multilingual discourses MD
Volume 3.1 / Fall 2016

Truth, Violence, and Domestic Space: Contesting Patriarchal Ontology in José Triana's *La noche de los asesinos* and Ariel Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella*

Axel Perez Trujillo

Abstract

This paper analyzes the staging of domestic space and gender reversals in José Triana's *La noche de los asesinos* and Ariel Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella*. Both aspects indicate the intersection between space and identity, especially in regards to the enforcement of patriarchal order. Although differing in their political contexts, both plays explore the oppression and containment of fixed gender and spatial values under authoritarian regimes and how such repression leads to a reversal of gender identities and the emergence of liminal spaces.

"Siento que mis palabras tienen que invadir el espacio físico donde se llevaron a cabo las violaciones, invadirlo con los cuerpos proscritos y ocultos"

Ariel Dorfman, *Entre sueños y traidores*

Gaston Bachelard commences his celebrated book *The Poetics of Space* (1958) by introducing the reader to the notion of inhabited space through a phenomenological study of the house. Analyzing the poetic experience and expression of occupying a domestic environment, Bachelard discusses the centrality of the house understood as shelter in human imagination: "we shall see the imagination build 'walls' of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts" (5). Household scenes in our imaginary are not empty spaces, for they express the need for protection and intimacy. They become spaces on which to stage fears and anxieties, as well as empowerment and resistance. I will argue that two of the most salient pieces of Latin American drama in the twentieth century explore domestic spaces as a means to reveal how a patriarchal conception of the household is linked to totalitarian epistemologies. Although situated in starkly different contexts, both José Triana's *La noche de los asesinos* (1965) and Ariel Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella* (1990) offer a glimpse into how the staging of domestic environments manifests and challenges totalizing models of space and truth.

Triana's play debuted in Cuba five years after the triumph of the revolution, in a cultural context heavily affected by Fidel Castro's political discourse "Words to Intelectuals" in 1961. Forced to close for several months under the scrutiny of the Cuban National Commission for Culture, the theatre company *Teatro Estudio* would later be responsible for staging *La noche de los asesinos* in 1966 (Meyran 24). The cultural atmosphere at the time was one of tension. Artists and writers were closely examined by Castro's regime, the latter attempting to ensure productions

were in accordance with revolutionary ideals. It is in such a context of policing and censuring that the play opened in La Havana. Staging a seemingly endless rehearsal of patricide by a brother and his two sisters in the basement of their house, the play offers a polemical perspective on the Cuban revolution. Although *La noche de los asesinos* earned international acclaim during its European tour, the Cuban journalist Leopoldo Ávila wrote in 1968 an aggressive critique of Triana and accused him of being "counter-revolutionary" (Meyran 30), an action that sparked a controversy involving other playwrights and poets, and further increased the regime's control of cultural productions. Facing gradual marginalization in Cuba, Triana eventually went into exile in 1980, continuing his career in France.

La muerte y la doncella debuted under different circumstances in 1990. Chile was in the process of a democratic transition from Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, a tense transition in which military officials who participated in institutional tortures sought amnesty, whilst the Rettig Report, under the auspice of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation revealed the countless cases of Chileans that had disappeared during Pinochet's regime. Incensed by the atrocities committed during the dictatorship and the apparent difficulty of bringing to light the truth of what had occurred in Chile, Dorfman explains in *Entre sueños y traidores* how the play provided him a means of expressing personal and political ideas (265). Largely unnoticed in Chile, *La muerte y la doncella* went on to gain international recognition and was even adapted into film by acclaimed director Roman Polanski in 1994. The story of how a woman confronts her torturer in her own house as an analogy for the Chilean democratic transition captivated international audiences, although in Chile it was not well received or supported.

Here we have, then, two contexts that differ in many ways: Triana's play is set in revolutionary Cuba in the 1960s, whilst Dorfman frames his play in a Chile going through a

political transition during the 1990s. Yet for all their differences, both plays offer a surprising continuity if we focus on the role of household space. I claim that each play frames its performance within a domestic setting, so as to challenge spectators to reflect on the role of patriarchy and its inherent link to the establishment of fixed and totalizing truths. Domestic space and truth are explored in both plays in a manner that emphasizes how patriarchal oppression and its resistance play out in a dialectic between space and subjectivity. From different angles, Triana and Dorfman encounter and dispute the patriarchal model of space and epistemology present in their representations of the Cuban and Chilean political circumstances alluded to in the performances. The household setting allows for a critical inquiry as to the mode in which patriarchal relations in the family are expressed in the distribution of fixed spaces and containment of static identities: space and gender identity intersect in the household environment.

