

Mobile Thresholds, Immobile Phones:
Staging Migration, Return, and the Empty Home
in Recent Ecuadorian Theater

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In the past decade, hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians have emigrated, principally to Spain and the United States. A growing body of recent Ecuadorian plays has treated the experiences of the migrants and, tellingly, the experiences of those left behind. This essay focuses on three plays that present migration as a kind of threshold, a space of transition that is paradoxically temporary yet solid: *Con estos zapatos me quería comer el mundo* 'With these shoes I meant to take on the world,' (premiered 2002; published 2004) by Jorge Mateus and Pablo Tatés; *El pueblo de las mujeres solas* 'The village of solitary women,' (premiered 2005; published 2006) by Jorge Mateus; and *La Travesía* 'The crossing,' (premiered 2002; published 2007) by Nixon García. The first two plays were produced by the Quito-based group, El Callejón del Agua, directed by Mateus; the third was performed by the group La Trinchera, based in Manta, of which García is the director.¹ These plays present the ambivalent situation of the migrant as one of both frustration and possibility. All three plays employ small casts of characters to explore the individual transitions faced by the migrant and to evoke the nostalgia and ambivalence that surround the possibility of return. *Con estos zapatos* centers on the experience of four migrants who leave Ecuador for

various parts of Europe and North America. *La Travesía* presents a married couple and the wife's brother who share an apartment in a snowy European city. In *El pueblo de las mujeres solas*, the migrants are wholly absent. Instead, the stage is occupied by the families they have left behind, the "mujeres solas" of the title.

The stage is a provisional no-place—endlessly redefined, temporary, understood as a specific setting by virtue of theatrical conventions and the consensus of audience and performers. It mimics, in some ways, the provisional space occupied by the migrant, readily redefined or undermined yet persistently rigid. These plays exploit that resemblance, using the malleability of the stage space to perform a migration that is not yet finished or resolved. The plays also raise important questions about the staging of a specific Latin American experience in different national or regional contexts. The stage might be one of those "interstitial" spaces that Homi Bhabha seeks to privilege when he writes, "It is at the level of the interstices that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (269). The staging of liminality and displacement is central to these plays as the characters negotiate unfamiliar languages and landscapes, including the previously familiar landscape of a home changed by the absence of the migrant.

While the mobile threshold is most directly visible in *El pueblo de las mujeres solas*, the threshold presents a significant trope of migration in *Con estos zapatos* and *La Travesía* as well. The convergence of theatrical representations and real world experiences of liminality shapes the three plays under consideration, evident in the staging and/or description of the journey; in the attempt to communicate, across distance and between languages; and in the hoped-for return, a return that combines the recreation of elements of home in the new country of residence, the triumphal tour of the migrant who has "made it," and the persistent hope that one might at least return in spirit, if only after death. Una Chaudhuri writes, "Being an immigrant, unlike being an exile, is an evolutionary alienation, occurring over years, sometimes even over a lifetime. It is a process that inevitably raises the specter of return, of the need to recover somehow the true meaning of that very real—increasingly real—place one has left behind" (174). The "increasing reality" of the place

Chaudhuri describes can be seen in all three plays. The “return” must be understood in terms of repetition and performance, as a closure performed imaginatively as aspiration or plan and, when it is realized concretely, itself a performance, as the migrant plays out the role of the world traveler once again at home.

Migrants are necessarily in a liminal position, a situation that is more process than fixed state, difficult to count or to document. Victor Turner writes that the:

attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (95)

Drawing on Turner, Jason Pribilsky points out that when “individuals leave one place for another, exchanging stability for liminality, they [. . .] find themselves straddling states, in psychological as well as political terms” (167). The migrants occupy a kind of interstitial state, one that overlaps parts of both Ecuador and the United States or Spain, but is fully coterminous with neither. As Ann Miles puts it, “migrants do not just leave one social setting to go to another: the very process of crossing borders creates new social and cultural patterns, ideas, and behaviors” (8). Finally, instability may characterize the situation the migrant is leaving just as much as it describes the status of that migrant in a new city. The interplay of migration, home, and identity is significant in theatrical terms as well. Chaudhuri argues that “Whereas the drama of heroic home-leaving had constituted stable identities by putting people into transit within and out of stable societies, the new drama, taking social instability as its basic norm, traces the difficulty of constituting identities on the slippery ground of immigrant experience” (173). Chaudhuri posits here a shift in the metaphors of home and place in modern theater. Most relevant to my argument is the sense of instability, as the identities staged as well as the societies between which the characters move are increasingly undefined or unstable.

Themes of migration have an established place in the theaters of the Americas. For instance, influenced by the influx of immigrants into Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Argentine theater has long engaged images of the immigrant, as in the stock Italian immigrant figures of the *grotesco criollo*.² In the U.S., Latino/a playwrights and performers such as Cherrie Moraga, Luis Valdez, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, María Irene Fornes, and Dolores Prida have addressed questions of immigration, migration, identity, and assimilation. In Mexico, plays such as Hugo Salcedo's *El viaje de los cantores* 'The singers' journey' (premiered 1989) offer a consideration of the dangerous journey undertaken by the migrant. In Ecuador, theatrical attention to themes of migration has been more recent and may be seen, at least in part, as a response to the sharp upsurge in migration out of Ecuador in 1999-2000.

