that “the first event was somehow related to the others” (97). Even if Diciembre no longer holds the cachet it once did, something persists of its reputation and the traumatic era it recalls, and something of the political power of Diciembre’s earlier work has been translated into the present. The mayor’s reaction to the troupe suggests that the present peace is uncertain, even tenuous. The scars of the anxious years have faded, but they are still there; Diciembre’s sway has lessened, but its revival inevitably recalls the urgency of its earlier performances.

In the final pages of the novel, we see one last performance: a staging of the work of mourning in the wake of trauma. Toward the end of the tour, Henry realizes that they are close to T--, the childhood home of Rogelio, Henry's long dead lover from prison. He wants to go there in order "to close off the past, to make peace with it" (142). This is also where the content of the novel intersects with the frame story; it turns out that the reporter is also from T--. The narrator describes the town in theatrical terms: "in shadow, as a backdrop for a series of events unfolding in strict adherence to the highlands' acute surrealist mode" (Alarcón 2013, 148). The series of events that unfold in T-- "take place" in Weber's sense, that is "without reducing the place [...] taken to a purely neutral site" such that the "place reveals itself to be a 'stage,' and those events become theatrical happenings" (Weber 2004, 7). The town is thus the "backdrop" to this theatrical happening, and the performance begins when the troupe arrives in town, even before Nelson agrees to play Rogelio for Rogelio's mother, Anabel. What happens in T-- stages the disruption of trauma and its aftermath, so that the elements of trauma are, in this elaborate production, both actual and virtual.

When they get to T--, Henry goes to the house of Rogelio's mother, who lives with her daughter, Noelia. There, he learns that Rogelio's brother, Jaime, has led Anabel and Noelia to believe that Rogelio has been living and working in the United States, in Los Angeles, since 1984. Thus, the central trauma in Henry's life—Rogelio's death—is not even known to Rogelio's mother and sister. Henry's arrival introduces this trauma into their lives, quite literally interrupting the fantasy that Jaime has constructed for them, an interruption so devastating that Henry initially changes his story. He leaves Anabel's house thinking that T-- is a place "where people died and were never mourned" (Alarcón 213, 168). This sets the stage for the trauma and mourning to come: first its postponement and then its inevitable arrival.

Henry, Patalarga, and Nelson return to Anabel's house the next day. This scene suggests the beginning of a performance: as Henry, Nelson, and Patalarga follow Noelia into the courtyard, Jaime and Anabel are already sitting together "talking in whispers", as the audience does before the curtain goes up (214). Moreover, "the members of Diciembre stepped out of the dark passage"—akin to backstage—"and into the light" (214). Nelson "emerges" first, as if stepping onstage, "[t]he sun in [his] eyes [...] like stage lights", making it difficult to see his audience (216). Anabel, who has dementia, immediately, and joyfully, mistakes Nelson for Rogelio.

Nelson "improvises" an affirmative response to Anabel's misrecognition (216): "Yes, Mama [...] I'm here" (216). Like Nelson's performance in *The Idiot President*, this performance also takes a postmemorial turn, staging the reunion between a mother and her seemingly long lost son. Nelson's appearance in Anabel's life is a foil to Henry's intrusion, an interruption that *repairs* her illusions, at least for the time being. From there, the rest of the elements necessary for this extended performance slide carefully into place: "'Mama, it's me,' he said—he purred—repeated the words once and again, such that their sound and meaning began to soothe Mrs. Anabel" (216-217). Nelson spends the rest of his time in T-- in character, answering Anabel's questions and, later,

staying on at her house even after the others leave, perpetuating Jaime's myth and attempting to repair the damage from Henry's disruptive visit.

CONCLUSIONS, OR TRANSLATION AS POSSIBILITY

By way of conclusion, consider that Benjamin viewed the gesture in its citability as an act that "ex-poses the present not just to the future, but to its finitude" (Weber 2008, 111). Henry's first visit to Anabel's house is a gesture, interrupting the elaborate fantasy that Jaime has spun. It not only damages Anabel and Noelia's illusions about Rogelio, it also ex-poses their present to its finitude. While Jaime's version of Rogelio serves a protective function, allowing Anabel to maintain hope and forestall trauma, it cannot survive beyond the bounds of T--. If the entirety of what happens in T-- is a kind of theater, Henry's first visit represents a critical interruption, a gesture with the potential for citability, signaling the interruptions that will likely come again in the future, at the national level and at the personal level. Nelson's performance as Rogelio temporarily restores the illusion, but not for long; his performance can delay, but not prevent, the aftermath to come. Henry's interruption mimics the untimely interruptions of trauma, stymying Jaime's best efforts to forestall its effects.⁸ While Henry's arrival in T-- could set the stage for a kind of productive mourning, it is also a reminder of the stakes of revisiting and coming to terms with the violence of what's come before. Henry's arrival ushers in the trauma and aftermath that Anabel has so far avoided, but eventually, Anabel will be left to confront the loss of her son.

In this final scene, theater becomes life, and life becomes theater. In each of the stagings, theater emerges as a translative force, one that serves to underscore the connections between history, art, and politics and attends to the concerns of postmemory, negotiating between the trauma of the past and its legacy in the present. Theater, literature, and art, more broadly, are all translative forces, mediating even as they interrupt. In this context, the novel stages a different mode of engagement with the past, one that depends not on pure repetition –not, that is, on the rehearsing of old scripts with their ties to an idealized past– but on opening ourselves up to translation and its possibilities for thinking history and its legacy in new and unfamiliar ways. Here, theater and translation highlight the ways in which grappling with trauma over time involves wrestling with the difficult task of evolving past tropes –translating them for a new context, but doing so in a way that neither reproduces them nor effaces them entirely.

⁸ Henry and Jaime's reactions to Rogelio's death suggest different modes of mourning, including Freud's distinction between "mourning and melancholia" (Freud 1957), where melancholia represents a fixation on the loss and mourning involves a healthy processing that leads to recovery, and Derrida's description of mourning as a kind of exposure to, and interiorization of, the other (Derrida 1986).

The difficulty –but also the hope– lies in making use of those translations of the past in a way that manages to think toward afterlife.

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