Elizabeth Grosz emphasizes that "the limits of possible spaces are the limits of possible modes of corporeality" (33). That is, how space is imagined and constructed affects the spectrum of corporealities possible. Space and gender are mutual constructs that reflect a corresponding paradigm. The way in which both are represented shapes the paradigm of the text or performance. In Triana and Dorfman's case, the overarching model is patriarchy and its control over truth and identity. When reflecting on the role of truth in *La muerte y la doncella* and international politics in *Entre Sueños y traidores,* Dorfman poses the possibility of a democratic and plural State where leaders need not establish a "total and totalizing truth" (285). Triana also insists on the "inflexible norms" of Cuban patriarchal society in his appraisal of his previous work (Meyran 32). Both playwrights focus on the ways in which patriarchy imposes fixed values, an oppression that manifests itself in the link between space and identity as explored in both plays.

I argue that whereas patriarchy enforces stable values through a specific ontology, *La noche de los asesinos* and *La muerte y la doncella* contest those static valuations by encouraging the presence of thresholds and liminality throughout the staged performances. Contrary to a homogenous space, the staged domestic environments are perforated by fluid entrances and boundaries that negotiate acts of apprehension and empowerment. Neither space nor gender is definite, but remain unstable in each play. They become curved and fluctuating: entrances become walls, doors become thresholds, binaries between inside and outside become inverted, and gender roles are continually reversed. Take, for example, the following passage from *La noche* in which Lalo explicitly links parenthood and stability: "Papá y mamá no lo consienten. Creen que está fuera de lógica. Se empeñan en que todo permanezca inmóvil, que nada se mueva de su sitio" (84). Parents—especially the figure of the father—impose a specific logic in which things must remain in their place, fixed and stable. Gender and space must remain unchanged, a logic that terrorizes the children in the play. In *La muerte,* Paulina's torturer also questions her husband's ability to put the house in order (60). The organization of domestic space is thus linked to the masculinity of the husband which guarantees order.

Such dynamic spaces and identities manifest themselves as a product of the social relations performed. That is, they displace the fixed ontology enforced by patriarchy. Space is no longer predetermined, but the product of the performances on the stage. In Henri Lefebvre's words, "spatial practice defines its space, it poses it and presupposes it in a dialectical interaction" (187). Gender identity is also no longer a stable truth, for role reversals generate fissures in patriarchal definitions of essential attributes to gender. Judith Butler argues that gender identity "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (185). Each play supports Lefebvre and Butler's approaches by exploring how a shift in the configuration of domestic spaces

through violence generates a displacement of identity; that is, how fixed spaces and gender identities are mutual constructs derived from a patriarchal ontology whose epistemology seeks totalizing truths. In *La noche*, all three protagonists suffer gender displacement by taking on each other's roles. Lalo will act as if he was Cuca or Beba, whilst his sisters will do likewise. At a specific point in the play, their names will even receive alterations that challenge the gender of the protagonists: Cuca transforms into "Cuco," and Beba into "Bebo" (110). In *La muerte,* Paulina manifests a phallic empowerment the moment she takes control of the gun and questions her torturer (33). These transformations are linked to the household spaces where they take place, placing in relief the intersection between Lefebvre and Butler.

It is at this point that such a theoretical framework presents a compelling approach to these two challenging yet apparently distinct Latin American plays. Through the conception of the domestic scenario as a political microcosm, as a network of power relations that transfer into society, both plays reveal a nuanced exploration of repressive social mechanisms *in extremis*. The domestic violence staged thrusts the oppressive strains to their very limits, generating a context in which antagonisms erupt. Furthermore, the social tensions performed are such that they anticipate alterations in an unsustainable repressive environment. This is perhaps one of the most striking features of the plays, for the interactions that take place probe into the complexities of changing a oppressive and totalizing social order, whether it be through the staging of a domestic insurrection or cohabitation. Each piece creates a desperate domestic scenario that pushes the limits of violence within the household structure so as to force latent issues to the surface. *La noche* is staged in the basement of a house, an oppressive space cluttered with furniture and a knife (74). The characters in the play constantly struggle with the domestic scenario that surrounds them, attempting to change things from place and generating sibling tensions (Triana 76). In *La muerte,* Paulina is

constantly shifting from one room to another in an attempt to challenge the intrusion of the torturer into her home (57). Singular within the plethora of conflicts that arise in each play is the corrosive displacement that undermines gender relations and spatial distinctions within the household. The violence staged in each domestic scenario releases the social anchors that maintain a given order. More specifically, it shifts and effaces those boundaries in custody of a patriarchal ontology, thus unhinging identities and spaces.