Ecuador has a long history of emigration, with a well-established pattern of movement from the southern highlands to the U.S., a migratory pattern that has been primarily male and that is most clearly represented in *El pueblo de las mujeres solas*. More recently, patterns have shifted. Following the economic collapse of 1999, which included a severe banking crisis, high inflation, and ultimately the "dollarization" of Ecuador's economy, Ecuador experienced a sharp increase in emigration as well as a shift in who was emigrating and where those emigrants went.³ Beginning in 1999, the number of emigrants from Ecuador increased sharply—Brad Jokisch and Pribilsky place the number at "more than 267,000" between 1999 and 2000—with a sharp shift toward Spain, rather than the U.S. as destination (76).⁴ Brian Gratton observes that prior to the crisis, "women never made up more than one-third of emigrants; after 1996 they were about half, and were the majority of those who went to Europe" (586). The role of the migrants in Ecuadorian politics and society continues to evolve, as the ability to send money back to Ecuador varies with changing economic conditions, and as migrants' ties to their home communities develop or weaken over time. Spain has carried out several "regularization" or amnesty programs, allowing many formerly undocumented immigrants to obtain legal working papers. Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa has proposed a "Plan Retorno" designed to encourage migrants to return permanently to Ecuador through a variety of economic in-

centives.⁵ Whether large numbers of migrants will take Correa up on the offer remains to be seen.

Within these plays, references to Ecuador's recent political and economic upheavals are elliptical or implicit. However, the individual experiences depicted are linked to national (and international) issues. The individual forced by economic circumstance to migrate reflects a collective as well as a particular identity, and national failures as well as personal hopes. Michael Handelsman observes that:

en lo que respecta a las artes y la literatura en particular, tradicionalmente los escritores encontraban en el tema de las migraciones un recurso útil para destacar la experiencia personal y existencial de los individuos que vivían en el extranjero. Es decir, generalmente no se aprehendía el tema como un fenómeno con repercusiones colectivas, ni tampoco como uno que pusiera en peligro una supuesta identidad nacional.

in the case of the arts and of literature in particular, writers have traditionally found in the theme of migration a useful means of highlighting the personal and existential experiences of individuals living abroad. That is, the theme was not generally understood as one with collective repercussions nor as one that endangered a supposed national identity. (212-13)⁶

National identity is nonetheless called into question, if subtly, in these plays. As Dora puts it in *La Travesía*, “¡La madre patria! Una madre que reniega de sus hijos no es una madre” ‘The motherland! A mother who disowns her children is not a mother’ (García 78). Pety Andino offers a similar denunciation of the *patria*, again linked to motherhood, in his monologue *Medea llama por cobrar* ‘Medea calls collect’ (2001) in which Medea, assigning to Ecuador the persona of Jason, glosses the national coat of arms from the perspective of the emigrant:

Solo los que se van entienden el significado de tu escudo de armas: la nave que se aleja, el sol eléctrico que alumbrará por siempre su holocausto, la montaña de dolor perpetuo, y el condor que los despiden con esa nostalgia que sienten las aves de rapiña cuando

su alimento se aleja.

Only those who leave understand the meaning of your coat of arms: the ship that moves further away, the electric sun that will forever illuminate its holocaust, the mountain of perpetual pain, and the condor that bids them farewell with that nostalgia that birds of prey feel when their food leaves. (16)

Artistides Vargas' *Nuestra Señora de las Nubes* 'Our Lady of the Clouds' (premiered 1998) also evokes the issues of economically motivated migration in a form that calls into question any easy distinction between exile and immigration:

BRUNA. Ahora nadie se exilia por motivos
políticos, se exilian porque hicieron
un desfalco, o porque robaron.

OSCAR. Yo creo que hay un exilio por
motivos políticos.

BRUNA. ¿Cuál?

OSCAR. El que se exilia por hambre. El
hambre es la forma más sutil
de persecución política.

BRUNA. ¿Es suyo ese pensamiento?

OSCAR. No, lo compré en la tienda de la
esquina; me queda un poco grande
pero se encoge en la primera lavada.
(54)

BRUNA. Now no one is exiled for political
reasons, they go into exile because
they embezzled or because they
stole.

OSCAR. I think there is still an exile for
political reasons.

BRUNA. Which one?

OSCAR. The person exiled by hunger.
Hunger is the most subtle form of
political persecution.

BRUNA. Is that thought yours?

OSCAR. No, I bought it at the store on the corner; it's a little big for me, but it will shrink in the first wash.

Vargas' play implicitly takes issue with a view of emigration as essentially voluntary. Lest the critique become too earnest, Bruno admits that his eloquence is borrowed. The note of humor further serves to underscore the environment of consumption and repetition—and performance—in which the migrants move.

A resistant theater that contests discriminatory treatment within the cultural context of the receiving country may both reinforce communal bonds among audience members who share a similar history and at the same time serve as a consciousness-raising tool for spectators to whom the struggles depicted may be “news.” Plays performed within a migrant-sending country assume a different audience. The spectators may well have experiences of migration, either personally or through family members or friends, but they are not, at the moment of the performance, surrounded by, or embedded in, the experience of migration. These plays question the interrelations of migration and identity within a specifically Ecuadorian context, but the culture depicted is at once local and hemispheric. Music and poetry are incorporated into all three texts. Gabriela Mistral's poem “Todas íbamos a ser reinas” ‘We were all going to be queens’ establishes an important underlying structure in *Mujeres solas*, which includes songs performed by Susana Baca and Mario Barona. Music is important in *Con estos zapatos*, too, with the use of traditional Ecuadorian songs. The music in *La Travesía*, finally, is provided by the characters themselves, as they rehearse for the fiesta.