Characters struggle to reconfigure family relations, challenging a patriarchal order within the household. The manner in which they interact, not only with each other, but also with domestic space itself, becomes all the more dramatic the moment the spectator perceives that the conflicts taking place on stage are the amplified convergence of social repression. In *La noche,* the conflicts between all three siblings escalate as each of them tries to order the furniture of the basement (84). In *La muerte*, Paulina's gender becomes more unstable as she challenges her torturer, moving from one room to another until she faces off with the revolver and suggests raping Roberto (54). Gender roles gradually become more and more unstable, until they are altogether blurred. Household areas are seized and appropriated by characters, expressing the physical struggle between exclusion and assimilation, between inner and outer spaces. Thus the domestic environment is not simply a metaphor for a broader political breakdown of authoritarianism into a threatening uncertainty. The violence performed within the household is indeed an intimate exploration of repression and empowerment generated in the household environment through the staging of liminal spaces. It is an exploration of the liquefaction of identity as a result of institutionalized repression of space.

Both plays, however, go well beyond the performance of domestic violence as a mirror of patriarchal regulation. In the nuances of each theatre piece, an entire exploration of facing and altering political oppression is staged. Triana and Dorfman set out to probe the inner workings of

repression in the tortuous instability that precedes political change under an authoritarian regime. They dwell ever deeper into the radical displacement of ontology that accumulates as repression escalates. Insofar as they offer spectators a voyeuristic exploration of domestic violence, their plays present the disturbing complexities of coping with repression. Political change under an oppressive regime is no longer an abstract or theoretical framework. It is precisely the performance of domestic violence that delves into the consequences of either a revolution or a transition, for it makes tangible the threat and trauma that accompany the tumultuous dynamics of such political change within a repressive space. Where *La noche de los asesinos* rehearses the inherent crisis and violence of revolutionary action, *La muerte y la doncella* stages the ruptures of social ties that cohabitation entails. Both offer disquieting accounts of the profound meaning of repression and resistance in an authoritarian regime, focusing on the tremendous pressure exerted on space and subjectivity, a pressure that is translated into unstable interactions with family members under constantly displaced gender roles, as well as the liquid configuration of physical spaces and the palpable struggle to possess them. They explore how an oppressive ontology regulates space and identity, yet ultimately leads to its own destabilization.

I argue that the domestic scenario is particularly relevant in both performances, for it sets up a point of departure to understanding how social structures are strained and perforated by repression. In particular, such an approach reveals two dimensions in each theatrical piece that warrant closer scrutiny: the interaction between family members in terms of gender performance and the fluctuation of domestic spaces as violence escalates. Those dimensions are perhaps pivotal in the capturing the constant displacements and shifts that juxtapose during the staging of each play. The reconstruction of gender interactions between characters, as well as the reconfiguration of physical spaces, manifests the inner workings of repression.

Precisely, the domestic scenario is right from the beginning an unsettling element, one that pulls the spectator into a spiralling circle of violence. This is further reinforced by the narrative structure of both plays: the framing of events does not follow a traditional linear progression, but rather places the spectator actively searching for meaning. Inspired by Artaudian conventions, *La noche* does not allow a passive narration. As Alvarez-Borland emphasizes, the spectator "is forced to assume a very active role as he/she is confronted with a variety of plots and subplots" (38). The lack of linearity makes the play all the more disorienting, for the audience is thrown *in medias res* within a seemingly absurd scenario in which the very logic of traditional narrative is questioned. *La muerte* also demands that its audience reconstruct the traumatic events palpable on stage, yet never explicitly revealed. Paulina's pain is gradually revealed indirectly, elicited though implied confessions well before the end. Both plays expect close scrutiny from spectators, especially in regards to the ambivalent interactions with family members and physical spaces.

By framing both performances in a household, the traditional coordinates of family relations, the audience is given the task of deciphering and recognizing the latent motives that bubble beneath the performance of domestic violence, an issue that makes each piece all the more affecting. Close attention must be directed not only to the manner in which gender roles are displaced through family interactions, but also to the way physical spaces are blurred and appropriated on stage. Rather than insist on isolating bipolar relations between victims and oppressors, it is far more revealing to focus on the seeming displacement that permeates the entire scenario, an aspect that amplifies the transference of political antagonisms within family structure so as to display the mechanisms of repression linked to patriarchy. Neither play fixes the coordinates of repression and victimization on a particular space or character. There is a perpetual fluctuation of gender and space that ultimately dissolves such binaries. Furthermore, although

there is an apparent attempt at purging domestic antagonism, neither play resolves such tensions. The same violence that erupts during the performance continues to be palpable at the very end. Insofar as both plays avoid anchoring binaries, they offer a valuable clue as to the salient dimension of each performance: the survey of the patriarchal mechanics of repression as a source of identity and spatial displacement. Precisely, the dissolution of binaries points towards an instability of identity as the primary tension that anticipates alterations in a repressive order.

In *La muerte,* a piece far more invested in seeking justice and truth for the victim, there is no exorcising of antagonisms, for the final scene is brimming with tension as Paulina and Roberto lock eyes just before the concert begins (85). In his *Entre sueños y traidores*, Dorfman insists that the last scene is meant to establish a space in which truth need not be negotiated, but rather confronted (333). The audience is left considering how the traumatic music will affect Paulina, whether she has really overcome her fears in the hopes of a possible cohabitation. Moreover, there is no explicit manifestation of what the future of such cohabitation will bring. If anything, the very ambiguity of the scene seems to foreshadow further violence, for in a play so invested in truth and justice, the spectator is left with the ominous sensation of having more questions than answers. Such an aspect signals that the staging of the play does not hinge on establishing clearcut victims and oppressors, but rather dwells on the shifting grounds that remain beneath that paradigm. Zoraya Aritzia highlights a similar point when claiming that *La muerte* "problematizes the question of absolutely fixed and definitive truths" (458). There simply is no stability, no place on which to secure dichotomies. Refusing to anchor the narrative and performance on distinct roles or identities, the play undermines truth as an absolute. That is, both identity and truth are in constant motion, displaced within the domestic scenario in which antagonisms find no definitive solution.

Even more frustrating is the ending of *La noche*, for the rehearsal of parricide leads not into action, but rather into yet another repetition of the performance. There is an anxious cyclical and ritual nature to the performance. The theatricality of interchanging roles infuses their actions with a ritual aura, as if cleansing their fears through repetition. Yet Lalo, Cuca, and Beba perform a ritual so strained and desperate that when the play ends, the lack of any purging adds even more distress to the entire piece. Constantly exchanging roles, genders are effaced and physical spaces are blurred. Theirs is a ritual that leads not into the purging of anxieties: "A ritual's expected redemption never comes" (Alvarez-Borland 40). There is no cathartic moment, no ultimate resolution that may foster stability. Even if there is "a pervasive sense of fatalism throughout the play," there is no release of tragic tensions (Lima 566). On the contrary, the play undermines any possible discharge of frustrations or fears. Latent antagonisms find no relaxation, prompting a recurrent displacement of boundaries.

This aspect of the play is indeed pivotal. Parricide is rehearsed continuously through repetition without any apparent progression. Taylor insists that the repetitive nature of the children's' game reveals a possible utopian dimension, insofar as it entails the potential of improvement (85). However, the play does not seem to support such an optimistic take on repetition, for the cyclical structure of each rehearsal accumulates frustration and anxiety. Repetition may potentially create a utopian space for improvement, there is always an opportunity to perform in a different way that might ameliorate the results. Yet repetition or recurrence can be the "heaviest burden", as Friedrich Nietzsche famously claimed in *The Joyful Science* (270). To rehearse over and over again a particular performance can indeed accentuate frustrations, spiralling into ever more anxiety and violence. There is no escape from recurrence for those that find themselves trapped within that vicious cycle. Cuca reprimands Lalo: "¡Es el juego! Vida o muerte.

No escaparás" (Triana 105). That is, eternal repetition is a burden, one that amplifies the tragic sense of the performance. Distraught at having to rehearse once more, all three protagonists in *La noche* display Nietzsche's philosophical approach to perpetual repetition. They struggle with the cyclical nature of the rehearsal, trying to break away, only to be consumed by it once again.