The “migration” of the plays as texts is also significant. All three plays have been or will be performed internationally.⁷ Traveling plays, like traveling people, often require guides and interpreters abroad, and the published editions of Tatés and Mateus' plays—both published in Spain—include cultural and linguistic footnotes that interpret Ecuadorian geography, speech, and customs for a Spanish public. The language that requires footnoting for a different Spanish-speaking audience also draws in the English, Italian, and French that begins to flavor the migrants' Spanish. In *Con es-*

tos zapatos, the migrants' "foreign" accents are represented not as mispronounced English or Italian but in a hybrid combination with Spanish, effectively portraying a linguistic *mestizaje* or otherness on stage, as audible when the migrants return to Ecuador as it is when they live and work elsewhere. *La Travesía* situates its characters as surrounded by a language they do not understand.

At the start of *Con estos zapatos*, two women and two men, each with a suitcase/trunk, appear on a stage decorated with cloth that suggests the wings of an airplane. The play is divided into four scenes, identified as "sequences." Named for traditional neighborhoods or streets in Quito, the characters, metaphorically, carry the geography of home wherever they go: Pedro El Pintado, Blanca Avelina Rocafuerte, Wilmer Ataúlfo Marín San Marcos, and Magdalena San Sebastián. The characters also represent the geographic diversity of the country. The importance of the shoes—world-beater shoes, globetrotting shoes—is highlighted at the beginning of the second sequence, when each character sits on his or her trunk to put on a pair of shoes, and again at the end of the play, when the characters begin to fill the stage with shoes, an excess that suggests both the missing and the dead while concentrating the idea of the journey on the clothing and movement of the individual body.

The play begins with a mime of departure and farewell, after which each character introduces him or herself. This first series of introductions seems to mark the characters' lacks or failings, the ways in which they have failed to fit in at home, to be part of the national project. Pedro describes himself as "sancionado dos años sin derechos de ciudadanía por violar la 'ley seca' en las elecciones de mayo de 1976" 'sanctioned with two years without rights of citizenship for violating the 'dry law' during the elections of May 1976' while Magdalena confesses herself "suspensa en matemáticas por medio punto cuando cursaba el octavo nivel de educación básica" 'failed in mathematics by half a point in the eighth grade' (23). Wilmer has not completed his military service. The four place themselves along the center of the stage, which has now become the interior of a plane, and look out the windows, remarking on the city seen from above. Their distanced perspective provokes the customary observations as to the smallness of things (the people look like ants) as well as a rejection of those shopworn similes (Wilmer ob-

jects, “Las picanterías no son balnearios, ni las personas hormigas” ‘The neighborhood restaurants aren’t spas and the people aren’t ants’ [26]). Pedro predicts that one day, the city will spread: “Si algún día volvemos, veremos esta ciudad como a una serpiente ciega que se estira y trata de crecer por dónde sea” ‘If we come back some day, we will see this city like a blind serpent that stretches and tries to grow wherever it can’ (27). The description is an apt one, for Quito, a city of roughly 1.5 million people, occupies a narrow valley; as the city has grown, it has become longer—some 40 km long—while also spreading up the mountainsides. The journey in the first sequence is a new one, and while there are expressions of nostalgia and loss, the characters are also excited and enthusiastic.

In the second sequence, the characters once again introduce themselves. The initial glow has begun to fade: Magdalena is a temporary worker in a cookie factory, Wilmer has become a gigolo. Blanca admits, “en la carretera gano mucho más que trapeando pisos y limpiando portales. . . no me quejo” ‘on the street I earn a lot more than mopping floors and cleaning doorways. . . I don’t complain’ (31). This second sequence consists of four extended monologues as each character describes a central, happy memory of the past: falling in love, being crowned the local beauty queen, scoring a winning goal. In Magdalena’s case, that early memory encompasses a train journey with her uncle, an engineer. The ambitious Magdalena sees the world in terms of popular films and transmutes the highland landscape of central Ecuador into the, for her, more fully exotic landscape cinematically portrayed in *Out of Africa*. Imagining herself in that film, she remembers, “Me sentía la heroína, como Meryl Streep” ‘I felt like the heroine, like Meryl Streep’ (40). Joseph Roach writes, “Like performance, memory operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes, with claims on the future as well as the past” (33). The characters’ memory monologues are preparation for the longed-for return as much as recollections of an idealized past time. The return itself, if realized, is another performance. The returned migrant plays the story of his or her return in a way that may or may not accord with anyone’s expectations. As Roach states:

no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the

same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance. In this improvisatorial behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination. (29)

The improvisational aspect is heightened when the performance must be translated spatially as well as linguistically or culturally to a new venue.

What should be impossible—a one-sided dialogue—is staged repeatedly, both in the form of a direct address to the absent husband (as in *Mujeres solas*) and through telephone conversations. In the case of the staged phone call, the speaker heard by the audience must supply just enough of the absent speakers' lines to make the scene coherent; the speaker's explanations make sense only as responses to implicit but, for the audience, unspoken questions. In the third sequence of *Con estos zapatos*, each character calls home, their Spanish now inflected with English, French or Italian; all have acquired accents in their native language. In the case of Blanca Avelina, settled in Spain, the "accent" lies in a new vulgarity—"hostia" and "joder" repeated constantly, words that, while common in Spain, remain much more taboo in Ecuador. The change is quickly perceived by the unseen interlocutors: the person calling home is not the same, and the reaction to that change is evident, for example, when Blanca tries to mollify the grandmother she has offended. Strangled by nostalgia and impossible communication, the characters become entangled in their phone cords: "Poco a poco se van envolviendo con la cuerda del teléfono hasta quedar con la sensación de ahorcarse" 'Little by little they wrap themselves in the telephone cord until they are left with the sensation of strangling' (51).⁸ Returning to the spots they occupied in the first scene, the characters finally enact their return.