The repeated staging of parricide echoes a fatalism that has no end, that foreshadows no release. As such, it emphasizes a displacement that ultimately establishes the absence of centrality, an aspect that imbues each new rehearsal with further disorientation. Insofar as each repetition seems always to end without release—that is, not ending at all in the traditional, linear sense—instability pervades their performance. Indeed, repetition is a mechanism that seeks out stability, for through it habits are established, and order guaranteed. Yet *La noche* introduces that element not as a means to equilibrium, but rather as a catalyst to the displacing of gender and space within a repressive regime. Repetition in the play evokes an attempt at domesticating gender and space, which ends in a futile endeavour at generating a new social order within the domestic scenario. Of particular interest are Butler's remarks on the performance of gender: "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts*" (191). I argue that emphasis on repetition as a failed means to stability is not only present in Triana's play, but also in Dorfman's *La muerte*. Whereas repetition signifies crystallization of a given order, both plays stage how repression and repetition eventually generate displacement. *La noche* also does not espouse fixed dichotomies "between victims and oppressors" (Alvarez-Borland 40). No matter how much the characters rehearse or repeat their performance of a particular gender role, it is always a futile attempt at stability. Repetition is always eclipsed by an escalating disorientation of identity, an aspect that makes both plays all the more distressing.

Displacement is manifested in both plays through the interactions among members of the family, as well as through the shifting of physical spaces in the domestic scenario. To better ascertain the impact of such fluctuating performance of family relations and spatial appropriations, close attention must be placed in both aspects of displacement. Ultimately, the violent yet liquid shifts in gender affiliations within the family unit, as well as the perpetual struggle to configure spaces refers the audience to how a patriarchal and repressive regime exerts itself upon the domestic body, effacing boundaries when its oppression becomes unbearable. That is, the moment repressive strategies overwhelm the oppressed, identities become displaced and fluid. Such uncertainty and instability translates into the reversal of gender roles and the blurring of domestic spaces. Precisely, both gender and space are the axis of patriarchal order within the household. *La noche* and *La muerte* explore that dimension of political oppression in the microcosm of a family, so as to reveal how draconian repression creates a context that may well lead to alterations in the *status quo*, but not before shifting identities in anticipation of change, whether it be through revolution or cohabitation.

The first aspect of displacement mentioned exhibits itself through the changing roles between family members. Those fluctuating roles have as their basis the reversal of gender. Precisely, family structure depends on the stability of gender, whether it be the father or mother, sister or brother, the construction of that particular social association is anchored on determined roles engendered by the binary between masculine and feminine. Family relations are thus constructed on such axis of gender oppositions. Moreover, the generation of those dyadic relations is the product of a patriarchal hierarchy in which power is sourced in masculinity. The authority of the masculine family member exerts its circuit of influence, establishing order by subordinating all other roles. This is evident in both plays. *La muerte* begins by situating Paulina in an

asymmetric position of power, for she not only occupies a peripheral space—the terrace—but is also reified as the substantiation of male desire: she is Gerardo's little cat, his "gatita" (16). Triana's play also elaborates on the patriarchal binary, for Lalo intervenes as figure of power that is eventually usurped by his sisters only after they shift gender roles, becoming Bebo and Cuco, the representatives of the law (110). The two theatrical pieces are fully aware of the masculine and feminine bipolarity, to the extent that much of the tension created on stage results from the conflicts that arise in an authoritarian conception of order prompted by patriarchy.

Precisely, the gender asymmetry presupposed in the mentioned binary is further manifested through the imposition of voice as a means to power. Paulina, for example, is faced with the suppression of her voice in the establishment of cohabitation, to which she responds by rejecting the idea of having to keep her mouth shut, to concede to a patriarchal order (82). In *La noche*, the gradual degradation of Lalo is accompanied with the loss of his voice. As he loses centrality, he is also deprived of vocalizing protest, so much so that by the time his trial is staged, Lalo has no say in what will happen to him. In fact, once Cuca begins her discourse accusing him of parricide, the latter is overwhelmed and unable to even phrase a response (113). Thus the circuit of power within the patriarchal family structure is sustained through the deployment of logocentrism in both plays. Having a voice becomes a mechanism of oppression, one that constantly shifts between different family members. Oscillating from one character to the next, voice denotes a source of power linked to patriarchal binaries. It is an emblem of antagonism.