That return, inevitably, falls short of expectations. Wilmer returns home as tour guide and companion to an Italian widow—returning, as it were, as a cultural and linguistic interpreter—but he does not stay: "En fin, arrivederci. Hay que irse. La vida pasa rápido y las viudas pueblan las playas del Mediterráneo" 'Well, arrivederci. One has to go. Life passes quickly and widows fill the beaches of the Mediterranean' (57). Blanca, in the second series of introductions, describes herself as "fallecida en la carretera" 'deceased on the road'

(53). When she returns home at last, her grandmother does not look at her. Her return is permanent but, of course, too late: “No reconozco a la gente. Me miran sin mirarme” ‘I don’t recognize people. They look at me without looking at me’ (57). As the lights dim, the actors fill the stage with shoes.

Four women—a widow and her three daughters-in-law—make up the cast of Mateus’ *El pueblo de las mujeres solas*, second in El Callejón del Agua’s trilogy. Their names (Rosalía, Soledad, Lucila, Efigenia) are those of the girls in Gabriela Mistral’s poem, “Todas íbamos a ser reinas,” ‘We were all going to be queens,’ a fragment of which is recited at the close of the play. Soledad is the eldest, a widow; her daughters-in-law, however, are also alone, as each woman’s husband has emigrated. Details are sketchy as to where the husbands have gone: the women cite rumors and popular wisdom about things “over there,” where the police are strict and the women are sirens. The women suffer from loneliness, sexual frustration, and the burden of completing both their own and their husbands’ work around the house. Soledad, although sympathetic, also takes them to task for letting the garden be overrun with weeds or for obsessing about possible infidelities. The play also recalls the short film, *Tiempo de mujeres* ‘Women’s time’ (1988), a film that depicts a village populated only by women whose husbands and sons have left to look for work in New York and Chicago. Handelsman notes that while the film’s strength lies in great part in its ability to elicit feelings of empathy and solidarity on the part of the viewer, it is also significant because it laid out, “con más de diez años de antelación, el aspecto desgarrador y devastador que caracterizará, desde 2000, la emigración y sus múltiples embates” ‘ten years in advance, the heartbreaking and devastating aspect that would characterize the ravages of emigration after 2000’ (217). The “empty town” is something of a topos; Pribilsky cites upper-class English language students in Ecuador who “perpetuated exaggerations regarding the existence of *pueblos de mujeres solas* ‘communities of only women,’ created by the absence of husbands and fathers” (*La Chulla* 42).

In *Mujeres solas*, the threshold is made explicit, becoming a visual trope of displacement. An early review of the play describes a performance in which three women “se mueven por el escenario cargando como cruces sus umbrales, donde se sientan, se levantan,

se acuestan y viven siempre a la espera” ‘move around the stage carrying, like crosses, their thresholds, where they sit, stand, lie down, and live, always waiting’ (“El teatro”). Fulgencio Lax describes the set in this way: “Un fondo cortado en tres partes a modo de banderolas o estandartes, significando la geografía andina y tres bastidores del tamaño del actor” ‘A background cut into three parts like scrolls or banners, signifying the Andean landscape, and three actor-sized frames’ (12-13). The three open wooden frames also suggest display windows, frames the younger women might occupy, almost like dolls in boxes or, more probably, in their roles as market women. That the thresholds are mobile plays on the unresolved nature of migration, for those left behind as well as for the migrants themselves.⁹

In their layering of colors and patterns, the performers’ brightly colored costumes become almost abstract, possibly losing any clear connection to a specific time or place. Nevertheless, the skirts worn by the performers echo, in highly stylized fashion, the traditional “polleras” worn by the *Chola Cuencana*.¹⁰ The costumes of *Mujeres solas* are not described in the stage directions, although the published text includes black-and-white photographs. The performers wear beaded tunics, striped belts suspended from the waist, layered skirts, half veils, and hats. Teatro Icono’s website includes the same photos in color; the half-mourning of Soledad, largely dressed in black and white though with touches of brighter color as well, stands out in contrast to the costumes of her daughters-in-law.¹¹

The play opens in darkness. Political news is heard in the background, news that the stage directions frame as at once threatening and nonspecific. The women appear single-file, marching like soldiers (17). The radio news interrupts again at intervals; the women worry about whether the roads will be passable and whether they will be able to sell their chickens and vegetables. The evocation of unrest is at once poetic and frightening:

dicen que la ciudad se transforma y se deforma en los cascos y los escudos y que las patas de los caballos van salpicando de sangre las paredes de las iglesias [. . .] ¡Dicen que los bancos han devorado los billetes y que las monedas han huido!... ‘they say the city is transformed and deformed on helmets and shields and that the

horses' hooves spatter the walls of the churches with blood. They say the banks have devoured the banknotes and that the coins have fled!' (31-32)

Later the news comes that the president has been overthrown (37). The radio news, elliptical and half developed as it is, alludes to the crises motivating the steep spike in emigration after 1999 and presents the clearest reference among the plays under discussion to the most immediate causes of emigration.

These plays about migration and international identities also evoke questions of tourism, an international displacement that presupposes a different level of mobility. In *Con estos zapatos*, Wilmer returns as a kind of tour guide, paid to show off his exotic homeland, while Pablo contrasts, in *La Travesía*, his own situation with that of the tourist who freely chooses where to go. The implicit evocation of the market woman in *Mujeres solas* may be linked to the role of that image in the promotion of tourism. According to Mary J. Weismantel:

As tourism expands in otherwise contracting economies, such antiquated images as *la cholita* of the marketplace with her baskets of fruits and flowers become the only attractions capable of luring enough scarce foreign currency to shore up the faltering prosperity of the middle class. The tourist industry thus offers a Faustian bargain to its members, who hope that by selling romantic images of underdevelopment, they can make it go away. (344)

For those outside the middle or upper classes, the significance of the image of the *cholita*—visible in tourist brochures, on billboards, and on websites—is quite different. Weismantel argues that “the thick wool skirts, handmade hat, and silver jewelry of the twentieth-century market vendor [. . .] symbolizes a vanished prosperity and self-respect once available to the city’s hardworking, entrepreneurial residents, since destroyed by the short-sighted and self-serving policies of the political and financial elites” (326).

The town is occupied, yet empty. Soledad instructs her daughter-in-law Efigenia to wash her windows and mend her curtains, because her house looks as if it had been abandoned, but the younger

woman insists that she is unable to do anything: “deambulo por las habitaciones como un fantasma” ‘I walk through the rooms like a ghost’ (Mateus, *Mujeres solas* 23). A living ghost, she is present and yet absent. Waiting becomes a constant motif: waiting for a phone call, waiting at the bus station; a little boy wearing the suit from his first communion, waiting in the corridor for his father’s return. The women keep busy, but it is a funereal busyness, Penelope working not on her own shroud but her own husband; says Efigenia, “Yo sigo tejiendo y bordando y no sé por qué, pero me parece que voy tejiendo tu cuerpo” ‘I keep weaving and embroidering and I don’t know why, but it seems I am weaving your body’ (23).¹²

The sense of emptiness is counterbalanced by the threat of excess. Soledad urges Rosalía to harvest her chirimoyas before they go to waste. The produce forgotten and rotting on the ground contrasts with the excess consumption made possible by the migrants’ remittances. The Ecuadorian highlands are dotted with houses built through remittances, creating what Miles terms “a unique kind of Ecuadorian urban sprawl where elegant two-story homes bump up against one-room adobe dwellings” (25). Lucila longs to move into her new house, but she is criticized by her mother-in-law for building a palace. Angry at her husband’s betrayal of her with another woman, Lucila declares that she is leaving: “Mañana mismo me iré. Tomaré cualquier bus que me deje cerca del mar y me arrojaré a los brazos del primer marinero que se cruce por delante en mi camino” ‘I’ll leave tomorrow morning. I’ll take any bus that will leave me close to the sea and I’ll throw myself into the arms of the first sailor who crosses my path’ (41). Her lines echo the disillusionment and wry nostalgia of Mistral’s poem. Again echoing the poem, Lucila—baptismal name of Gabriela Mistral—laments, “todo el mar que nunca he visto. Si no me voy. . . ¿Qué hago?” ‘all the sea that I have never seen. If I don’t go. . . what do I do?’ (42). Lucila’s material ambitions conflict with her desire for companionship and adventure, for a present rather than an absent partner. Soledad condemns what she views as Lucila’s greed—sexual and material—saying, “Siempre pensé que eras ligera y no me equivoqué. Mi hijo ha cumplido contigo. Cada mes recibías un cheque para construir esa casa que tu vanidad quiso convertir en el palacio de las mil y una noches” ‘I always thought you were loose and I was not mistaken. My son has

met his obligations to you. Every month you received a check to build that house that your vanity turn into the palace of the thousand and one nights' (43). Soledad implies that the sacrifices have all been on her son's side, and Lucila's longing for a beautiful home is held to reveal a more generally excessive, uncontrolled desire.

The play closes with the murmured recitation of the opening lines of Mistral's poem: "Todas íbamos a ser reinas / De cuatro reinos sobre el mar [. . .] Y lo tuvimos por verdad / Que seríamos todas reinas / Y llegaríamos al mar. . ." "We were all going to be queens / Of four kingdoms by the sea [. . .] And we held that it was true / That we would all be queens / And that we would reach the sea..." (46). Transposed to highland Ecuador, the poem retains the weight of the sea as an image of freedom or escape, an escape far distant from the lives of the women who appear in the play. In a section of Mistral's poem not quoted directly in the play, it is Efigenia who manages to leave: "Rosalía beso marino / ya desposado en el mar, [. . .] Efigenia cruzó extranjero / en las rutas, y sin hablar, / le siguió, sin saberle nombre, / porque el hombre parece el mar" "Rosalía kissed a sailor / already married to the sea, [. . .] Efigenia met a foreigner / on the road and without speaking / she followed him, his name unknown / because a man resembles the sea" (522). The four women in the play, however, never reach the sea, and the one-act play ends before Lucila can make good her threat to leave. If men resemble the sea here, it is because they are mobile and unreachable. They do not, in this play, speak for themselves.

The themes of stymied communication and return, and of a return that occurs only after death, reappear in García's *La Travesía*. The play takes its name from a small town on the Ecuadorian coast. *Travesía* means a crossing or voyage, as well as an alleyway or side street. This second meaning suggests, too, a detour or wrong turn. *Travesía* also refers to the wages paid to a member of the merchant marine for a given voyage; in its adjectival form, it refers to livestock that has wandered away from its village without yet going very far. All of these meanings resonate with the play. Three characters appear: Dora and Pablo, a married couple, and Dora's brother Santiago. Santiago arrives in reindeer costume; Dora and Pablo are initially afraid of this stranger, with his peculiar dance, until Santiago identifies himself and announces that he has found work, tooting

his horns and handing out restaurant flyers (74). The characters discuss the hardships of the immigrant's life and also rehearse for the fiesta of San Pedro and San Pablo, celebrated in the village of La Travesía, and elsewhere in the province of Manabí, with a ritual war between Blancos and Negros.¹³

Bits of information are skillfully doled out, allowing the audience to draw seemingly obvious conclusions that later are proved false. When Dora and Pablo find the apartment window open and Antonio nowhere in sight, their concern about his absence, and their fear that he might overhear and understand *risqué* remarks, initially suggests that he is a child who has been left alone. That Antonio is a goat, kept in preparation for his sacrifice as part of the fiesta, is revealed only with his unmistakable bleat near the end of scene one. The goat is at once the scapegoat, the ritual sacrifice—though the gods to be propitiated remain somewhat undefined—and a pet, a traveling companion, a comforting element of home.