Thus the two plays display a palpable struggle between genders, as if alterations in the domestic order require a ritual of transgression in regards to masculinity and femininity. Gender oppression is reproduced in a shifting environment, where female characters confront their male counterparts by inverting roles. Herein lies the difficulties of advocating the two plays as *prima*

facie feminist, for gender roles are not effaced, but rather are repeated, rehearsed, and reversed. The patriarchal binary seems to remain intact, its inversion indeed seems to justify the asymmetries and antagonisms between the feminine and masculine. However, the subterranean displacement that takes place beneath the gender bipolarity is crucial in grasping how gender is corroded in both plays. The repetition of gender roles is not a mere imitation, but rather becomes a subversive rehearsal that draws the audience to the exaggerations of gender performance. The theatricality of gender in *La muerte* and *La noche* transfigures the patriarchal binary into a performance, corroding the essentialist basis of such hierarchy.

Although patriarchal order does not appear to dissipate, its performative fluctuation sheds light on the slippery borders of gender roles. Masculinity and femininity may not completely dissolve, yet their theatricality profoundly displaces any bipolarity. Gender identities can and do spill forth from one character to another. There is no stable ground on which to foster essentialist conceptions. For example, Paulina's female body becomes gradually empowered with masculinity as she confronts her oppressor Roberto, only to shift back to a feminine role when speaking with her husband Gerardo in the terrace. At one point she even proposes the rape of her assailant by Gerardo as a means of exorcising her trauma, a twisted scenario of desire and torture that radically displaces patriarchy (Dorfman 55). Gender is not latched unto specific bodies, thus triggering the volatility of both the masculine and feminine. If patriarchy is to guarantee a stable order, family roles need to be static and unchanging. Yet both plays portray the reversal of gender binaries, allowing characters to slip from one role to another, not just once, but in several occasions. Each gender switch pierces into an essentialist and patriarchal conception in which roles are stringently defined.

Patriarchy is very much present within the domestic scenario, yet the displacement that constant gender shifts produce corrodes and subverts the apparent repetition of masculine and feminine bipolarity. The function of repetition is entirely relevant, especially if the theatrical nature of gender in both plays is taken into account. Repetition and performance are intimately tied in the gradual reversal of gender roles in both plays. To begin with, the spectator is presented with a doubling of theatricality in each piece: a play is staged within a play. *La muerte* rehearses a torture session, while *La noche* stages a performed parricide. Thus the actions that take place on stage are more acutely theatrical insofar as the characters consciously perform different roles. That duality of representation establishes a critical distance from what is taking place. The performative aspect of staged actions becomes all the more incisive, piercing the veil of imitation.

If such is the case, the repetition of shifting gender binaries has a radically different meaning. Each character is performing gender in a manner that repeats stereotypes, yet by accentuating the theatrical dimension of such rehearsal, a non-essentialist view is assumed. Performing multiple gender shifts, characters repeat patriarchal binaries to the extent that they become corroded and essentially dysfunctional. Butler further reinforces this notion by asserting that "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts" (192). Constantly repeating and inverting patriarchal bipolarities, both plays emphasize the arbitrary and contingent basis of gender. Instead of imposing stable roles through relentless repetition, the fluctuating performance of gender bolsters the inconsistent basis of such binaries. Patriarchy is revealed as an erratic order, one that ultimately sustains a despotic circuit of power countered by identity displacement within the household. In other words, gender identity is unhinged through the shifts and reversals of masculinity and femininity, displaying the displacement inherent to authoritarian configuration of social relations within the family.

Despotic and repressive, patriarchy leads to the reversal of gender roles. Repression triggers that which it seeks to control: repetition becomes subversive, corroding patriarchal borders through the performance of identity shifts. Bipolarities transform into arbitrary exertions of power, displayed as struggles for identity. In *Entre sueños y traidores,* Dorfman explains that throughout the play Paulina must decide "which is her true identity" (303). In *La noche,* all three siblings must come to grips with who they are to become once parricide has taken place. The antagonisms of an oppressive regime transfer into family relations through the displacement of identities. Enforcing a specific ontology, patriarchy pressures gender identities into fixed values that gradually destabilize as repression escalates. Precisely, the exploration of family interactions under a repressive order allows both Triana and Dorfman to expose the profound transfer and oscillation of gender that emerges from within the domestic scenario.

Thus the patriarchal family order seems to bubble beneath the surface. Interactions between family members, however, are not the only ones affected. Gender reversals attest to the destabilization of patriarchy in a radically oppressive environment, yet the displacement of space makes clear how repression infringes upon the domestic environment, shifting the dichotomy between inner and outer, whilst accentuating liminal spaces. This last dyadic relationship performed on stage, once again is rooted on a static conception of order. It clings to the political notions of public and private spheres of influence, a distinction that basically anchors on the preservation of family structure as the source of social stability. It also brings us back to Bachelard's analysis of the house in human imagination, for the inner/outer binary manifests the notion of domestic space as a shelter that is both an intimate place and protective barrier. As long as the household remains isolated from outside alterations, it will continue to vouch for a social hierarchy that reproduces domestic structures. I argue that the inner/outer binary is persistently

challenged in *La muerte* and *la noche*: space is continually recast into different configurations, confirming a lack of locus on which to regulate domestic compartments and an emergence of liminal thresholds that contest a fixed ontological space.

La noche stages the arbitrary disposition of space by having characters question the very logic of domestic organization. Lalo, for example, insists that the ashtray must be placed on the chair, while the vase must go on the floor (76). Objects are constantly changing places, inverting and subverting physical order. It is almost as if space itself is undefined. In fact, spatial disorientation follows the seemingly perpetual repetition of the children's game. Such rehearsal of parricide exploits the frustratingly cyclical yet unstable experience of repeating tentative actions that never fully materialize. Just as the myth of Sisyphus, all three children seem incapable of completing that which they are determined to fulfill. As long as there is no end to their rehearsals, that precise frustration of not being able to complete the parricide establishes a sense of vertigo, as if there was no stable point to cement a progress. Precisely, that continuous displacement is further aggravated by the lack of spatial order and distribution: the absence of a physical center dismantles any possibility of permanence, for there is no means by which to lever spaces into a particular organization or order. In the absence of a focal spatial point on scene, the liminal spaces that surround characters become ever more present. This heightens the sensation of distress in Triana's play, because the displacement of spatial hierarchies escalates growing disorientation.

Lalo, Beba, and Cuca are indeed out of place in their own home. There is nowhere to go, because outer and inner dichotomies have collapsed. Characters are disoriented, lost in the midst of arbitrary spaces. The domestic scenario is pure fluctuation. Perhaps the only fulcrum available is the door that supposedly leads outside of the room. Yet that possible locus in the *mare magnum* of domestic space does not offer a frame of reference from which order might be established.

Where exactly is the door? It seems to be blurred somewhere in the background, inaccessible even during each rehearsal. Also, it is anything but a threshold. The door opens and closes, although nobody walks through. It is an unattainable opening in space and, as such, only serves to exacerbate the sense of disorientation. It reverberates fatalism throughout the scenario, since it sets up the false illusion of stable limits. However, there are no limits, no borders. Ultimately, the absence of a spatial locus collapses inner and outer spaces. Herein lies the claustrophobic sensation that permeates *La noche*. The lack of private and public spaces makes characters vulnerable, for they find no shelter in that diaphanous space that gives no respite. Their basement becomes a panopticon of sorts, an ambiguous space that allows all characters to see and be seen—a spatial distribution in which private and public fuse.

Dorfman also exploits the sensation of spatial displacement through the shifting appropriations of space within the domestic scenario, especially as it pertains to Paulina. The moment Roberto intrudes into her household, domestic partitions begin to oscillate and strain. As her oppressor takes up space inside Paulina's home, instability ensues. Cohabitation precipitates a dialectic of exclusion and integration through fluctuating appropriations of physical surfaces. Doors are constantly opened, closed, and locked. Characters move from one room to another, seeking a place of privacy. The terrace, for example, gradually evolves into a peripheral space of respite. Whenever Gerardo and Paulina must talk alone, they quickly move to the terrace. There is a palpable struggle to reinstitute the inner/outer binary.