Through the image of snow, and of cold, the play's opening lines underscore both the fragility of memory and the durability of nostalgia as Dora laments that she no longer remembers her own country's heat, "*lo extraño sí pero no lo recuerdo*" 'I miss it, yes, but I don't remember it' (72). In contrast to the snow around them—snow that has soaked their clothing, snow that can be seen, still falling, through the apartment window—Pablo remembers fondly seeing snow on TV and urges his wife to make the effort: "*Imagínate que esta nieve es la que estaba dentro del televisor que veíamos en nuestro pueblo*" 'Imagine that this snow is the snow that was inside the television that we watched at home' (72). But, as Dora insists, it looked different on screen.¹⁴ Santiago wonders if they shouldn't have chosen a different country, but Pablo objects to his naiveté: "*Como si uno estuviera en condiciones de escoger a donde quiere ir a trabajar, como si fuera turista con harto billete*" 'As if one were in a position to choose where to go to work, as if one were a tourist with a lot of cash' (77). Pablo also describes his previous attempts to emigrate, including a painful, terrifying journey that culminated in three days hidden under a false floor in Guatemala, suffering the rising water after a heavy rain and the terrible stench of the decomposing body of a young Bolivian woman who drowned in the rainwater the first night. Pablo's first attempt to emigrate resembles the experi-

ences of many others. Pribilsky discusses the dangerousness of the migrants' route, describing sea journeys similar to that described by Pablo in the play, and further observes that "compounding would-be migrants' fears was the fact that many of them, as rural children growing up in a region without a significant body of water nearby, had never learned how to swim (164-65). Patricio Estrella's *Los pájaros de la memoria*, 'The birds of memory' first performed in Quito in early 2008 is based on a similar story, that of a young boy whose mother was lost at sea.¹⁵ Like the other plays discussed here, Estrella's work, produced with the group La Espada de Madera, highlights the constantly shifting ground of the migrant's experience, exploiting stage elements such as small wooden carts and long winding cloths—at once shrouds and sails—to create visually powerful images of great emotional resonance. The play concludes with a sea of hands, the last vestige of the shipwrecked migrants. The ocean, in this context, is not an elastic symbol of adventure and escape, but a hurdle to be overcome. And yet, for the characters of García's *La Travesía*, the ocean of *home*—they are, after all, from a coastal community—is a focus of nostalgic longing and a contrast to the cold, inhospitable climate in which they now live.

In recreating the fiesta, the characters perform home, carrying their traditions into new surroundings. Dora complains that they are rehearsing "por gusto," 'for the fun of it' and grumbles, "seguro que mañana no va a venir nadie" 'guaranteed, no one will come tomorrow' (79). Pablo, however, insists that they themselves are sufficient audience and that what is most important is the ritual. Santiago's public job as a cartoon reindeer provides the humorous spark of mistaken identity when Dora and Pablo initially fail to recognize him, but it is also an instance of exploitative performance, as the only work Santiago has been able to find consists in making an undignified spectacle of himself. In contrast, in preparing the fiesta, the three perform for one another in an attempt to improvise, if not the desired return home, the arrival of home, here.

Pablo reminds the others of the need to rehearse and they take out their instruments. It is to appease Pablo's uncle that they have the goat in the first place. The uncle, dismayed that Pablo would not return to take part in the fiesta at home, obliged them to take Antonio along "para que la cosa salga como se hace allá" 'so that the

thing would turn out just as it's done back there' (79). Yet the music will not be the same, either "here" or "there." Recalling that another musician, Manuel, had been next in line to leave, Santiago suggests that while the three of them may have been replaced, it would be harder to find a substitute for Manuel. La Travesía becomes another empty town, this one without musicians, for without Manuel, there will be no music for this year's fiesta. The transposed performance in the new city is realized only at the expense of the "real" fiesta of which they can no longer partake.

Although Santiago has posted flyers around town announcing the fiesta, no one has responded; perhaps they are the only ones of their countrymen to have chosen this particular place. The music, however, brings knocks on the door, and the hope of compatriots, though the shouts are in another language. Pablo goes to the door but returns dissatisfied, having been unable to understand whoever it was. The hope that friends have arrived is repeatedly dashed. Unable to communicate, the three can only speculate—the neighbors are annoyed at the noise? They are calling the police? They will be back soon with a search warrant? The rising tension of the scene is punctuated by the sounds of the bleating goat, by sirens, and by voices in the corridor. When the police leave a piece of paper, that too is unintelligible.

Antonio is the sacrificial goat, meant to be killed and eaten as part of the fiesta. However, he has also become one of the family, for he has shared their journey, and Dora in particular objects to his execution. Pablo and Santiago therefore undertake to kill the goat at night, when Dora is sleeping. As they discuss the animal's fate, the uncomfortable parallels with the immigrants' lives are inescapable.

SANTIAGO. A veces yo me siento igual.

PABLO. ¿Cómo?