Even the lighting of each room follows that strain to appropriate spaces. Both dark and light aid Paulina in reestablishing order in a household fraught with an exterior intrusion. Artificial lights within the house result in affirming exteriority inside, just as if the public sphere had somehow been transferred into the domestic scenario. The living room, with its bright lighting,

becomes the place to rehearse a public trial. It becomes the manifestation of the exterior in the heart of the domestic. That very intrusion profoundly unsettles the entire physical order of the house. In order to maintain privacy, Paulina and Gerardo are forced to occupy a peripheral location with only the moonlight as a source of illumination. Moreover, the window panes that partition the terrace from the rest of the house function as a fragile threshold between the intrusion of an exterior threat and the possibility of an inner space. Notice how that precarious division is diaphanous, its transparency seems to attest to the uncertain nature of that forced cohabitation in which inner spaces are queered by exteriority. Once again, domestic space resembles a panopticon insofar as characters fail to find an adequate shelter from the intruder's sight. That is, the displacement of space under that repressive cohabitation results in a struggle to readjust and secure the domestic scenario through the repetition of inner-outer dichotomies that are only precariously maintained. Although Roberto is tied up in the living room, he has sequestered the inside of the household. His very presence forces the family to redraw boundaries, generating moments of tense displacement.

Thus physical space and gender roles are affected by a repressive atmosphere in which patriarchal order looses footing, resulting in an escalating disorientation within family structure, as manifested in the relations between characters and the instability of the household environment. The domestic setting is perforated by its multilayered surfaces and liminal spaces, ultimately disrupting any anchoring of identity or ontology. Acute and relentless, the exertion of an oppressive regime collapses the very binaries that sustain its order, that contain and fix identity so as to exert control. This is indeed a significant convergence between *La noche* and *La muerte*—both plays seem to stress the impact of repression within a given order, exploring how it disrupts identities in its totalizing project. Although the rampant displacement that saturates each domestic

scenario may lead to either an insurrection in the form of parricide or a strained cohabitation, the latent thrust of both political transfigurations is precisely the flaring displacement generated.

By staging political antagonisms through the lens of a domestic scenario, Triana and Dorfman are able to probe into the underlying elements that drive society to a crucial turning point, a violent intersection from which the only possible resolution is the transmutation of the given order. Far from maintaining a naive perspective on the matter, their plays dwell on the profound impact that such a political crisis has on identities and spaces forged through an authoritarian regime, one that translates into family structures as domestic patriarchy. Neither insurrection nor cohabitation allows for a complete stabilization of identity. *La noche* highlights the recurrence of a rehearsed parricide, a perpetual repetition that does not lead to an eventual anchoring of order, but rather evokes the Sisyphean destiny of the revolution. Identity is constantly deferred, eternally out of reach as the door in their basement. Or rather, it is the rehearsal of a performance that never truly arrives. Dorfman's *La muerte* also focuses on how a transition towards cohabitation cannot completely reconstitute a stable order. Insofar as binaries implode within the domestic scenario, so does that appearance of social stability through a political transition driven by a totalitarian regime. Cohabitation suggests the effacing of boundaries between antagonists, the borders that isolate each bipolar element so as to retain stability. In other words, cohabitation does not subordinate conflicts, but rather interiorizes them in a way that produces a profound displacement in identity. Repression is no longer an exterior force, for it is introduced within society itself. That is, it is inserted at the core of family structure.

Insurrection and cohabitation are the result of a crisis of signification, a disarray of identity triggered by the totalizing tendencies of an authoritarian system. Triana and Dorfman draw the audiences' attention to the unsettling of domestic surfaces and boundaries, be they manifested

through the reversal of gender within family structure or the dissolving of spatial binaries. Each play explores that crisis of signification inside the domestic microcosm, offering powerful insights as to the distinct limits and contradictions of patriarchal oppression. It is in that sense that they both challenge our traditional understanding of political transfiguration of totalitarian regimes, for the displacement of identity points to the loss of stable signifiers as an anticipation of alterations in the established order. Furthermore, they question the possibility of anchoring signification even after an insurrection or cohabitation is staged. Once the surfaces of the domestic body are disrupted and effaced, the arbitrary relation of juxtaposing signifiers makes any return to patriarchal certainty an impossibility. The totalizing exertion of repression ultimately leads to deconstructing its custody of identity and space; that is, it dismantles the disciplinary mechanisms with which order was preserved. Both plays attest to the impossibility of returning to a stable identity, prior to oppression. Not a revolution nor a political transition may reestablish fixed signifiers. As heavy a burden as the rehearsal of tragedy without end, so political transformation under a totalitarian regime will not lighten the weight of identity loss. Triana and Dorfman present audiences and readers alike with two plays that radically defy our contemporary understanding of how authoritarian repression displaces identity, and how that identity is disrupted in such a way that it is no longer possible to hermetically reconstitute the oppressed other, signalling the successive and perpetual deference of stability.

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