SANTIAGO. Igual de 'útil.' Siento que me crían, que me alimentan, que me mantienen hasta que me llegue la hora.

PABLO. ¡Pendejadas! Sólo tú puedes compararte con un animal.

SANTIAGO. ¿Cuál es la diferencia?

PABLO. ¿Entre tú y Antonio? Casi ninguna.
(*Rie*).

SANTIAGO. Tú mismo dices que aquí
trabajas como un animal.

PABLO. Es un decir.

SANTIAGO. No es verdad entonces.

PABLO. Sí. . . pero. . . me pagan por eso. (83)

SANTIAGO. Sometimes I feel just the same.

PABLO. How?

SANTIAGO. Just as 'useful.' I feel like I'm
being raised, being fed, being
supported just until my time is up.

PABLO. Crap! Only you could compare
yourself to an animal.

SANTIAGO. What's the difference?

PABLO. Between you and Antonio? Almost
none. (*Laughs*).

SANTIAGO. You yourself say you work like
an animal here.

PABLO. It's a saying.

SANTIAGO. So it's not true.

PABLO. Yes. . . but. . . they pay me for it.

Santiago recognizes Antonio's anxious, powerless gaze as his own. Antonio's end, however, comes not at the hands of the humans, but in a fall from the window, a fall variously interpreted as accident or suicide, perhaps occasioned by the goat's desire to play with the falling snow. Dora's account of his death combines sadness at her own inattention and regret at too quick a discounting of the impossible:

Me pareció escuchar reír a Antonio pero no creí que era él, porque los chivos no ríen y no hice caso. [. . .] Me pareció escucharlo llorar pero como los chivos no lloran no le hice caso. Santiago sí lo creyó y desesperado se asomó a la ventana, vio a Antonio que se estaba derritiendo con la nieve"

'I seemed to hear Antonio laugh, but I didn't think it was him,

because goats don't laugh so I paid no attention.
[. . .] I seemed to hear him cry, but because goats don't cry, I paid no attention. Santiago did believe it and, desperate, opened the window, and he saw Antonio, melting with the snow.' (86)

The image of the goat, its body melting like snow, is haunting. Dora has failed her grandmother: she will return without Antonio, despite the injunction that a group of travelers must return complete. But Pablo reassures her that Antonio's spirit has surely preceded them, like the souls of the dead who return to their homeland to say goodbye.

The image of the mobile threshold, one that a person might carry on her back and yet never fully cross, is complemented by that of the telephone, an imperfect medium of communication poised, in its own "betwixt and between" fashion, on the shifting ground between modernity and backwardness. Like other technologies of communication, telephones have long been, in all their different varieties, more accessible to those of greater means. The phone and the threshold are recurrent images in Ecuadorian treatments of migration, signs of the prolonged instability constitutive of the migrant's experience, of difficult communication, and of the uneven distribution of technology. For instance, an especially strong scene in the film *Tiempo de mujeres* is one of a mother speaking into a telephone, asking her son when he will return and struggling with her grief at the thought that she may never see him again. She is shown seated at a table in a public phone office, without even a booth for privacy. The camera shifts to a brief pan across the empty plaza of the town before the screen fades to black with credits. As in the phone calls staged in *Con estos zapatos* or reported by the women in *Mujeres solas*, only the caller's voice is audible to the spectator. Dialogue is thus reduced to a kind of monologue, producing an unsettling lack of closure or completion. Peko Andino's Medea (who does deliver a monologue) is also poised on a kind of threshold, demanding the self-immolation of Jason/Ecuador before either she or the absent children of the nation might return: "Subirás a la cumbre del volcán taita [. . .] caerás al infierno de lava que espera por ti desde tu nacimiento y te derretirás despacio junto a tus cadáveres ilustres" 'you will climb up to the summit of the father volcano [. . .] you

will fall into the hell of lava that has waited for you since your birth and you will slowly melt, along with your illustrious cadavers' (30). Medea's call is a threatening one. Far from strangling on her own nostalgia, she describes herself as "una ejecutora de larga distancia, [. . .] una asesina de cabina telefónica" 'a long-distance executioner, [. . .] a telephone booth assassin' (31). Handelsman discusses a performance of Andino's piece presented under another title, "Medea call back," a title that carries intriguing theatrical connotations, such as the "call back" for further auditions or, as Handelsman notes, the curtain call or encore (219).

When the phones fail, other means of contact must be sought. The migrant characters of *Con estos zapatos* and *La Travesía* must rely on memory in order to maintain the existence of a lost home to which they might yet return. Moreover, they are in the act of performing that past and future home from within the provisional home they now occupy. Their improvisational performance, at once remembered and imagined, allows them to address the cultural and physical challenges presented by their new surroundings. The closing moments of all three plays underscore the impossibility of returning home unchanged. Nor are clean solutions offered: the threshold, once crossed, cannot be fully uncrossed. Both *Con estos zapatos* and *La Travesía* explore the theme of return, including a return that occurs only spiritually and after death. *El pueblo de las mujeres solas* closes with a "return" to Mistral's poem, a fragment of which is recited on stage by the four actors, highlighting the persistence of lost illusions. Overall, the women appear to be the most harshly circumscribed, though the burdens of emigration are by no means borne by women alone. Still, to take as examples the characters of *Con estos zapatos*, Wilmer, although lonely and displaced, enjoys his Mediterranean widow. Blanca, a streetwalker looking for work, is killed "on the job."

Unintelligibility and the need for translation—a translation that may never be offered—are most pointedly stressed in *La Travesía*. The revelation that comes when the goat Antonio finally bleats aloud resonates with the experience of negotiating a foreign language, an experience that can be one of long frustration punctuated by *aha!* moments when, at least briefly, it all becomes clear. But not, perhaps, clear enough. Individual plays may be published with

explanatory footnotes or translations, but within the action of the plays, the characters are not able to make themselves understood or, indeed, to fully understand the new languages they are beginning to adopt. Santiago speaks “*palabras en otro idioma*” ‘words in another language,’ words that are not supplied in the text and that could presumably be varied depending on the city in which the play is staged. Irritated, Pablo complains, “Habla claro, a mí no me vienes con esas palabritas que ni tú mismo entiendes” ‘speak clearly, don’t come to me with those little words that not even you understand’ (75). The passage has taken a wrong turn; the crossroad becomes a dead end. There is an unfinished air to these plays, not because the texts are less than polished, but because the journey is still underway and what is staged, to a large extent, is the fact of movement, the unresolved displacements of migration.

Notes

1 The plays by Mateus and Tatés are part of a trilogy, “Como Somos” ‘The way we are.’ The third piece, *La noche de los tulipanes*, ‘Night of the tulips’ premiered in Quito in January, 2008. Both *Con estos zapatos* and *Mujeres solas* were first performed by Santiago Rodríguez, Sonia Valdez, Alejandra Albán and Alex Altamirano. *La Travesía* premiered in September 2002 at the XV Festival Internacional de Teatro in Manta. La Trinchera is comprised of Freddy Reyes, Rocío Reyes, Magaregger Mendoza, and Nixon García.

2 The *grotesco criollo* is a specifically Argentine genre, most prevalent in the early 20th century, depicting the lives of the lower class, predominantly immigrant population of Buenos Aires in a comic, distorted (grotesque) manner. On immigration to Argentina, Adam Versényi notes that “Between 1871 and 1920, 4.5 million immigrants arrived in Buenos Aires” (83).

3 For further discussion of Ecuador’s recent economic and political history, including “dollarization,” see Ronn Pineo, *Ecuador and the United States*, and Allen Gerlach, *Indians, Oil, and Politics*.

4 Jokisch and Pribilsky observe that “Few Ecuadorians resided in Spain in 1998, but by mid-2002 as many as 200,000 Ecuadorians had emigrated to Spain, making Ecuadorians the largest Latin American immigrant group in Spain and the largest overall immigrant group in Madrid, outpacing the traditionally large Moroccan and other North African populations” (82).

5 Alex Mindlin summarizes the plan’s provisions: to “raise or end ceilings on the value of cash and goods they can bring back; offer them attractive loans to build houses and start businesses; and let them ship home their cars without paying the usual high import duties” (4).

6 All translations from Spanish are mine.

7 A question for further investigation would be to what extent recognition abroad affects success at home, particularly in a country like Ecuador with a fragile economy and limited theatrical infrastructure.

8 The image of strangulation reappears in *Mujeres solas* when Lucila complains, “los recuerdos me estrangulan” ‘memories strangle me’ (25).

9 It is appropriate in this context to recall Rosario Castellanos’ “Meditación en el umbral,” ‘Meditation on the threshold’ with its affirmation that there must be “Otro modo de ser humano y libre. / Otro modo de ser” ‘Another way to be human and free / Another way to be’ (73). The characters in this play are caught in that moment of thought, still on the threshold; the “otro modo de ser” remains elusive.

10 Mary Weismantel describes the *chola cuencana* as “a woman dressed in the traditional costume of the province of Azuay (of which Cuenca is the capital). This striking outfit includes layers of brilliant, deeply gathered skirts called *polleras*; a delicate shawl made of ikat-dyed cotton with long fringes knotted in complex macramé designs; a finely woven straw hat, tall and white; and hair worn in two long braids, tied together at the ends” (326).

11 <<http://www.iconoteatro.com/elpueblo.htm>>. 25 Apr. 2008.

12 Mistral, in an author's note to "Todas íbamos a ser reinas," explains at some length the changed spelling of the name, notable here for the sense of migration and adaptation of cultural traditions that seems to come through at so many levels, as if migration occurred in stages, with myths and words migrating and assimilating, or not, at their own pace: "No bautizan con Ifigenia, sino con Efigenia, en mis cerros de Elqui. A esto lo llaman disimilación los filólogos, y es operación que hace el pueblo, la mayor criatura verbal que Dios crió" "They do not baptize with the name Ifigenia, but with Efigenia in my Elqui hills. Philologists call this dissimilation and it is an operation performed by the people, the greatest verbal creature that God created" (807).

13 Rocío Reyes explains that in the town of La Travesía, where her father was born, many goats are sacrificed and eaten as the reconciliation of two communities historically at odds—whites and blacks—is celebrated (Rocío Reyes, personal communication, 13 Feb. 2008). Pablo Cuvi also describes the celebrations in his brief essay, "Presidente Blanco Presidente Negro."

14 For one reading between languages, English as well as Spanish, the idea of TV "snow" presents yet another image of imperfect transmission—the snow they imagined and the grim reality are quite different, just as the poor reception or lack of signal that produces flickering screen snow combines an indecipherable image with an unpleasant sound.

15 The play unpublished; I base my comments on the description included on the Teatro Sucre's website, <<http://www.teatrosucre.com/calendario/obra.php?id=588>> 12 May 2008 and on the performance at the XXI Festival Internacional de Teatro de Manta, 8 September 2008. Although I saw the play staged too late to include a full analysis in this essay, Estrella's play, a highly effective depiction of the migrant's experience and of the interrelations of memory and forgetting, is deserving of further study.

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